



*Helsingin Mylly Oy (Helsinki Mills) is a family business set up in 1934, however, the owner's family has been in the milling trade since the 16th century. 23 people are employed here, most of whom have undergone some form of vocational training.*



At the mills, wheat, rye, barley and oats are refined for flour production. The company also produces organic flour, which is, at present, an expanding market. Most of the flour is sold to large bakeries, with around 20% of output going to the retail trade.

### **Working atmosphere**

A survey carried out by the Uusimaa Regional Institute of Occupational Health and Education Administration as part of its small workplace programme revealed that the working atmosphere is generally speaking positive. The employees are motivated and committed to work.

### **Economic situation**

The financial situation is currently difficult for most mills. However, Helsinki Mills has a number of strengths: because of its relatively small size it can be flexible, it produces a broad range of high quality products, it has moved into organic flour production for which there is a growing demand and the modern milling technology used is a great asset.

The company has found the advice and development hints from this small workplace programme useful. As part of the project, a number of ergonomic improvements were made. Noise and dust levels were measured and an investment made to improve the environment.

Three employees have taken part in a rehabilitation project, one from the office and two from the production department. All gave a positive response to this programme. Ways of improving well-being have also been looked at as part of the small workplace project.

### **Giving employees a voice**

Employees work in small teams and can organise shift work, work times and job rotation to suit themselves. Management culture encourages staff to be self-reliant and self-motivated. Management also endeavours to involve employees. At a weekly meeting staff are given an update on what's going on within the company.

### **Why did the company join the programme?**

Financial support was a major consideration as there is very little spare money within an SME. The second important reason was to

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access information and advice from an external source. Thirdly, the company sees its staff as a valuable resource and their well-being is important if a good working atmosphere is to be kept up and people are to remain interested in their work.

### ***Continuous improvement of working conditions***

Employees report that the small ergonomic improvements made so far have had positive impact on working life. Staff are also keen to continue making suggestions for improving their working conditions.

The biggest problems in the milling industry are noise from the milling process and flour dust. Efforts have been made to reduce dust by using machines with diminished pressure.

### ***Occupational Health Care***

The company has a statutory occupational health care contract. As a result of the project the relationship with the occupational health care centre has become more proactive. The centre provides good services and Helsinki Mills receives much help and information. However, the health care centre resources have been cut and as a consequence the staff are always busy. Booking a time for physical

examinations can sometimes be difficult.

### ***Positive health and safety patterns***

Smoking is forbidden inside the mills because the grain dust is explosive. Attitudes towards the protective equipment are positive. Staff actively want to use devices such as respirators. The work involves a certain amount of lifting and employees take good care of their backs. In 1999 sick leave came to approximately one day per employee per month, a loss of 21 working days. No occupational accidents occurred in 1999. The company encourages physical activity by supplying staff with swimming pool tickets.

### ***Positive results***

Three out of four employees feel that the project has been beneficial. The others feel that the results are, on the whole, more positive than negative. According to a survey carried out by the small workplace project the most important outcome was better communication and co-operation between the employees themselves and between employees and management.

On another positive note, the company was given a clean bill of health at its most recent occupational safety inspection.

The cost of WHP is small compared to the benefits. Improving ergonomic conditions costs very little, but other investments, such as replacing the automatic data processing equipment in the office, proved to be fairly costly.

### ***Looking to the future***

Further improvements to the noise and dust levels will be made in the near future.

However the crucial factor governing further WHP activities is Helsinki Mills' place in the market. If its economic position stays good then it will be feasible to make concrete improvements.

The most important piece of advice the company can pass on to others is to keep employees informed as to what's going on and why certain decisions have been made. It is also important to look for expertise from outside the company as small businesses tend not to have health and safety skills at their fingertips.

An external advisor can help implement proposals which might otherwise be shelved or postponed and may also provide invaluable financial support. Last but not least, management must take an active interest in health promotion projects.