

“ArGU!ment” – A regional project on OHS in craft enterprises Germany



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As part of a project called “ArGU!ment” run by the Dusseldorf chamber of crafts, concepts, measures and tools relating to occupational health and safety for regional craft enterprises were developed and tried out between 1996 and 1999. The aim of the project was to promote better health in these organisations and to help them meet with new statutory requirements.

Project partners

Funds came from the QUATRO programme (financed by the European Commission). One of the major objectives of the QUATRO programme is to help craft businesses maintain high standards of health, thereby enabling individuals to stay in work longer.

Various organisations in the craft sector, state occupational health and safety representatives, statutory accident insurance, the guild health insurance fund, trade unions and educational bodies also took part. This network committee has now established itself as an on-going discussion forum.

Analysis of company needs

Existing empirical knowledge on work and health in the craft sector was by no means sufficient for ascertaining their needs with any degree of reliability. Therefore close scrutiny of the target group was essential before workable methods for addressing their health requirements could be found. Businesses in this sector are characterised by their individuality, motivation and focus on producing high quality products. Individual

health is considered to be important to the success of the business – in a small organisation, sickness can have severe repercussions.

However, formal occupational health and safety is very much geared towards large companies and has very little bearing on the way in which small organisations operate. For example, small businesses do not have company experts or employee representatives to provide a contact point for institutionalised occupational health and safety bodies. Moreover, small ventures don't have sophisticated work organisation procedures or human resources management systems into which preventive routines can be integrated.

Why small businesses resist

This sector is sceptical of the new statutory framework conditions and provisions stipulated in European and social policy. Accident rates are of no interest to small businesses as accidents and industrial diseases are rare. What's more, sickness rates in the craft sector are lower than in other sectors of the economy. Craftspeople also resent superficial, generalised



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descriptions of shortcomings in their businesses.

The “Healthy Crafts” philosophy The extensive material gleaned during the needs analyses was collated in a multi-tier documentation, interpretation and evaluation process. Interim results were presented and discussed by the network committee. The project group then developed a draft concept based on “model” lines. Top priority was given to creating a contextual orientation framework for specific measures and a stable dialogue platform with small enterprises and their trade associations through the development of a philosophy of “prevention in crafts”. This approach was intended to be flexible enough to answer the needs of a diverse range of businesses. Entitled “Healthy Crafts”, it deliberately plays on the social and economic significance of health and looks at preventive measures that will help secure a better health profile for this sector. In this sector, employees often work alone or in small groups. Therefore measures for improving health must take this into account. Appropriate practical aids have to be developed and these must be participation-oriented and fit in logically with the everyday running of the business.

The ArGU!ment project recognises that the human element in the craft sector is absolutely crucial. Here, even more than in most businesses, independence, quality awareness, social skills, motivation, perfor-

mance, creativity and innovation are vital to the success of the enterprise.

“Healthy Crafts” brochure

A total of five individual modules were developed and pilot-tested. The first module was an attractively designed brochure which outlines the philosophy behind proposed preventive measures in the craft sector in an easy-to-understand form.

“Information Manager: Health and Safety”

A compact and accessible information and documentation system was prepared providing essential information. Useful local contacts were listed along with printed application forms and a filing system for correspondence with relevant institutions.

“How safe and healthy is our company?”

A framework was developed to help businesses ascertain their health risks and list their preventive resources. The emphasis was on communication – encouraging constructive dialogue between the owner and employees. This tool differs from existing instruments as it can be used without any prior knowledge of ergonomics and takes a very practical tone in terms of content and language.

Training measures

A fourth module, a Compiler’s Guide, was developed for training bodies, helping them to integrate health and safety into their range of seminars. It was piloted in vocational and further training courses run by the chambers of crafts.

Seminar concept “Prevention in Crafts”

Many occupational health and safety professionals are governed by their experience of large companies. Their approach tends to be formal and bureaucratic and is unsuited to the very pragmatic work culture in most small businesses. Better communication and a deeper understanding of such companies is essential if intervention and consultancy are to be successful in the long term. To help achieve these aims, a seminar concept was developed for full-time occupational health and safety experts, providing them with an opportunity to get to know more about a craftsman’s working environment.

The first trial results are encouraging: communication and intervention skills are improving and a follow-up project aims to modify methods so that even better results can be expected.