

Denmark

Organisational and Skills Development at the Danish National Library for the Blind

Background

The Danish National Library for the Blind (DBB) is a government institution, operated under contract with the Ministry of Culture. It has approximately 90 permanent employees, in addition to a number of readers working on a freelance basis.

DBB was founded as an independent institution in 1952 and it produces and distributes information to the blind, the visually impaired, and those with reading problems in Denmark. The material is distributed in audio, braille and electronic form. It is being produced and distributed more frequently in electronic and digital formats. Users include public libraries, business customers and individuals who are blind or visually impaired.

The institution is divided into four divisions: production, distribution, IT, and administration and management, with the majority of the employees in production and distribution. One third of the employees are unskilled workers.

Heavy manual handling is common in the production and distribution divisions. DBB is located in a renovated building which, until the late 1990's, was an industrial plant and the physical facilities are not up to date. For many years, the absentee rate due to illness has been high.

Why introduce workplace health promotion?

Technological development and digitalisation brought new possibilities for DBB users. That situation raised demands for new skills among employees and

created a need for new ways of working and thinking. Consequently in 1998, when a new director was hired, DBB initiated an extensive reorganisation and development process involving all the employees at the institution. To the extent possible, DBB wanted to implement change retaining the staff already employed.

How the process is organized

The development process have been organized in three projects which, with regard to time and content, have been continuations of one another:

- Reduction of sickness absenteeism and personnel turnover
- Development of skills
- Improvement of working capacity and the quality of life

The starting point for the project to reduce absenteeism and personnel turnover was a survey of job satisfaction among all employees and the establishment of self-managed working groups in the department with the highest absenteeism. The project was carried out in 1998 and 1999, with a total budget of 36,000 euros.

The skills development project, called "Building on Values", included all employees and was implemented in 2000-2001. It had a total budget (excluding wages) of 200,000 euros.

The project, aimed at increasing working capacity and the quality of life, called "Women: Take Care of Yourselves and Your Bodies", includes 24 women with a risk of exclusion from the workplace and the labour market. The project has

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a budget of 36,000 euros and is being carried out from the autumn of 2001 to the summer of 2002.

The projects were initiated by management and the works council comprising five staff representatives and four members of management and has had the function as steering group.

While these projects have been under way, there have also been organisational changes: Both the management staff and the number of departments have been reduced; a new profit-and-loss contract has been signed with the Ministry of Culture; a social profile has been developed for the institution; and management has participated in a management training course.

These projects are being carried out with financial assistance from various development funds, established as part of the collective agreements between the Government and the unions for the public employees. The majority of the expenditures, including all wage expenditures, falls under DBB's profit-and-loss contract.

Participation and information

Management has emphasised on a high level of information and employee involvement. Focus has been on the risk for uncertainty and insecurity among employees due to the rapid implementation of organisational changes. Activities have been discussed at company-wide conferences, joint personnel meetings and department meetings. Working

groups have been appointed with the task of preparing the specific changes. Articles have been written in the biweekly personnel newsletter on the various development activities and their results.

Over time, the works council has developed as an important strategic partner for the management. It has been very conscious on which decisions to take in the management and which ones to open for discussion with the employees. Employees have always been informed and the opportunity to make comments has been organized. They have, however, only been included in decisions in which they have had the possibility of real influence.

Job satisfaction survey

When the job satisfaction survey was initiated in 1998, the specific goal was to obtain a comprehensive picture of the employees' job satisfaction and the link with absenteeism. The overall goal was to identify possible improvements, to create a dialogue within the organisation as a part of the process of dynamic change and to create the foundation for the development of a common, comprehensive set of values.

The questionnaire survey was conducted by an external consultant. The results were discussed at staff meetings in all departments, and the departments developed action plans for conditions under their own control. The action plans have been followed up consistently.

The survey revealed significant dissatisfaction with a number of physical con-

ditions at the workplace. The Safety Committee was responsible for improving these conditions, which were identified by the workplace assessment and have been given high priority financially.

Independent teams

As a result of the job satisfaction survey and on the basis of a pilot project, three were set up in 1999 in the distribution department which had the greatest absenteeism and the lowest degree of job satisfaction. The goal was to give individual employees more responsibility and influence with regard to their own jobs. A process consultant was hired to help set up the groups and to supervise management in its new role.

Development of skills

In order to retain DBB employees in a time with heavy pressure for technological and organisational change, a comprehensive skills development project was commenced in 2000.

The goal of the project was to develop the employees' professional skills, in order to deal with the change in technology and the new work tasks. Another goal was development of the personal skills for all managers and employees with the aim of working in a holistic, comprehensive project culture. The fact that the development project was entitled "Building On Values" reflects a desire for the organisation's new set of values to be an integrated part of the project.

Three working groups, appointed by the works council, developed proposals for professional skills development for the production and the distribution departments and for personal skills development, including content, timetable, budget, and evaluation. The proposals were discussed and adjusted by the WC.

Before participating in skills development, all employees had a performance review with their manager, in which a plan for personal development was worked out.

The professional skills development was implemented in the form of six training courses for the employees concerned.

Focus on three modules

The personal skills development course was conducted in three modules totalling five days for all managers and permanent employees. A total of 72 have participated. The content of the three modules was:

- Team organisation, communications, and co-operation
- Basic values for DBB
- The demands for tomorrow? (with tools for conflict resolution and coaching).

The participants for six course teams were selected based on the desire to create the greatest possible diversity and range within the organisation and management participated on an equal footing with the other staff.

The course modules have been held as day courses with organisational psychologists as instructors. The training

approach has emphasised involvement and orientation towards practical experience.

At the second module, which focussed on anchoring the new basic values of the organisation, all employees had to tell a "life-giving story" from the workplace. The life-giving stories were written down and now serve as examples of the basic values.

In addition to the three modules, half the employees have participated in a two-day module on project work and project management.

There was some concern and anxiety among employees with regard to participation in the first module. But the evaluation following each course module and at the end showed widespread satisfaction with both the instructors, the contents, and the results.

Working capacity and quality of life

In 2000 a high rate of absenteeism was still found among some employees, 12 employees had more than 30 sick days a year. Absenteeism was concentrated in a group of unskilled women over the age of 40 with a long career of heavy manual labour behind them. Some of these women were in risk of being fired and, thus, being excluded from the labour market. This situation created both anxiety and despondency among them.

In order to retain the women at risk and to prevent other women from ending up in a similar situation, a number of activities were organized during the second half of 2001 in order to increase job satisfaction and reduce absenteeism

among the women. The expectation was that a better quality of life, both physically and psychologically, would have a positive influence on their conception of their daily work and on their working capacity. The activities were aimed at the content and organisation of their work and their lifestyle.

The activities were part of the project: "Women: Take Care of Yourself and Your Bodies: A Project for Increasing Women's Working Capacity and Quality of Life" with 24 women participating.

Twelve physically worn-out women under direct threat of exclusion are examined by a physician and a physical therapist. An individual plan of action is developed, based on the study and the wishes of the individual woman. The plan may contain recommendations with regard to working postures and functions, as well as proposals for fitness, exercise, relaxation, and advice regarding diet, courses to quit smoking and others.

As part of the project, the distribution of work is changed in the self-managed groups in which the women work, in order to make it possible for the individual woman to avoid the work functions she believes take the greatest toll on her.

The participating women are also informed of the possibilities available for gradually withdrawing from the labour market.

Also participating in the project are 12 other women who, due to physical wear or lifestyle-related problems, are moving towards an exclusion risk. They are participating in a two day seminar, in which they are learning how to improve their working conditions and lifestyle through their own effort. At the end of the seminar they are asked to develop a personal action plan.

The participants receive 400 euros in support to their action plan. An occupational psychologist is involved in the project as a co-ordinator and process consultant.

The personal action plans are followed up and the project will be evaluated in the summer of 2002.

Evaluation and results

Evaluation has been an integral part of all projects undertaken at DBB. In addition to ongoing internal evaluation and follow-up, external consultants have been involved in evaluating the larger projects.

Such an external evaluation is being conducted in early 2002, as a follow-up to the job satisfaction survey of 1998 and as an evaluation of the skills development project.

In the project designed to increase women's working capacity and quality of life, the Danish Institute of Occupational Health undertook examinations of the participants' health before the project and similar examinations will be carried out when the project concludes in the summer of 2002.

Willingness to meet the challenges

The main result of the whole development process is a willingness within the organisation to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

Greater knowledge

According to the employees' own statements, they have gained a greater knowledge of the areas in which DBB operates, learned more about what is going on at DBB and become more committed to DBB's future. Management believes employees are more committed to their work and their colleagues and that they are co-operating in new ways and have a greater understanding of unity of the institution.

Social profile improved

The social profile of the institution has been improved: The employees include six blind and visually impaired individuals, eight who belong to ethnic minorities and five people in jobs with special social contracts.

Sick leave rates decreased

Absenteeism rates, which were the focus of several projects, have dropped over the duration of the projects. The drop has not been as great as hoped. However, considering the extensive organisational changes and the strong social profile, any drop is noteworthy. An extensive training effort (approximately 900 course days) was implemented without financial compensation.

Increase in productivity

Production of taped and printed books as well as the number of loans also increased during the transition period which, in relation to the many work days used on training courses, indicates a dramatic increase in productivity.

Customer satisfaction

In general, users have expressed satisfaction with DBB. In late 2001 the institution received a prize from the library employees' office workers' union. The justification was the library's unique products and the "Building on Values" project for organisational change from which other libraries had much to learn, as it was expressed.

Handbook for inspiration

Activities at DBB have been used as examples in a handbook on improvement of the psychosocial working environment for inspiration of other government workplaces in Denmark

In the near future the technical changes at DBB will be accelerated. The new follow-up of the job satisfaction survey will show what other issues should be dealt with in order to continue the positive trend at the workplace.