

# Occupational Health Services tailored for SMEs Denmark



*The project is being carried out at the Frederiksborg Occupational Health Service Centre in Northern Zealand. The Centre has 350 affiliated member organisations with fewer than 10 employees. These enterprises make up about 10% of the total number of affiliated employees. The Centre received funding for a pilot project from the National Working Environment Board which was planned to run throughout 1999-2000. The aim was to develop an extensive service profile for small businesses with a firm emphasis on the sustainability of the system.*

## **Introduction**

The focus is currently on the construction industry, hotels and restaurants. However, the ultimate objective is to visit all 337 member SMEs.

Evidence shows that SMEs very seldom contact occupational health services. Over the last 8 years the OHS Centre in Frederiksborg has been in contact with 181 SMEs.

Within the construction and hotel and restaurant sectors fewer contacts still have been made with occupational health services. The OHS centre has only been in contact with 13% of SMEs within the construction industry and 20% of SMEs within the hotel and restaurant sector.

## **How the system works**

The essence of the project is to offer services that suit the particular needs of small businesses. The requirements of these enterprises will be met even if the consultancy hours exceed the income from

membership fees for the year.

However, experience shows that small businesses rarely need such comprehensive advice that a great many consultancy hours are necessary.

## **The project features:**

- n A personal contact allocated to each business. That person will visit the business and see how it operates
- n A telephone service providing on-the-spot answers to queries
- n A special workplace assessment method developed for small enterprises
- n Arrangement of seminars tailored for small businesses. Workplace assessment methods are presented along with other special topics designed for this sector. A forum for exchanging experiences is also provided
- n Introduction of businesses to a supportive network such as local employers associations and the organisation of joint activities
- n An information strategy is designed specifically for the target group and includes a

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newsletter and articles in local weekly journals.

One of the most important elements of the project is its ability to understand and empathise with the needs of small businesses. Great emphasis is placed on positive achievements too, instead of the traditional problem oriented approach.

#### ***How successful is the project?***

A midterm evaluation was carried out. The reaction, overall, was very positive, but a number of problem areas were also identified. Most of the small businesses gave positive feedback and indicated that they were satisfied with the help and advice provided by the occupational health service.

Many owners – more than expected – have asked for help with solving specific working environment problems. A reasonable number of participants also showed up for the seminars (those taking place in small organisations were particularly popular). But the seminars did not go entirely smoothly. For instance, even though an owner might have signed up for an event, he would perhaps not show up if something more pressing cropped up in his business.

The consultants have been on a sharp learning curve. For the most part the project has proved fruitful,

but certain elements have been less positive. For instance, changing from the problem-oriented approach to a more positive one has not been easy.

#### ***The project also raised a number of questions such as:***

- n What can we really offer these small enterprises with their special problems?
- n How much should we tolerate a negative attitude towards OHS because it's seen as a burdensome extra tax?

Visiting all the sites proved to be a more arduous task than expected – it took far more time to organise than originally anticipated and journeys were often wasted because the owner had gone off to attend to an urgent work matter at the last moment. However, all these problems are of a one-off nature, once each company is allocated a personal contact there will be no further need for such frequent visits.

#### ***Drawing conclusions***

It is too soon to tell how the project will work in the long-term. Certain trends have been identified however. For example, the SMEs that were visited as part of the project are now more likely to contact the OHS. After meeting with the OHS, SMEs are more likely to draw up a

policy for purchasing better equipment and to draw up guidelines for the safer handling of chemicals and other hazardous substances.