

MEETING NEW DEMANDS – APPRENTICESHIPS/I-VET FOR YOUNG WORKERS IN HHM

1. Organisations involved

HHM A/S
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Denmark

2. Description of the case

HHM, a private enterprise with 165 employees in the building and construction sector, does commercial and residential construction projects in addition to offering service concepts for maintenance, remodelling and extensions. They employ craftsmen from various disciplines and pay special attention to young workers in initial vocational training and education (I-VET)/apprenticeships.

2.1. Introduction

Operating in a sector facing the problems of high accident rates and the prevalence of fatal accidents combined with the wish to act as a socially responsible enterprise has led HHM to put efforts into improving occupational health and safety and promote the health and well-being of employees. Thus, for the past five years HHM has demonstrated active interest in the quality of the working environment.

Moreover, the interest in promoting health and well-being at the workplace led to the formulation of a working environment policy. The working environment policy is built around the following principles:

- Ensuring that no employees are injured as the result of occupational accidents or encounter with work-related diseases;
- Motivating employees to take responsibility for themselves and others by being positively engaged in the working environment;
- Encouraging employees to use their right to disengage if rules or policies are not being followed;
- Integrating working environment at *all* levels in the enterprise as a natural part of business operations.

Taking these principles as a starting point, HHM obtained the Health and safety certificate accredited by the Danish Working Environment Authority and conducted an evaluation and analysis of the working environment policy in cooperation with an external working environment expert. The study used a survey to measure key indicators for the well-being among all employees, and gave recommendations on the basis of the results.

From this evaluation, HHM became aware of a critical need among young workers in apprenticeships or initial vocational training and education (henceforth I-VET).

2.2. Aims

A principle aim at HHM is to retain and attract highly qualified employees. A high quality working environment, according to HHM, is central in achieving this goal. HHM aims to create a working environment and an atmosphere at the workplace that is amenable to both the physical *and* mental needs of all employees. However, as indicated by the evaluation of the working environment policy, initiatives addressing the specific needs of young workers were necessary in order to promote health and well-being among these employees.

HHM's policy regarding young workers in I-VET is a good illustration of the holistic policy approach characteristic to the approach of HHM.

HHM seeks to accommodate the unique set of challenges that young workers in I-VET face in transitioning from school to the labour market. In Denmark, the transition from mandatory lower secondary education in the Folkeskole to I-VET is associated with a relative high risk of 'dropping out' I-VET, which in turn may put young people in a precarious position and increase the risk of encountering social problems, such as the abuse of drugs or alcohol.

HHM's insight, that the demands posed by school and the workplace are fundamentally different, guides policies concerning young workers. Attracting young, quality labour is in HHM's long-term interest, and a holistic approach in the working environment policy for employees in I-VET is a means to that end.

2.3. What was done, and how?

To meet the practical and psychosocial needs of young workers, HHM has endeavoured to open communication both vertically and horizontally in the enterprise. HHM has opened communication horizontally by organizing a network of young employees, and has also increased vertical communication, by assigning two hosts per young worker in I-VET. Both of these initiatives – the network and apprentice hosts – result in a better integration of young workers in the enterprise, and thereby prevent the break off of education (i.e. reduces the risk of mental disorders typically associated with social marginalisation) and increases well-being in the job. The two initiatives are described in more detail below.

Apprentice network

To meet the particular psychosocial needs of young workers, HHM has launched a networking system, known as the Apprentice Club, for first and second year apprentices. The network affords apprentices with informal peer-to-peer counselling and a variety of social arrangements throughout the year. The network is intended as a forum where new employees can share experiences and concerns in an informal way. The network is meant to facilitate knowledge-sharing between new and old apprentices, where second-year apprentices, for example, can help and prepare newcomers in their transition to the labour market.

Apprentice hosting

In order to address the practical needs and physical and mental well-being of new workers, HHM assigns two hosts for each new worker. The hosts are given the responsibility to satisfy the young workers' more immediate needs, such as finding suitable working clothes or equipment, and to address general concerns, such as understanding wages, working time registration and the nature of the job. The hosts are selected for their enthusiasm and attentiveness to the more sensitive concerns new workers have, such as conflicts among colleagues, setting expectations and being treated with respect.

Beyond these two specific initiatives, young workers in I-VET benefit from measures that are offered to all HHM employees. Such measures include an internal course on working conditions in different environments, annual employee development interviews and an open and transparent policy for

dealing with bullying, harassment and threats. These measures represent an approach that integrates the physical and psychosocial aspects that make up the working environment. They also suggest that a certain level of specificity is necessary when businesses consider working environment policy.

2.4. What was achieved?

HHM's working environment policy seems to have led to several improvements when compared to national trends in Denmark.

- HHM scores well on meeting the social needs of their workers. According to a 2007 external evaluation undertaken by the consulting company Alectia, applying the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ) developed by researchers at the National Research Centre for the Working Environment, HHM matches or exceeds the national average across several indicators on social well-being. They perform above-average in the areas of emotional job demands, social atmosphere, and support and feedback from colleagues.
- HHM has been able to attract a relatively stable amount of young workers from year to year. Over the past five years, HHM has had 11-15 apprentices per year.
- HHM experience relatively few drop-outs among first-year apprentices. Since adopting the measure, HHM has on average lost only one first-year apprentice per year.
- The total work-related accidents fall from year-to-year.
- Low rates of sick leave – under 1.6 %.

While these achievements are promising, it is important to note that HHM's working environment policy is underperforming in the categories of:

- Predictability: receiving timeline information about important issues and changes including news about job assignments, tasks etc.;
- Own health as evaluated by employees themselves.

Though overall lower predictability in the job and poorer self-rated health are distinctive features of the construction sector, employees do not always receive the information necessary to perform tasks in a timely fashion, and their self-rated health is lower than the national average.

To address these areas of underperformance, HHM has incorporated better predictability in the job into their business strategy toward 2011. HHM has also applied for funding for a new project, "Better ergonomics – Better health" to address the health concerns among their employees.

Moreover, since HHM initially started focusing on the working environment sickness absence levels in the enterprise have been reduced and the enterprise performs better in regard of occupational health and safety.

2.5. Success factors

The success criteria for HHM's measures concerning the working atmosphere include:

- An active safety committee – with competitive elections for seats;
- Frequent unannounced management visits – to ensure that worksite policies are being followed;
- Yearly employment development interviews – not only for functionaries, but for all employees;

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- Solid introduction of new employees – all newcomers receive an employee handbook, working environment folder, safety check and a 14 day follow-up telephone conversation to hear how things are going;
- Full participation in the “Introduction to the workplace” course – all employees.

One success criterion not mentioned above is awarding workers that report “near accidents” (that may have had serious consequences). The measure intends to open communication among workers about how accidents can be avoided. This is helpful for young workers in particular due to their limited work experience, and as they are more likely to have an increased risk of experiencing occupational accidents. Awards for reporting near accidents generate a higher frequency in the reporting of accidents. Thus, the 38 accidents reported in 2008, reflects a mature health and safety culture in the enterprise. However, the overall goal of no more than 35 accident reports set by HHM for 2008 was exceeded.

2.6. Further information

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2.7. Transferability

Regarding the broader perspective, HHM’s measures for a healthy working environment aligns with general concepts of good practice. However, HHM’s case distinguishes itself when considering their attention to the particular demands of young workers in I-VET. HHM has an introduction plan that surrounds newcomers with formal and informal resources to meet their physical, practical and psychosocial needs. Their network and hosting strategy demonstrates that a working environment can be as dependable as it is adjustable to the individual needs of new workers. This combined approach is perhaps the case’s contribution to the general lexicon of good practice in the workplace.

In this sense, the case of HHM is transferable to other enterprises in general. However, the formal organisation of the initiatives in HHM may not be transferable to micro enterprises. Establishing a network, quite naturally, presupposes a certain number of young workers. Also, appointing apprentice hosts may require some level of expertise in the enterprise.

3. References, resources:

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