

## A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH FOR THE WELLBEING OF OLDER WORKERS IN SOLYSTIC: FRANCE

### 1. Organisations involved

- Solystic
- ACMS (interenterprise association of occupational medicine services of the Ile-de-France region)
- AIPVR (interenterprise association of occupational medicine services of the Valence region)

### 2. Description of the case

#### 2.1. Introduction

Solystic specialises in the design, manufacturing, marketing and installation of automatic postal sorting and distribution equipment. Company headquarters are located at Bagneux (Ile-de-France), with a production site at Bourg-les-Valence (Drôme).

Workers at Solystic are employed in manufacturing, installation, trade, design studies, engineering, marketing, programme management and support services such as human resources (HR), finance and information technology. The diversity of tasks makes manual work less repetitive and allows greater autonomy for each worker, resulting in a lower rate of occupational disease in its production site. The working conditions of installers, however, were given special attention, as installation requires working in difficult postures, more flexible working hours, frequent travel for business and an increased likelihood of customer-related stress.

Of the 450 staff employed, 58% are aged over 45 and 37% have more than 20 years of experience in the company. Market forces reducing the demand for postal equipment (and, thus, fewer incentives for hiring replacement workers), as well as demographic changes within the company, meant that Solystic needed to retain its older employees.

#### 2.2. Aims

Solystic aimed to increase career longevity and to maintain the employability of workers as they aged. This was both to retain experience and knowledge within the company, and also to enable older workers to end their career in good health.

#### 2.3. What was done, and how?

In 2009 a French law on the funding of social security required companies with more than 50 employees to negotiate a company agreement for the promotion of employment of older workers. Solystic therefore adopted its first company agreement in 2009, and has renewed the agreement every year following an assessment of results.

Six key priorities were defined by the government <sup>(1)</sup> (focused on recruitment, career management, working conditions, skills development and transfer of knowledge), each of which formed part of the Solystic agreement. Clear objectives were set to have 15% of the workforce aged over 55 years by 2010, with a further increase to 18% by 2012.

In 2013, in accordance with the law on 'Generation Contracts' (developing mentoring tasks for older workers), Solystic signed a company agreement implementing the Generation Contracts for 2013–2016.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Recruitment of older workers; anticipation of career changes; improvement of working conditions and the prevention of arduous working conditions; skills development and access to vocational training; career management for older workers and transition between employment and retirement; transmission of knowledge and skills and development of mentoring.

The company agreements were comprehensive and targeted workers from the age of 45, with some measures applicable only to workers aged over 50 or 55. Measures focused on improving working conditions through the reduction of strenuous work, and career planning in later life, using methods such as working time arrangements, vocational training, mentoring programmes, and transition between working life and retirement.

### **2.3.1. Improving the work environment**

An annual ergonomic assessment of both premises of the company is carried out by the occupational health services of the ACMS and AIPVR. Each year a different category of workers is targeted in order to identify strenuous working conditions. In 2010, wiring workstations in the production site were the focus; in 2011, mobile workers frequently on business travel were assessed; in 2012, the target was tasks which put pressure on joints; and, in 2013, the ergonomic assessment supported the relocation of the head office to new premises.

Ergonomic assessments have led to adaptations of the workplace. Particular attention was given to the furniture and equipment. All the wiring workstations, for example, were equipped with height-adjustable furniture, task chairs were bought, knee protectors were provided to workers who often knelt, and headlamps were provided to employees working in poorly lit rooms. Other equipment, such as manipulator arms, were installed to facilitate movements and gripping.

In preparation for the 2011 assessment on mobile workers, a subgroup in the psychosocial risks committee of the company Committee on Hygiene, Safety and Working Conditions (CHSCT) was set up specifically to discuss working conditions of mobile workers, with a focus on workers over 50.

### **2.3.2. Better career management**

All workers reaching the ages of 45, 50, 55 and 60, and all workers over the age of 57 who request it, can meet with HR for career discussions (*entretien de deuxième partie de carrière*) separate from their annual appraisal. Here, they can discuss their current working conditions and review their career prospects. Standardised procedures agreed with social partners mandate discussion of working conditions, workload, physical capacities and restraints, commuting time, issues related to workstations, and their career prospects and desire for change. The meetings have concrete outcomes, such as work-time arrangements, adaptations of workstations and career development.

Following the 2011 assessment, a provision was made in the agreement to consider requests from mobile workers wishing to move to more sedentary work.

### **2.3.3. Flexibility in working times**

All requests from employees over the age of 55 to move from full-time to part-time work are carefully considered, with an agreement that at least 50% of these requests will be accepted. For older workers changing to part-time work, the company covers the wage gap up to 80%, guaranteeing that pension entitlements will not be lost for these employees.

### **2.3.4. Other measures**

Vocational training, mentoring and the transition between employment and retirement are all important issues for the wellbeing of older workers. A minimum of 30% of workers over 50 are offered technical skills training to ensure continued employability. All employees over 55 who wish to retire progressively and continue working part-time are permitted to do this.

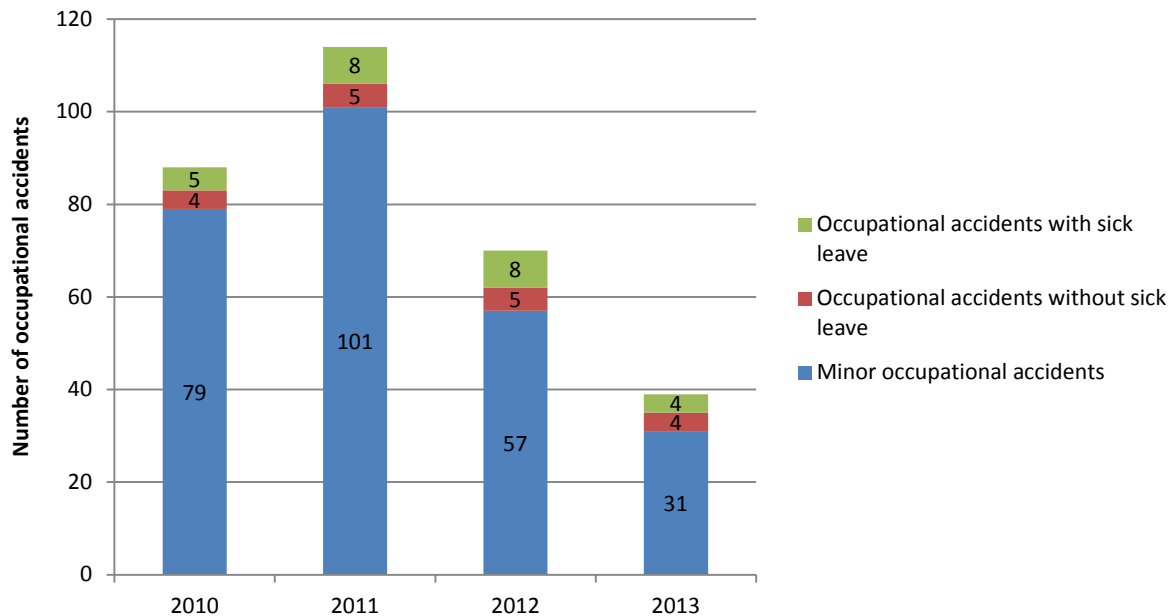
## **2.4. What was achieved?**

Initial scepticism from older workers has given way to satisfaction with the measures implemented.

By the end of the first 3 years, the objectives set out in the company agreements had been largely achieved.

The objective to reduce occupational accidents resulting in absence from work to fewer than five a year by 2015 was achieved, with four such accidents recorded in 2013. All types of occupational accidents have decreased since 2010 (see Figure 1). Additionally, the company has seen a decrease in sick leave.

Figure 1: Occupational accidents per year, 2010–2013



In 2012, 78% of older workers attended the individual career discussion meeting with HR, compared with 20% in 2009. Overall, eight requests for part-time work have been made, all of which have been accepted. Requests for other working time arrangements and adaptations of workstations have also been approved.

## 2.5. Success factors

- *Legal basis:* The legal requirement underpinning the actions, and the negotiated company agreement gives weight to the programme.
- *Holistic approach:* The agreement adopts a comprehensive approach to the employment of older workers, linking working conditions, skills and career management. It involves HR and occupational safety and health.
- *Coverage of all workers:* The company agreement may have targeted older workers but the ergonomic assessments and interventions were carried out for all workers, irrespective of their age. Health problems were thus prevented across the workforce.
- *Measures were proposed at the right age:* Most measures were proposed to employees from the age of 45 to anticipate career changes and allow early intervention before health problems actually occur.
- *Continuous improvement:* Choosing a different area of the company for ergonomic assessment each year ensures that the programme does not become routine or invisible.
- *Evaluation and monitoring:* The company agreement was closely monitored. Selected indicators are assessed each year and presented to social partners and worker representatives council. Annual agreements, instead of 3-year agreements, allow greater flexibility to adapt the measures where necessary.

## 2.6. Transferability

The process of negotiating a company agreement with employee representatives and/or the company occupational safety and health committee can be transferred to other countries with similarly structured social dialogue mechanisms. Working proactively within existing national instruments (such as the requirement to conduct career-planning discussions with older employees) can be readily modelled by any company of any size.

## 2.7. Further information

Solystic  
152/160 Avenue Aristide Briand  
92227 Bagneux CEDEX  
France

Contact person: Marie-Pierre Homberg, HR Manager

## 3. References and resources

- Interview with Marie-Pierre Homberg, HR manager at Solystic.
- Collective bargaining agreements on the employment of older workers 2010, 2011 and 2012.
- Collective bargaining agreement implementing the law of 1 March 2013 on the Generation Contract, September 2013.
- Assessments of the collective bargaining agreements on the employment of older workers 2010, 2011 and 2012.
- Ravallec, C. and Vaudoux, D. (2012), 'Vieillir au travail, des accords seniors qui montrent la voie', *Travail & Sécurité*, no. 726, 1 March, pp15-28. Retrieved 30/10/2015 from: <http://www.travail-et-securite.fr/dms/ts/ArticleTS/TS-TS726page14>