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Netherlands Labour Authority
Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment

The State of Healthy Work

Preventing the unhealthy
aspects of work

*Summary in English of Staat van Gezond werk - het
voorkomen van de ongezonde kanten van arbeid.*

*The full report in Dutch is published on
NLArbeidsinspectie.nl.*

*Please note that footnotes refer to publications in
Dutch*

Summary

Work is good for us. Research has shown that working people generally enjoy better health than non-working people.¹ Healthy work is work that is not harmful to you, now or later in life. But scientific research and data from the Netherlands Labour Authority show that some jobs are healthier than others.

Work-related health problems do not affect all workers in the same way and to the same extent and can have far-reaching consequences.

First, they affect the working people themselves. Examples include reduced performance, illness, absenteeism, disability, lower quality of life, or even premature death. They also affect loved ones or survivors. Finally, they affect businesses through reduced employee performance or absenteeism, costs and society through financial losses due to healthcare costs, and occupational disability.

Human suffering and damage to society...

Some 4,000 employees and former employees die prematurely each year due to unhealthy working conditions. That is 11 people a day. It is estimated that around 200,000 healthy life years lost annually due to unhealthy working conditions. That makes unhealthy working conditions, after smoking and obesity, the leading cause of healthy years of life lost. Overall, some 5% of the total burden of illness in the Netherlands is attributable to unfavourable working conditions.

Almost half of the total number of sick leave days are work-related. Furthermore, it is estimated that about 13,000 workers become incapacitated each year due to unhealthy working conditions. The financial damage of unhealthy working conditions cannot be precisely quantified. But with a high degree of certainty, it is at least 10 billion. However it could also be 20 billion or more.

...by three culprits

There are many activities that can damage people's health. Still, there are three main culprits for damage to people's health: psychosocial workload, physical strain and exposure to hazardous substances. It is no coincidence that the Labour Authority addresses these with specific programmes in its multi-year plan.

Underestimated because it is invisible

Unsafe work regularly leads to workplace accidents. The consequences of unsafe work are often immediate. A worker falls, something heavy falls on the worker, forklifts run over people's feet, workers lose limbs in unsafe machinery, fatal accidents, etc. *Unhealthy* working conditions have equally far-reaching consequences, but they are often harder to see and of a less immediate nature. As a result, the damage to health and social costs of unhealthy working conditions are underestimated by society as a whole and by individual employers.

For example, society and individual employers underestimate the costs because there is often a long period between exposure to a risk and the consequences, such as illness and absenteeism. Therefore, no link is made between illness and absenteeism and previous exposure to a risk. Moreover, individual employers face the costs of investing in healthy work directly, but they do not always translate into gains in the form of lower absenteeism. Indeed, it is only years later that a significant part of the illness arises. In the case of exposure to hazardous substances, it is usually not until people have retired.

Employers may also have wage loss insurance, which reduces their awareness of the cost of absenteeism. And not *all* costs are taken into account. Employers often underestimate the cost of lost productivity because it is less tangible and visible. Furthermore, individual employers do not experience healthcare costs to a large extent, if at all, because they are largely born by society and individual employees.

¹ Hulshof, C. (2012). [Blijven zagen](#). Oration University of Amsterdam; CBS, 2020: [Mensen zonder werk voelen zich minder gezond dan werkenden](#); Burdorf, A. et al., (2016). [Kennissynthese Werk\(en\) is Gezond](#). ZonMw.

The intangible costs, such as grief caused by lost healthy years of life, are not taken into account either and are also borne by the worker and their loved ones. The same applies to the loss of income suffered by employees. That makes it likely that, on balance, there will be an uneven distribution between what the employer and the employee are expected to bear. Thus, costs are underestimated and passed on to the employee and the collective.

Absenteeism counselling is given, but prevention is taken less seriously.

Employers do not invest enough in prevention. Half of all companies have not carried out a risk assessment. This is especially true of smaller companies. These employers do see the usefulness of the risk assessment but still perceive taking stock of the risks and drawing up a plan of measures as complex and impractical. Also, health and safety services contracts focus on absence counselling rather than on prevention. Prevention-oriented expertise, including advice from the company doctor or other experts and the provision of a periodic occupational health surveillance (PAGO), are only taken up by a minority of companies. For those companies that do take measures to tackle unhealthy working conditions, the quality of these measures is lower if they are not embedded in a fully supported occupational health and safety system.

Tackling unhealthy working conditions: relatively high costs for individual employers

In the Netherlands, both the direction and funding of healthy working conditions have been placed mainly in the hands of the employer. That is understandable, as the duty of care lies with the employer too. However, taking preventive measures may involve relatively high costs for individual companies. It seems plausible that where there is more joint direction and approach, e.g. through the involvement of social partners in the implementation of social security as can be found abroad², there is more investment in prevention and more learning from any occupational illnesses detected. The ways of applying this approach deserve further exploration by stakeholders.

Unsafe work is more often reported than unhealthy working conditions

Given the scale of the problem, relatively few complaints and signs of workers doing unhealthy work are reported. The Labour Authority receives significantly more reports of unsafe situations. After all, these are often directly visible to those who report them. Also, the fact that people can report unhealthy working conditions to the Labour Authority seems relatively unknown.

To remedy this, the Labour Authority wants to raise awareness of the possibility of reporting unhealthy working conditions and make reporting easier. The Labour Authority is working on this with company doctors and health and safety experts.³

Risk-oriented supervision

Besides taking up notifications and requests, the Labour Authority also conducts risk-oriented supervision through active inspection projects. The Labour Authority decides which risks it addresses based on its information position and risk assessments. The Labour Authority is further investing in that information position by developing high-quality data analysis and qualitative improvement of information registration and use. The choice of interventions and intensity of deployment is focused on social impact. Key interventions include enforcement inspections and re-inspections, communication about the desired health and safety standards, and exerting pressure on and cooperating with industry associations. Information-driven working also supports inspectors and investigators in these interventions, allowing them to efficiently use up-to-date and relevant information during their work.⁴

The Labour Authority specifically does the following on occupational health and safety and healthy work:

- Surveillance of occupational health and safety: digital retrieval and assessment of risk assessments, combined with education and visits to employers that submit substandard risk assessments. The Labour Authority has gained experience with this approach in consultation with the sector or industry in recent

² See section 3.3.

³ The Netherlands Labour Authority, [Multi-Year plan 2023-2026](#), p.14.

⁴ [Meerjarenplan+2023-2026+Nederlandse+Arbeidsinspectie \(4\).pdf](#), p 6, 7, 23, 26.

years. The Labour Authority is continuing with this approach. At the same time, such an approach need not depend on the initiative of the Labour Authority but can also be taken by the sector, possibly in conjunction with the Labour Authority.

- Specific intervention programmes focused on exposure to hazardous substances, psychosocial workload and physical strain. The Labour Authority is further developing and deepening its approach concerning the latter.
- Sending a signal to sectors, industries and professionals: The information the Labour Authority is gathering and analysing can and will give sectors a more explicit indication of where risks may be hiding.
- Contributing to awareness among employers, employees, sectors, industries and professionals on healthy and safe working conditions by opening up information on the state of science and technology.⁵ Providing tools, such as self-inspection tools, to employers so that they themselves can identify where their risks are.⁶

Improve prevention

Preventing damage to employees' health calls for concerted action. The responsibility for a healthy working environment lies primarily with employers, but other actors also have a role to play. They include individual employees, the works council, the prevention officer, certified core experts, company doctors, health and safety services, sector associations, insurers, policymakers and the Labour Authority itself.

Listed below are improvement opportunities that the Labour Authority intends to actively bring to the attention of each party involved.

Employers

- Know your work processes and the respective operations taken in those processes. Not in a general sense but step by step. 'Knowing' in this context means: examining the work actions, or having this examined, from an occupational hygiene angle. Measure the burden, measure the exposure. Do this for each work process and, where necessary, down to the level of individual operations. A risk inventory is more than an academic exercise alone and can also be used to optimise work processes.
- Adjust work processes and operations that may cause too much strain, exposure or danger.
- Policies and procedures in the form of codes of conduct, risk assessment, or action plan are only effective if they are properly implemented and embedded in the organisation. In other words: if they are living documents and give direction to the day-to-day work practice. Therefore, investing in a responsible safety and health culture is important to healthy work.⁷
- Enter into a basic framework contract.⁸ Do not limit company doctors' input to sick leave that has already occurred. Extend the input of company doctors to the prevention of absenteeism. Also leverage the expertise of the other core experts. And have a periodic occupational health examination (PAGO); take action if the PAGO shows early signs of health complaints.
- Encourage an open dialogue on healthy working conditions. Engage regularly with the prevention officer, company doctor and other key experts on healthy working conditions.⁹
- Ensure that healthy work and health and safety policies are an integral part of business operations; sustainable employability of staff is important to business continuity.
- Also consider the professionalism and implicit and explicit relationships (internal/external) core experts to other disciplines in the company (such as sales, marketing, production, financial, etc.).

⁵ Examples include self-inspection tools, fact sheets, research into risk factors and measures, e.g. regarding undesirable behaviour at work. For the latter, see the [Delphi-studie naar risicofactoren en maatregelen intern ongewenst gedrag](#) (2022).

⁶ See culprits appendix.

⁷ Inspectorate SZW (2018). *Staat van Arbeidsveiligheid. Iedereen een veilige én gezonde werkplek*. The Hague. See [website](#) for infographic, video and speech and the [report](#).

⁸ [Waar moet het basiscontract aan voldoen? | Basiscontract | Arboportaal](#) (What requirements must the basic contract meet? | Basic contract | Health and safety portal)

⁹ See, for example [Een handreiking de ondernemingsraad en gevaarlijke stoffen](#) (2020) and the importance of a Health and Safety catalogue (2022): [Gewasbeschermingsmiddelen in de agrarische sector](#).

Employees (employee representatives)

- Engage regularly with the prevention officer, company doctor and other key experts on healthy working conditions.¹⁰
- Obtain relevant information such as absenteeism data, first signs of health complaints (PAGO) and staff turnover, and discuss preventive measures with the employer and monitor their implementation.

Branches, sectors

- Understand that healthy working conditions are a strategic issue: how do we retain happy and healthy workers for our sector?
- Invest in knowledge about hazards and the risks of work processes in the industry.
- Invest in joint research or knowledge sharing on effective management measures. It is clear, at the level of an individual company, that a conclusive prevention business case may not always be made because taking measures may be costly. In that case, initiate a sectoral approach to work cost-effectively on tailor-made solutions. It could be that within a sector, with all its economies of scale, it really does pay financially to prevent occupational diseases - to the benefit of the whole industry and the health of all workers in it.

Health and safety experts

- Promote the importance of safe and healthy work and usefulness of the periodic occupational health examination (PAGO).
- Strengthen mutual cooperation, both between associations of OSH experts and individual OSH experts.
- Report shortcomings in OSH performance to the Labour Authority.

Legislator

- Consider introducing entry requirements to enter the market place. Encouraging entrepreneurship has resulted in there being no entry requirements to be a 'good employer'. The Labour Authority regularly finds that start-up employers rarely know about employer responsibilities.¹¹ The Labour Authority's self-inspection tools¹² and starter projects¹³ help to remedy some of that. Furthermore, the Labour Authority supports initiatives such as the Multi-Year Risk Assessment Programme. Nevertheless, the dilemma remains as to whether knowledge about healthy, safe and fair work should not already be present at the start of the company, and more specifically, knowledge about which factors may be a risk for workers' health. Such knowledge among companies is needed to prevent illness and absenteeism from work.

¹⁰ See, for example [Een handreiking de ondernemingsraad en gevaarlijke stoffen](#) (2020) and the importance of a Health and Safety catalogue (2022): [Gewasbeschermingsmiddelen in de agrarische sector](#).

¹¹ Exploratory inspections for new forms of business such as rapid delivery distribution sites have shown, for example, that occupational health and safety care is lacking or of poor quality, managers do not know they should provide information or how to supervise. Nor is there any knowledge on what measures they should take for safe, fair and healthy work. See [Themarapportage maaltijd- en flitsbezorging](#) (2022) the temporary Employment Agencies Programme report [Programmarapportage Uitzendbureaus 2016-2019 | Rapport | Nederlandse Arbeidsinspectie \(nlarbeidsinspectie.nl\)](#).

¹² [Self-inspection your health and safety policy in order](#); [Self-inspection working with hazardous substances](#); [Self-inspection work pressure and undesirable behaviour](#).

¹³ Provision of specific information for first-time buyers ([Multi-year plan 2023-2026](#)).

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Postbus 90801 | 2500 LV Den Haag
T 0800 51 51

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