

## Experiences, Results and Challenges

It is too early to assess the full impact of the new strategies. Though, the preliminary results show following tendencies during the first years since the strategy was implemented:

### Experiences

The guidance tool has, among others, been evaluated via focus groups interviews with inspectors from all four regional Inspection Centres. The evaluation found that inspectors use the guidance tool for *preparing* before starting out on visiting a new sector, *before* visiting an enterprise, for checking *during* the inspection (e.g. to make semi-structured group interviews with employees) and for evaluation *after* the inspection whether the enterprise have violated the Working Environment Act. Furthermore, inspectors use the tool as a template when writing the improvement notices.

Most inspectors use the tool to support and structure their dialogue with the enterprise. They might choose relevant questions or themes from the tool during the interview, thereby adapting the tool to the specific enterprise. Sometimes inspectors use the guidance tool openly during the interview though most inspectors do not - in order to facilitate an “open” dialogue. A practical observation is that inspectors often perform group interviews on PWE matters in pairs – which facilitate a more fluent shift between dialogue, “checking” the guidance tool, and making notes.

Most inspectors emphasize that they find the guidance tool helpful for investigating and assessing PWE problems. Many inspectors also reported an increased awareness of, and interest in, PWE matters along with increased skills on regulating PWE. At the same time, inspectors still find PWE more complex to handle than other working environment issues – due to the subject matter as such and because methods and inspection procedures differ from methods and procedures related to other working environment problems.

Regarding the enterprises’ response to the new strategies – according to the inspectors – many enterprises find PWE-matters a delicate subject for inspection although most acknowledge that psychosocial issues are important aspects of the working environment and that WEA inspects this area as well as the physical working environment.

### Results

It is always difficult to measure effects, and there are several limitations associated with the following presentation of the preliminary results of the WEA strategy. Introducing the new “all workplaces are inspected” procedures have been done sector by sector. This means data cannot be compared over time because, for example, hospitals were predominantly inspected in one period and auto repair shops in another. Moreover, different kinds of sector focused efforts are taking place in different periods of time which also affects the types and amounts of notices issued.

With these limitations in mind there has been a significant increase in the quantity of improvement notices issued since the new strategy was launched April 2007: In 2006 the total number of notices, sanctions etc. issued on PWE was 245, in 2007 it was 673 and in 2008 it

was 1053. The increase in PWE-related notices issued is not just a result of WEA issuing more notices or sanctions overall. In 2005 improvement notices issued regarding PWE amounted to about 2.5 % of the total number of sanctions, notices etc. issued on all types of working environment problems whereas the same percentage has increased to about 5 % since 2007.

Considerable human and economic resources have been invested in the new strategy since 2007. But due to the tool, the training, the risk factor approach and the initiatives of the overall strategy (PWE task forces, templates etc.), the WEA's time consumption of inspecting the PWE *regarding the specific workplace* has been reduced. The time reduction concerns both the visits and data collection at the enterprises and the administrative process of writing the improvement notice, which in many ways could be described as a profit for both the WEA and the enterprise.

And, though preliminary, the tendency seems to be that the WEA now is winning more cases in the appeals board than before 2007 (appeals generally have long latency) – which indicates that the improvement notices are now better at substantiating how and why a certain PWE-problem involves a health and safety risk to the employees.

Thus, so far the guidance tool and the new strategy (at least for some PWE-problems) seem to be a suitable and efficient way of assessing the health and safety risks concerning work related stress and violence, thereby allowing the WEA to detect more of the existing problems. Furthermore, since PWE-matters are now an integrated part of the general inspection in all enterprises the WEA expects that the continued focus on stress prevention and PWE contributes to and strengthens the enterprise's own awareness and capacity for stress prevention.

About 60 % of enterprises who receive an improvement notice have asked for and received WEA's process guidance regarding action plans. When inspectors evaluate the process guidance after the sessions many of these enterprises describe the WEA guidance as helpful in planning and implementing their action plan. Though, it is still too early to evaluate whether the improvement of the action plans will result in better management of the PWE- problems on a long term basis.

## **Continuous challenges**

Even though psychosocial working environment can be a delicate subject, only very few enterprises oppose WEA's inspection. Many enterprises indicate that psychosocial issues are important aspects of the working environment and that WEA inspects this area as well as the physical working environment.

Though, it is important that inspectors know how to introduce the subject to the companies and how to explain improvement notices in a comprehensible way. This can be a challenge to inspectors with other education or training backgrounds than psychology and likewise, for instance engineers.

All inspectors have completed a basic education in all aspects related to the working environment, including psychosocial working environment. The inspectors are also trained in the use of the guidance tools and how to evaluate collected data from an enterprise. Also,



specialists in psychosocial working environment help the inspectors in the assessment of psychosocial working conditions. All together this has resulted in a higher level of professional competencies within WEA in assessing and evaluation psychosocial working environment.

Still, a continuous challenge for the strategy is to continue qualifying all WEA inspectors in proper use of the tools, and continuously to refine the tools based on further research and experiences from practice.

Other challenges are finding and managing the balance between the focus on only one risk factor at the time (as the guidance tools do), and the complexity and interaction of the whole psychosocial working environment in a given enterprise.

Finally, an important challenge is for the inspectors, despite differences in basic training and former experience, to be able to make the right evaluations as to whether the enterprises has violated the law and to write qualified improvement notices. The guidance tools tells the inspectors which data to collect and which questions to ask, but gives less guidance on how to evaluate the health risk. To face up to this challenge, all inspectors have trained in evaluating health risks within the psychosocial working environment and on how to write qualified improvement notices.