

# BEST

BETTER PSYCHOSOCIAL  
WORK ENVIRONMENT:  
a study of workplace interventions



## 1. Summary

The BEST-practice research project (Better Psychosocial Work Environment: a study of workplace intervention) was conducted in 2004-2008. The purpose of the project was to find out how companies, in practice, can work with the psychosocial work environment. The background was that many companies had problems making the efforts work, especially after having surveyed the psychosocial work environment. At the same time, there is probably not “one perfect way” to improving the work environment. There are many ways that lead to improvements but there are also many pitfalls and barriers where the companies can learn from each other.

### Method and material

The project was designed as an intervention project in which the participating companies should try to improve the psychosocial work environment with support from researchers from the BEST project. The intervention consisted of a written cooperation agreement to conduct initiatives to improve the psychosocial work environment, a survey of the psychosocial work environment, feedback and support to interpret the results from the survey, feedback from the researchers during the project period, and exchange of experience between the companies involved. In the cooperation agreement the participating companies had committed themselves to implement initiatives to improve the psychosocial work environment. At the same time, the companies were responsible for defining the desired changes which should be included in their efforts to improve the psychosocial work environment.

Both quantitative and qualitative data have been collected in order to describe the intervention. The quantitative data consist of two questionnaires dealing with the psychosocial work environment – one before and one after the intervention. The medium-size Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ) with 26 dimensions describing the psychosocial work environment was

used. It is developed by the National Research Centre for the Working Environment. The qualitative data come from interviews and observations before, during, and after the intervention. In order to standardise the qualitative data as much as possible a common book of methods was made. It contains an interview guide and report standards, and several research seminars on coordination of practices were held.

In total 14 companies participated in the project and they came from various areas within manufacturing industry, from information and knowledge work and from human service work. The study covered approximately 3,000 employees. In a few large companies only a fraction of the employees were included in the study. A company within the fishing industry closed down during the project period. 3,116 employees (88%) responded to the questionnaire in the first round, whereas 2,351 (78%) responded to the questionnaire in the second round. During the project, 391 interviews were conducted. Most of the interviews were individual interviews with key persons, but group interviews and steering committee meetings were also included as interview data. Furthermore, a large amount of observation notes, telephone notes and other written material were collected.

The quantitative data were analysed in order to see the difference between the three sectors, between measurements before and after, and the association between the psychosocial work environment and the respondents' perception of the process. The qualitative data were analysed in order to find out what characterised the process of trying to improve the psychosocial work environment in each participating company, the characteristics of the three sectors, and finally the entire material. To this can be added that the process was summed up in a number of semi-quantitative variables which were used to link the quantitative and the qualitative data. The entire data material was very comprehensive and the researchers will continue analysing the data after the project has been completed.

## **Results**

The analyses of the quantitative results show considerable differences between the 14 companies. The tendency is that industrial companies have the most straining psychosocial work environment in average compared to the other two sectors, but the best industrial companies are at the same level as several companies within the other two sectors. Therefore, it is clear that the company has much

influence on the quality of the psychosocial work environment. It is not only the industry as a whole and the characteristics of the work which are significant.

Regarding changes from first to second round the overall results show little change. However, the tendency is primarily for the better. A distribution according to sector shows that most improvements took place in the industrial companies, whereas the human service companies primarily experienced deterioration. In the information and knowledge companies it was almost status quo. When looking at each company different pictures turned up. Some companies have experienced significant improvements, e.g. The Catering, The Transport Factory, The Bank and the Residential institution, whereas others have experienced a worsened situation, e.g. the IT Company, the Nursery schools and the Family Counselling Office. Furthermore, the companies which at the first survey had the best psychosocial work environment were still the best, whereas it was the opposite for the companies with a poor psychosocial work environment.

Surprisingly, this result indicates that the majority of the companies were not successful in conducting significant changes of the psychosocial work environment. If that was the case, we would have seen a significant improvement in the overall material collected. This result appears despite the fact that the companies were very motivated to make improvements. The conclusion is that the systematic approach to the psychosocial work environment – surveying, prioritizing, the action plan and the follow up - as described in connection with workplace assessments, does not necessarily lead to an improved psychosocial work environment. However, it must be taken into consideration that the time span of only two years was too short to measure real long-term effect.

The large variation of the results for the companies involved substantiates the original assumption that each company must find its own way to improve the psychosocial work environment. It shows that some companies have succeeded in navigating through the process in a more rewarding way than others. Of course, there are external factors which might interfere and complicate the efforts to improve the psychosocial work environment, but again, some of the companies were able to handle such challenges. For instance, the Catering and the Transport material Factory were forced to lay off people during the project but they still succeeded in improving the psychosocial work environment, whereas the IT Company experienced a change in their competitive situation which

put the psychosocial work environment under pressure. The company could not manage the situation in such a way that it was able to secure the psychosocial work environment.

The analyses of the efforts made in the companies show that the survey primarily was an opportunity for and legitimation of dealing with the psychosocial work environment, whereas the prioritization and the action plans were based on the present agendas in the company. In order for the efforts to succeed it is of importance that they were linked to the core work tasks, so the employees and the managers could regard the psychosocial work environment as something that could contribute to solving the tasks in a better way. That is primarily due to the fact that everybody is interested in doing a good job. To make this process work, it is important that the employees and the managers trust each other, and especially that the employees find that their managers are trustworthy. If this is not the case, all initiatives are interpreted negatively, which hinder all actions. The companies that had a very good psychosocial work environment by the beginning of the project also had a good work environment after the project since they had built up a certain robustness. Social capital had been built up during the process and that sustains a good psychosocial work environment even though it is exposed to challenging factors internally as well as externally.

## **Conclusion**

The conclusions to be drawn from the BEST project are both positive and negative. The positive conclusion is that it is profitable to do something about the psychosocial work environment. Companies which develop the psychosocial work environment in cooperation between managers and employees get a better psychosocial work environment and it has a robustness against challenges. The negative conclusion is that it is not easy and it takes time to get a better psychosocial work environment. There are no rules or simple methods to create a good psychosocial work environment. It takes time, commitment and dedication to connect the core tasks and the psychosocial work environment. To facilitate the effort, we have made 13 theses about how the companies can try to manoeuvre through barriers and opportunities in order to reach real improvements of the psychosocial work environment.

- 1. The slowest changes are the fastest*
- 2. The good psychosocial work environment must be re-invented all the time*
- 3. Distrust in others' motives hampers the process*

4. *Create a professional culture of disagreement*
5. *No to love – but yes to recognition and respect*
6. *The manager as secretary for the employees*
7. *If we could just do our work!*
8. *Involvement and dialogue are good but not enough*
9. *Questionnaires set the agenda but do not solve the problems*
10. *Face the shortcomings and cultivate the possibilities*
11. *It is difficult to keep a sense of perspective when the sea runs high*
12. *Nothing comes from nothing*
13. *The meaning of work is created collectively*