

Dutch Good Practices

Healthy Workplaces Manage Stress



A good example
Minister Lodewijk Asscher

Ten innovative best practices
*to tackle high workload and
work-related stress*

Personal stories
from own experiences

Signals and causes
of work-related stress

Facts & Figures
*every year nearly 1 million people
risk suffering from burnout*

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“Ultimately, employers and employees will have to actually address workplace stress together.”

A good example

Dutch international Marco van Basten was an inspiration for everyone in the world of football; more recently, I've found him to be a great inspiration for everyone in the workplace.

Why? Because he spoke openly about the impact that work-related stress had had on him and had decided to do something about it.

The story has been widely reported in the Dutch and international media. Marco van Basten felt that the stress in his job as head coach at AZ Alkmaar was eating away at his health. He tried everything to deal with the problem, but failed to achieve the desired effect. “At a certain point, I just couldn't face the idea of having to go to another training session,” he explained. “If this is the case, there's only one of two things to do,” he went on to say. “And that is find another job or do your job differently.”

His club gave him the chance to take a step backwards and he continued his work - with great satisfaction - as assistant coach.

I was really impressed how a successful sportsman like Marco van Basten could be so honest about the stress imposed on him by his job. For me, that was a good example. We must shake off the fear of failure and the idea that you're a wimp if your work gets on top of you. It can happen to anyone.

It is important that employers and employees talk about it at an early stage, without any taboos. This way, they can do something about it before it's too late.

Workplace stress is a complex occupational hazard. There is no single cause, in the same way as there is no single solution for preventing individual breakdown in the workplace.

To deal with the problem effectively, it's essential to pick up the signs of stress at an early stage and for people in the workplace to speak about the issue in an open, problem-solving manner. What can be done in the organisation to tackle and prevent unwanted stress levels? Ultimately, employers and employees will have to actually address workplace stress together.

Marco van Basten is a shining example, but happily not the only one. This magazine is full of positive examples where employers and employees have enjoyed successes. To learn from each other. To help prevent individuals from falling ill from the effects of stress. Either through doing other work or doing the same work differently, but mainly in whatever way in which they are able to continue working in a healthy and enjoyable environment.

*Lodewijk Asscher
Minister of Social Affairs and Employment*

Good examples and proud businesses provide inspiration!

The European statistics are pretty clear: half of all employees in Europe admit that stress in the workplace is an everyday occurrence. In the Netherlands too, stress - which accounts for 6 million lost working days every year - is the biggest occupational hazard today.

For the Netherlands Focal Point for Health and Safety at Work and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, these figures are the last drop before the bucket floods (Dutch saying). Together we are launching the *Check je Werkstress* ('check your work stress') campaign. We want people to reflect on work-related stress, to talk about it and to implement measures, not only by employers, but employees too. No easy task. As it stands,



Focal Point manager Jos de Lange hands over the Dutch Good Practices to Europe in the person of Christa Sedlatschek, director of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA).

work-related stress is still taboo according to the European figures. Fortunately, a lot of businesses are successfully tackling the problem of workplace stress. It's absolutely essential that their successes don't go unshared.

For that reason, this magazine presents ten good practices in the Netherlands - outstanding examples of businesses and organisations that have successfully eliminated or curbed instances of work-related stress. These examples are the outcome of the *Goede Praktijken Competitie*, the Dutch qualifying competition for the European Good Practice Awards, which will be presented in early 2015. So, they are a source of inspiration, not just in the Netherlands, but throughout Europe.

It never fails to catch my notice that businesses are eager to promote and share knowledge about their good example. Employers and employees alike are justly proud of their achievements. That's no less true of the two good examples that were declared winners of the Dutch competition: Schuberg Philis and Food Connect.

They caught the jury's eye for their focus on preventing work-related stress through their business culture. Despite the tough demands that Schuberg Philis places on its workforce, they give their employees scope to make mistakes and ensure that both their strengths and weaknesses are respected. At Food Connect, individual employees and their place occupy centre stage, whereby managers - like a coach working on the sidelines - give their colleagues the opportunity to get the best out of themselves. Thanks to their horizontal organisational structures, both Good Practices set an example to other businesses: employers and employees are united in their



An expert jury, consisting of (left to right) Sonja Baljeu, Willem van Rhenen, Noortje Wiezer, Mirjam Engelen, Paul Schuurmann, Mario van Mierlo, André Marcet and Jos de Lange (not in the picture), was responsible for assessing entries for the Good Practices Competition.

endeavours to prevent workplace stress, and this has resulted in optimum levels of performance and job satisfaction.

In fact, while the *Check je Werkstress* campaign has only just begun, it has already been making significant strides forward. The subject is getting a lot of attention, in the media and within organisations and businesses. Apart from these Good Practices, this is also thanks to the active involvement of 20 campaign partners who have affiliated themselves with the campaign.

By exchanging know-how, tools and examples of good practice with other European member states, the Netherlands Focal Point aims to make an active contribution to healthy and safe work practices well beyond our national borders. In the Netherlands, and in Europe.

So, feel proud, share, learn and inspire! Join the *Check je Werkstress* campaign.

Jos de Lange, TNO
Focal Point Manager

The Netherlands Focal Point represents the Netherlands in the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) in implementing the European-wide 'Healthy Workplaces Manage Stress' campaign. The Netherlands Focal Point is executed by TNO in collaboration with the government and social partners.

Netherlands Facts & Figures

Every year nearly 1 million people
risk suffering from burnout

Workload

 **2,7 million**
employees experience
high job demands

 **1,3 million**
employees think their
supervisor doesn't look out for
the well-being of the employees

 **3,1 million**
employees have a low
level of job control

Risks
44%
of employers thinks
workload is an
important risk

Workplace violence

 **1,7 million**
employees experience workplace
violence from people outside
work (customers, clients,
students, passengers etc.)

Most prominent types of external violence

Intimidation	1,4 million
Physical violence	426 thousand
Bullying	404 thousand

Some employees report multiple forms
of unwanted behavior

Risks
6.768
of employees had a
psychological
occupational disease

Unwanted manners

 **1,1 million**
employees experience
workplace violence from
supervisors or colleagues

Most prominent types of internal violence

Intimidation	749 thousand
Bullying	499 thousand
Unwanted sexual attention	129 thousand

Some employees report multiple forms
of unwanted behavior

Impact Employees

 with burnout complaints
868 thousand

 who cannot meet the psychological
demands of their work
607 thousand

 who indicate that they (very)
often miss or neglect family
activities due to work
644 thousand

work-related absence days

caused by work pressure,
work stress or too
difficult work
6,0 million

caused by problems
with supervision
1,7 million

caused by problems with co-workers
or clients
450 thousand

Measures

 **2,8 million**
employees are in need for
(more) measures against
work pressure/work stress

 **552 thousand**
employees are in need for
(more) measures against
intimidation, aggression,
or violence by clients

 **390 thousand**
employees are in need for
(more) measures against
intimidation, aggression,
or violence by supervisor or
colleague

Workload and work-related stress reduce Job satisfaction

When asked “how’s things?”, employees are increasingly likely to answer by stating “busy” or “under stress”. Work pressure and work-related stress have become part and parcel of our everyday language. But how does pressure at work actually affect an employee? And what does an employer understand by this? When it comes to alleviating workload and work-related stress, differences of opinion are hindering the dialogue between employer and employee. With this in mind, we aim to set out what the differences appear to be between work pressure and work-related stress, how work-related stress can be identified, and what its most common causes are.

Work-related stress as a result of workload, aggression or bullying

Professor Wilmar Schaufeli of the University of Utrecht describes work-related stress as “a negative psychological condition which results from overwork. This causes a feeling that it’s no longer possible to meet the demands of work.” Although everyone expresses stress in different ways, we can differentiate between three types of symptoms:

Box 1. Identify work-related stress on the basis of these signals

1. Psychological symptoms, such as: absent-mindedness or reduced concentration levels, difficulty in processing information, lack of interest in work, or cynicism.
2. Physical symptoms, such as: headaches and fatigue, rapid breathing, high blood pressure and high cholesterol levels, musculoskeletal pain (e.g. in the neck), and ultimately, cardiovascular disorders.
3. Behavioural symptoms, such as: restlessness, mistakes in one’s work, social isolation, and absenteeism.

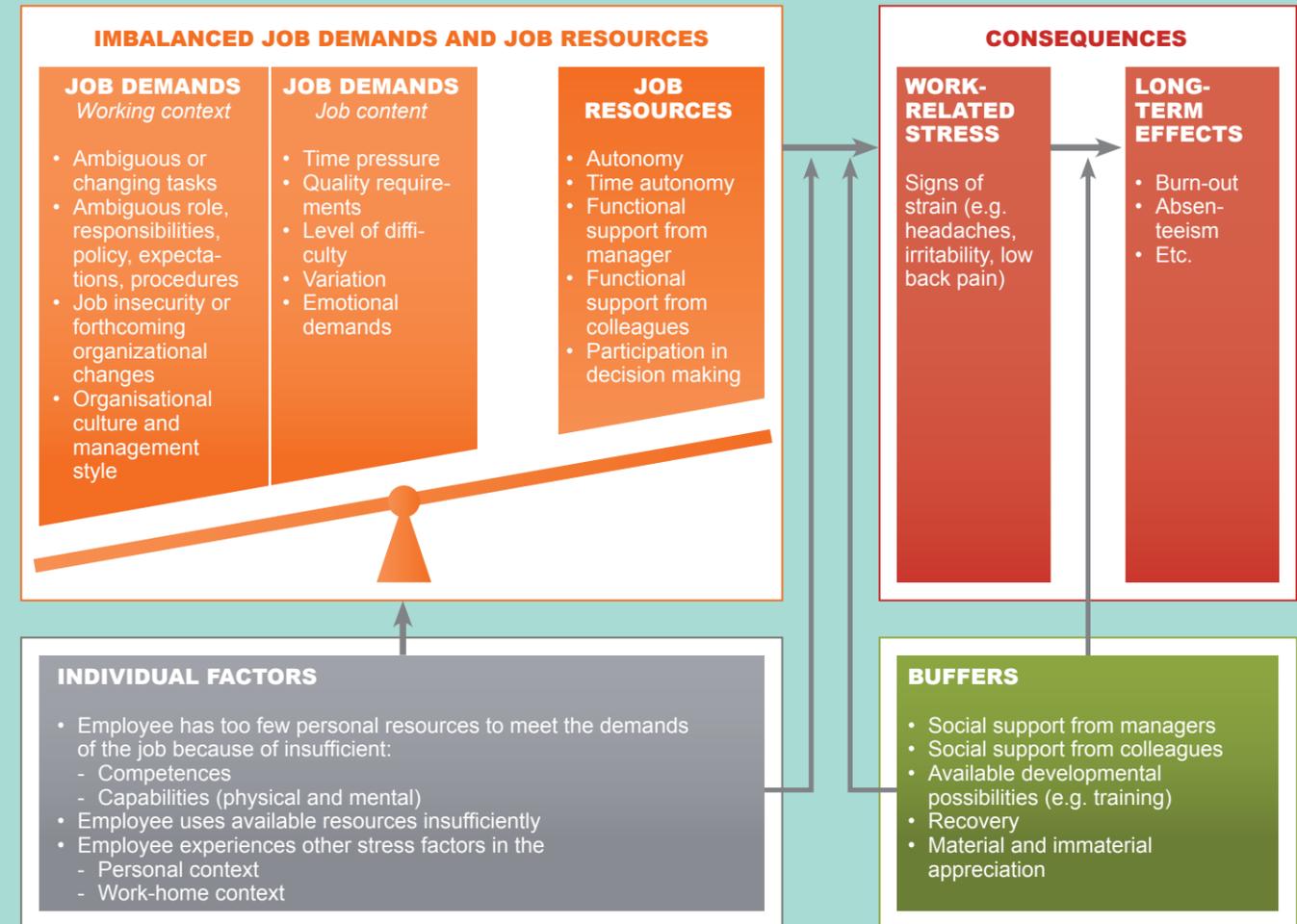
Workload as the most important cause of work-related stress

In addition to aggression, violence and bullying, the most important cause of work-related stress is the workload pressure. TNO describes this as an imbalance, which manifests itself when an employee - over a longer period of time - is no longer able to meet the requirements of the job nor do anything to alter this situation. If an imbalance persists between the demands which are made on the employee (job requirements) and what he or she is able to offer in return (control options), this is seen as negative, because it impacts detrimentally on his or her health. It’s also negative because the employee can no longer deliver the quality required. The causes of this imbalance lie in the content of the work, the context of the work, and the lack of control options (see box 2).

Box 2. The causes of work pressure

1. The content of the work, such as: the amount of work, quality requirements, and the level of difficulty. A large amount of work in itself doesn’t necessarily have to be a problem.
2. The context of the work, such as: ill-defined or changing responsibilities, interruptions, ill-defined procedures or policies, job insecurity, and organisational culture.
3. The lack of control options in the work, such as: autonomy, functional support from colleagues or management, and say in decision-making

The personal qualities of an individual employee can help redress the balance between job demands and control options, or conversely, upset the balance even more. These personal characteristics can equate to, for example, competences, personality traits, or the personal situation.



Job satisfaction as buffer against work-related stress

Based on the premise of sustainable employability, both Schaufeli and TNO suggest that job satisfaction must be taken into the equation. Sources of positive energy, such as a good working environment, the support and appreciation from colleagues, and favourable development prospects, are key factors. These ‘buffers’ not only help to prevent causes of stress, but also improve the workplace in such a way that growth and development are possible. A study by the University of Utrecht concludes

that adopting a positive approach to employees often has a quick return on investment. Employees who are happy in their job, are not only physically and mentally stronger, they sleep better and are less susceptible to absenteeism. Within the organisation, customer satisfaction levels are higher, fewer mistakes are made and there are also fewer accidents. Profit and working productivity are higher in these organisations. “It has been scientifically proven,” Schaufeli argues, “that individuals who are inspired are much less vulnerable to stress.” So, why stop at stress-prevention and not go one step further?”



“Stress can cause blockages in both people as well as the workflow.”

A customised approach to tackling stress-related absenteeism

At Achmea, workplace absenteeism is dealt with on a company-wide basis using an interdisciplinary, demand-driven, but primarily customised approach, aimed at prevention. “No standard programmes: instead we always listen to what the employee wants.”

“Uniformity is passé,” explains Achmea’s Marcel Reijmerink about their approach to workplace stress and other work-related problems. He is one of the driving forces behind the Gezond Werken (‘healthy working’) method that the health insurance concern is now using to combat work-related absenteeism. Because each department within the company has its own issues, every situation demands a different solution.

Interdisciplinary team

Achmea deploys a specialist team of healthcare professionals who work closely alongside each other. “These include company medical officers, prevention specialists, dieticians and mental coaches, all of whom complement and bolster each other in the chain of good management,” Reijmerink explains.

Once a company medical officer becomes aware that a particular department has been making more appointments recently, the healthcare team is notified. In response, the team may organise training and/or information sessions or give targeted treatment. This can be anything from mindfulness training to providing advice on how to exercise more often or to reorganise the workplace. “This early warning has a vital part to play,” explains Reijmerink, “because the company medical officer knows the company through and through.”

This intensive collaboration between all the different healthcare disciplines provides the basis for an interdisciplinary approach to work-related stress. This is important, Reijmerink adds, not least because workplace stress is not unambiguous. “Stress at work is both a physical as well as a mental problem. For that reason, you have to investigate on the basis of a number of contri-

butory factors. For example, the importance of physical exercise is embedded in our approach to workplace stress.”

Prevention is the buzzword here. “We try to encourage colleagues to lead a healthier lifestyle without lecturing them,” says Nathalie de Jager, who together with Reijmerink has helped mould the Gezond Werken approach. Although the aim is to provide support to employees, she stresses it’s not the intention to nanny them. They have to keep thinking for themselves. “We are clear about where their own responsibilities lie, so it’s up to them to take matters into their own hands.”

Change

This approach isn’t new to Achmea, “but it’s more important than ever today,” Reijmerink believes. The health-insurer is currently undergoing a radical transition which will have major repercussions within the company. Job requirements will change and pressure on employees will only grow.

“Change is difficult for individuals,” explains Reijmerink. What should also be taken into account, is that the average age of its workforce is 45 plus. The older the employee, in general the more difficult they find it to deal with far-reaching changes, such as automation and re-training. The consequences are not difficult to guess: increased workload and workplace stress.

For this reason, Achmea is undertaking serious measures to tackle work-related stress and absenteeism. “It’s in the company’s DNA,” Reijmerink adds. “And it’s worth remembering that it brings about significant cost-savings.” The Achmea departments which have implemented the Gezond Werken method have seen absenteeism rates decrease by at least one percentage point. That represents a saving of around €18 million in one fell swoop!

“As a healthcare insurer and business, we aim to show that this approach works,” he says, “so that not only Achmea can take advantage of these gains. That’s why we’re sharing our ideas about healthy working practices and enterprise with other companies.”



“Attention to stress and high workload makes the topic discussable.”

An anti-stress coach

Individual coaching helps contractors put workload pressure out in the open. The *UTA werkvoorziening* (CTA employment system) lightens the load for hundreds of contracting, technical and administrative personnel (CTA).

“Construction workers are not quick to talk about stress,” explains Jan Warning, director of knowledge and service institute Arbouw. So why the reticence? “There’s a culture of toughness. If you admit you’re not able to cope, it amounts to loss of face.”

Significant workload

Working in the construction industry however, can be accompanied by lots of stress. This certainly is the case for contractors. These are the team leaders who have to take on responsibility for the day-to-day running of construction projects and on-site supervision of personnel and sub-contractors. “In particular, they have to maintain the fine balance between planning, money and quality,” Warning reports. They carry a large degree of responsibility for safety on the construction site and for its inspection. On top of that, there’s a mountain of paperwork. The upshot of all this is a heavy workload, long working days and regular overtime. No fewer than one in six contractors admits to frequent stress according to a report (“Uitvoerders onder druk”) commissioned by Arbouw in 2013.

Stress coach

Absenteeism amongst contractors can lead to major problems. According to Warning, construction work revolves around the contractor. “So if they fall ill or become prone to mistakes, this can have consequences for the progress of the whole construction project. That’s bad for them, and costs businesses a lot of money.”

Following the positive experiences and results of a pilot project carried out between 2000 and 2005 with the CTA employment system, there was

good reason on the part of the social partners to have this included in the collective bargaining agreement (CAO) for the construction industry in 2006. Since then, CTA employees who experience a greater or lesser degree of stress can draw upon a number of different resources and intervention programmes. For example, there is the so-called Energie CheckUp (Energy Checkup), which identifies and analyses mental and physical performance in-depth. In addition, contractors can work alongside a stress coach to ‘re-energise’ themselves, both physically and mentally. “It’s important to recognise the symptoms of stress at an early stage,” explains Warning. “With the aid of a coach, a contractor can learn how to implement measures that keep the workload under control and keep work enjoyable!”

Contractors can register anonymously for coaching. Warning believes this is essential. Because of the ‘tough’ business mentality, contractors are reticent to talk about psychological overload, whereas it’s vital to talk about it and have it out in the open. “Contractors who suffer this kind of psychological overload can end up in a vicious spiral. Too much pressure ultimately results in stress. Symptoms include sleeping badly and making more frequent mistakes at work. In turn, this leads to yet more stress. By talking, it’s possible to break this vicious spiral and maintain one’s pleasure in the job. That’s important. After all, we’re all going to have to work longer until retirement age. It’s better to do this as healthily, energetically and enjoyably as we can.”

Decrease

The approach appears to work. Hundreds of construction workers are now experiencing less workplace stress. In 2012, participants rated their stress levels at 9 on a scale of 1 to 10. After coaching, stress levels significantly decreased, leading to a score of no less than 3! That’s a win-win situation.



“If you’re stressed for too long you will eventually succumb to it.”

Practical and positive

Plezier in Uitvoering (‘Pleasure in Performance’) is a method that has been devised specifically for professionals in social work and childcare. Its approach is to turn job stress into job satisfaction. In the first instance they are asked to answer such basic questions as: what do I want; what can I do; and what should I do?

Social work and childcare are professions that have been under increasing pressure in recent years. In childcare for example, a decline in demand has been resulting in a large number of reorganisations and closures. In social work, waiting lists and the transfer of statutory responsibilities of some aspects of social work to local authorities have been a great cause of concern amongst workers in this sector. Excessive caseloads and absenteeism are the outcome.

Industry figures (provided by branch organization FCB) speak volumes: around 40 percent of workers in childcare feel under stress because of the pressures of too much and too hectic a workload. In child protection, the same percentage experiences mental and emotional duress. *The Plezier in Uitvoering* method, developed by FCB and the communications agency Arboriginals, is aimed not only at eliminating work pressure, but also at helping employees understand the extent of their resilience.

Practical and accessible

“*Plezier in Uitvoering* adopts a DIY approach for self-analysis and self-help,” explains Veronica Jocker, a consultant in health & safety at work at FCB. Using a manual that is available both in digital form (via www.plezierinuitvoering.nl) and in hard-copy, employees are encouraged to identify aspects which make or break their energy on the shopfloor. The questions and the exercises are simple as well as practical. Are you energised by the fact you have an influence on

your working environment, or because of the amenable working climate and the appreciation of colleagues? And what is it that saps your energy? Workplace gossip perhaps?

Employees are not only encouraged to reflect on these matters, but also urged to do something about it, according to Jos Bus and Ermin de Koning at Arboriginals. “Pressure at work can come about because personal ambitions do not match personal capacities.” For example, they talk about the distribution of tasks within a team. “Although people quite naturally are expected to perform tasks at work, we foist a lot of pressure on ourselves out of a sense of compulsion. In teams that work well together, people complement each other: Who’s good at what and who has the time? Asking these sorts of questions represents an important step in combating workplace pressures and achieving greater levels of job satisfaction.”

Job satisfaction

Management staff also receive coaching so that they are better aware of what their influence is on their workers’ job satisfaction. After all, they have to have some understanding of what keeps their employees balanced in terms of energy, explains Jocker: “The key to job satisfaction is in the hands of employees, their teams and management alike. They all need each other.”

The first time the method was used by FCB was in 2007, in the childcare sector. And it proved a great success: *The Plezier in Uitvoering* manuals went like hot cakes. For this reason, the method was made suitable for other disciplines. However, the core philosophy has never changed, argues Bus: “The more you focus your attention on something, the bigger it becomes. If you start looking for problems, for example, the problems themselves will increase. The same applies to resilience: if you go looking for it, that will get stronger too. Our aim is not just to combat job stress, but to help increase job satisfaction.”



“We should realise that being happy is not the result of success, but that success is the result of being happy.”

Arko speaks

Introducing myself..

My name is Arko van Brakel, managing director of De Baak, a centre for management and enterprise, also affiliated to VNO-NCW, the Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers. In addition, I help set companies up, write books and columns for newspapers and media such as Financieel Dagblad, ManagementTeam, Nu.nl and Sprout, and I have also presented at BNR news radio. Early on in my career I suffered a burn-out.

When did you first discover you were suffering from work-related stress?

It was a long time ago I had a breakdown, and it was tough. It really started because I wanted to satisfy the image that other people had of me. For me the last straw was a minor setback which upset my equilibrium completely. The people around me could see it coming, but I was the last to know. I thought I would get over it by taking it easy for two to three weeks, but in the end I needed ten months.

What steps did you take?

There's no point in focussing on the burn-out. If you do, the emphasis is on what you don't want. On the contrary, you must concentrate your mind on the things you do want. I've learned to stay true to my own values. When I talked to people coming from this, it was then I noticed I was making strides forward. That was my way of dealing with it. I have to do things which I can't wait to get started on. For me this means I always get satisfaction from my work. At De Baak, we too pay a great deal of attention to stress prevention at work and improving job satisfaction. We are constantly dealing with the question as how to best look after our employees. There are even people within the business who are responsible for 'happiness' as a theme. After all, being happy is not the result of success, but success is the result of being happy.

Do you have any helpful advice for others?

'Fit' is the new buzzword, so make sure you feel healthy in mind and body. This improves your chances of more sustainable working practices and continuing to provide a good performance in the long term. We should also realise that being happy is not the result of success, but that success is the result of being happy. If you start looking at things this way, you can eliminate stress and achieve a happy equilibrium.



“It’s important for management to realise the enormous effect that absenteeism has.”

A compliment works wonders

How is it that some companies experience high absenteeism rates even though their working conditions are excellent? The Dutch rubber and plastics federation (NRK) commissioned a comparative study to seek an answer to this question. “Culture and behaviour provide the basis for improvement.”

Following a request from NRK, consultancy firm Arboplaats developed the Technical, Organisational and Individual model, in short: TOI. The idea behind this model is as simple as it is effective: an extensive risk identification and evaluation (RI&E) and a questionnaire completed by almost 3,700 staff and management professionals from dozens of organisations.

Thanks to the *TOI model*, participating businesses are now able to check their own score against that of other companies in the same sector. This way, you can see those areas which are doing well and those which need improvement. Erik de Ruijter, director of Policy & Advice at NRK, immediately knew this was what he had been looking for: “Both the NRK and its affiliated members have adopted this model as a tool for curbing absenteeism.”

Coaching leadership

“It’s important for management to realise the enormous effect that absenteeism has,” explains Huib Arts, owner of *Arboplaats* and developer of the TOI-model. Two categories of leadership immediately became apparent: the coaching, and the businesslike type. “Many of the NRK affiliated businesses with low absenteeism rates had a management system in place taking a promise-made-is-a-promise-kept type of approach. In other words, they are the kind of people at the top who are happy to support their staff and give enthusiastic workers greater scope for development.” This results in an eager workforce willing to give its utmost for the company.

Somewhat less effective are the ‘just-send-me-an-email-when-it’s-finished types,’ says Arts. Likewise, authoritarian managers have a negative impact on the organisation where they work. The comparative study shows that businesses with this type of management at the helm stood a much greater chance of higher work-related stress and absenteeism rates.

What’s more, in terms of image, coaching and businesslike managers are a lot better for the company, according to De Ruijter of NRK. “It has a positive effect vis-à-vis clients and other stakeholders. Furthermore, with positive-minded leaders, innovation and production prosper.” Through a combination of coaching and advice, Arboplaats teaches managers how they can adopt forms of leadership which impact positively on their organisations.

A compliment

The comparison between the various companies also provided another interesting insight. Arts: “Both coaching and businesslike types of leadership result in an open workplace culture where individuals are quicker to recognise their mistakes. This way, problems further down the production line can be prevented, for example. On the other hand, where this culture is lacking, people are much more inclined to sweep problems under the carpet.”

An important part of this open culture is compliment-giving. Sadly, this tool is frequently deployed as a preamble to criticism. We all know how it goes: “Well done, but...” “Many managers compliment their employees in this way,” explains Arts. “They mean well, but the positive impact is limited.” And this is reflected in job satisfaction levels and the enthusiasm of staff. In Arts’ view however, this can be easily changed. “Do not give compliments and indicate areas that are ripe for improvement in the same conversation.”



“Employees are entitled to a healthy workplace.”

Lightening the load together

Reducing workload pressure can only be done if you tackle it at source. With the whole workforce. After all, workplace stress is seldom an individual problem.

More than 60 percent of the FNV trade union members suffers from workplace stress according to a 2010 study. For FNV health & safety policy advisor Hester Konijnenberg and her colleagues it was reason enough to come up with a tool to reduce the workload. No easy task, as it turned out. “The causes of stress are manifold. Too much red tape, bad planning and poor working conditions, for example. These are all factors that can lead to unhealthy amounts of work or, in the worst case, stress. The question is how to identify the root causes and then how to tackle them.”

Simple

To this end, the FNV deploys the *Werkdrukbox*, a practical ‘anti-stress toolbox’ for employees, which consist of, amongst other things, a rapid workload test and a step-by-step plan. The test enables you to see at a glance whether it’s an individual or the whole department that’s experiencing workload pressure. The rapid test, developed by FNV in collaboration with research agency SKB, also provides a baseline measurement. If changes are introduced, the test allows you to see whether things really have improved. The step-by-step plan is also quite simple. The first step is an exploratory one: is the problem a genuine one and how widespread is it? Step two asks: what lies at the root of the problem? And is there a possible solution?

How does the *Werkdrukbox* work in practice? Konijnenberg provides an interesting example. In a factory where fruit is sorted, workers are unable to keep up with the speed of the conveyor. That leads to workload pressure. Initial interviews are undertaken to find out the causes. It turns out, for example, that for some members of staff the

chair is too high, so there’s not enough leg clearance under the conveyor, thus slowing down their work rate. An improved workplace layout, by reducing the reach, for example, provides one possible solution. If it’s still not possible to keep pace with the machine, another solution might be to stop the belt intermittently to give employees a breather.

A number of companies are now working with the *Werkdrukbox*. The rapid test was introduced to all team managers in a large logistics company, where workload pressure turned out to be abnormally high. After a joint assessment, it turned out that the most important cause was limited room for manoeuvre, that is, room to personally decide on what to do. Konijnenberg: “That fact, together with suggestions for possible solutions, was submitted to the management of the company.”

Lasting solutions

You might ask yourself why an employee doesn’t just go to the boss and tell him or her about the problem. Well, in Konijnenberg’s view, it’s not that easy. Not everyone is bold enough to take this step: often it’s fobbed off as being an individual problem, whereas in fact the whole department may be suffering from it. “You shouldn’t start looking for causes amongst your staff in that situation, but look at their work circumstances.” The problem must be tackled at the source. The findings of the test provide employees with evidence enough to convince their bosses that the problem requires urgent attention.

That, plus doing things together, are the determining factors in the success of the *Werkdrukbox*, Konijnenberg stresses: “The practical experiences and the skills of the workforce are harnessed, so that lasting solutions can be brought about to alleviate workload pressure.”



Business is a kick in the grass

For many years, the emphasis at Food Connect has been on the individual behind the employee. Managing director Benno Schildkamp visualised this philosophy in the SaS model. “We avoid thinking in terms of payroll numbers and absenteeism rates.”

“Of course our staff experience work pressures,” declares Benno Schildkamp, director of day-to-day business operations at Food Connect. “We deliver fresh meals every day, so our staff are having to deal with issues such as temperature control and on-time delivery all the time.” In terms of workload however, that’s normal, he elaborates. “We need this kind of pressure to perform well. This is different to ‘stress’, which happens when communication and/or interaction is poor or non-existent. At that point, the normal pressures of work become too much and it becomes stress.” This can lead to a burn-out, other health issues and loss of job satisfaction.

Food Connect has been investing in job satisfaction and an open culture for years. The company takes its staff seriously and is committed. Schildkamp and his fellow director Wim Swier can regularly be found on the shopfloor discussing all the ins and outs with their personnel. What’s more, the door’s always open for employees who have something on their mind. “Problems are often nipped in the bud before they have time to take root.”

Equal value

Food Connect believes in keeping things at a human scale. The annual performance review has been replaced by regular discussions with individuals over an informal cup of coffee. The company sends its staff a greeting card on their birthdays. The term ‘absenteeism rate’ is taboo. “We talk about sick colleagues instead of ‘percentages’.” Neither do we talk about employee numbers in terms of ‘full-time equivalents’. “Every member of staff is of equal value whether they work for 8 hours a week or for 40.” What’s more,

managers are no more important than the rest of their colleagues. I often tell the chefs that I can’t even cook, that’s why I need them. But on the other hand, I can do things they can’t.” Food Connect has been working in this fashion for the past decade or so. Starting out with just 4 employees 11 years ago, in the last three years the size of the workforce has grown to 110, so this led to a different organisational model: a kind of Christmas tree structure with the managing director at the top and the other staff below. “That model went against the grain,” explains Schildkamp. “After all, I’m not of any greater value than my colleagues. So in that sense, I’m not at the top of the tree. It’s all about creating an appealing product together.”

Stadion als Spiegel

One afternoon Schildkamp found himself at a football match with his two young sons. “I thought, this should be the basis for a business model: a stadium in which the staff form a single unit, with the manager on the sidelines - at the same level - coaching the team. From the stands, the paying customers are watching with a critical eye.

This organisational model acquired the name *Stadion als Spiegel*, or SaS for short, a name which alludes to a ‘stadium mirroring the organisation’. In the meantime, Food Connect continued to invest in its people to alleviate stress. Motivational tools include informal talks over a cup of coffee and birthday cards. For more than ten years, Food Connect has been a financial success and staff are keen to point out that they enjoy their work. When asked what part the model plays in these successes, Schildkamp is not quite sure. However, he is convinced that if he did it any other way it would cost the company and arm and a leg. “Anyway, what’s wrong with investing in your own people? I’m very happy to work here myself.”

“Every member of staff is of equal value whether they work for 8 hours a week or for 40”



“The chance that I’d only just be surviving out of a sense of loyalty was big.”

Peter speaks

Introducing myself...

My name is Peter Gret, I'm 52 years old, married and father of two children. I started working in 1979. For the last fourteen years, I've been working in the Human Resources department of the Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences.

When did you first discover you were suffering from work-related stress?

In 1992 I ended up in a job with a Rotterdam-based energy company I was very unhappy with. For that reason, I decided to take up studying again in 1995. During the third year of my studies, I was appointed personnel officer with another business unit of the energy company. In combination with my studies and bringing up two young children, it was a hectic existence. That's when things started going wrong. I never had time for anything and was constantly running from pillar to post. To cut a long story short: At one point I would wake up every morning and burst into tears. This went on for two years or so. I was at the end of my tether.

Eventually I decided to make a fresh start in 2000 and found a job in the personnel department of the Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences. I thought I'd seen the last of it. I made headway in my job and that didn't go unnoticed. I was appointed manager of the HRM admin department with twenty people working under me. Then came a reorganisation plan! Some of my time was freed up to participate in a project, but in practice I was still doing my normal work and I was still responsible for the same team. The project itself was going nowhere and I started feeling as though I was becoming the conduit for everyone else's problems. If no one else could solve the problem, it would land on my desk where it would stay unattended.

What steps did you take?

For the interim manager and the company medical officer it was clear things could no longer go on like this. I was sent home and told not to come back for another three weeks. I felt wretched about the fact that it happened again. It was as if I'd left all my colleagues in the lurch and I was a failure. Eventually, after speaking to the medical officer, a social worker and a heart-coherence coach, who helped me physically relax, I was slowly able to distance myself from things. I realised that things could not go on as they were and I accepted a new position. I'm really glad that they helped pull me from the mire. Otherwise the chance that I'd just be surviving out of a sense of loyalty was big. Because that's what could have happened.

Do you have any helpful advice for others?

Listen to what your body is telling you. Be true to it and act accordingly. You're not doing anyone any favours if you behave counterintuitively. Everyone has their limits and no one is irreplaceable. Talk with others about the problem. There's no point in pretending that you're tougher than you really are.



“The term high workload is misleading.”

An atmosphere of openness and mutual trust

Horizon College developed its own programme to confront the causes of work-related stress. Staff and management are all actively involved.

A heavy workload, reams of paperwork and an overbearing sense of responsibility are just a few of the factors that threatened to lay teaching staff low at Horizon College, a regional training college for vocational education in the Kennemerland and West-Friesland regions. Absenteeism rates were at 6 percent, collaboration between colleagues was poor and staff meetings would either break down or provide a platform for resistance to change within the organisation.

In turn, management would apply pressure on staff to prompt them into action. It all backfired and the unrest continued unabated. To turn the tide, its board of governors called in Heijting Weerts Groep (HWG). They were charged with reconnecting staff and improving the relationship between management and staff.

Job satisfaction

“Encouragement and coaching,” are the words that founder Edda Heijting uses to describe HWG’s role at Horizon College. “Joint responsibility is a keyword. At the end of the day, everyone there has to muck in.” To this end, HWG enjoyed a close working partnership with Kees Sietsema, director of education.

Gezond en met Plezier Werken (‘job health and satisfaction’) was the name we gave to this approach. In order to identify the causes of stress in the workplace, HWG and Horizon College used the information gleaned from in-depth interviews, digital questionnaires and panel discussions with all 150 members of staff and management in the Faculty of Economics. This approach was underpinned by the so-called Heuristic Method.* As opposed to many conventional forms of stress management, where employees are primarily taught simply how to cope with stress, this method

tries to eliminate the causes of work-related stress at the source.

Openness

The results of the study pulled no punches. Teaching staff argued that they had too few resources at their disposal at the college and that more attention should be focussed on learning and education. In all tiers of the organisation there was dissatisfaction with the way people regarded each other. Staff felt there was a lack of trust on the part of the management which - in their view - had not always acted in decisive fashion. In turn, management pointed out a lack of commitment on the part of staff to take on responsibility for improving the situation.

A detailed plan of action pinpointed a number of areas which could be improved on by managers and staff alike. This resulted in better facilities for teaching staff, such as more toilets and a coffee area, this being in response to the need for such amenities expressed by teachers. Staff also indicated a need for greater openness and for a louder voice within the organisation. Together, the educational standpoints of the Faculty of Economics were re-established, so that teaching was given a bottom-up impulse. At all stages of the plan of action, dialogue was placed centre stage so that all staff could have their say. “Staff and management have to enter into this dialogue together,” explains Heijting, “but also staff and managers amongst themselves.”

In this way, the relationship between management and staff in the Faculty of Economics visibly improved over the space of two years. Absenteeism rates dropped by two percent and employees now feel trusted and their concerns taken seriously as a result of management now communicating openly and involving everyone in the faculty in developments. Heijting adds: “This helps activate people and bring about bottom-up innovation.”

* The Heuristic Method was developed by HWG and provides a structured way for all employees to have a say in the organisation. HWG has put this method into practice in more than 120 private and public-sector organisations.

Change begins with you

Better communication between staff at the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) and their clients leads to a better understanding of each other. “People feel safer and happier in their work.”

Feelings can sometimes run high in the offices of the IND. A request for a residence permit can sometimes prove emotional on the part of applicants, whereas IND personnel are obliged to treat every case rationally and within the legal framework. In Jeroen Sevink’s opinion however, this doesn’t have to be a problem. He is in charge of the *Goed Gesprek* (‘a good talk’) project, an informal, customer-minded approach with respect to anyone involved with staff at the IND, including applicants for residence permits as well as internal sales and support departments. As part of this project, IND personnel learn what the best way is to deal with the clients they come into contact with.

Traffic light

The *Goed Gesprek* project was introduced as a standard method at the IND in 2013, after a period of long and arduous planning. It all started with a critical report written by the Dutch Court of Audit and the Ombudsman in 2006. At best, the IND showed a lukewarm attitude towards its clients, it concluded.

“We’ve come a long way since then,” explains Sevink. “Communication with clients just had to improve. What’s more, it’s good for staff too. The unpleasant atmosphere at work created a feeling of insecurity and with it workplace stress.”

“The new method helped employees to strike up a conversation in a more informal and pleasant manner when interviewing clients,” he continues. An interview goes through three different phases, symbolised by traffic lights. ‘Green’ means friendly and informal, and provides the starting point for any conversation. The IND member of staff and the applicant treat each other with the mutual respect they deserve, the atmosphere is positive and cooperative. “This way, it’s possible to get

down to business more quickly,” says Sevink.

Staff learn to identify the point at which the conversation is about to turn to ‘amber’. The telltale signs might be a client who leans forcefully on the desk, raises their voice or even turns in on themselves. “Sometimes,” Sevink admits, “the interview can take a turn for the worse. However, the interviewer must be aware of how the message comes across to the other person. They must be able to turn the conversation around from ‘amber’ back to ‘green’.”

Nevertheless, it’s not always possible to prevent the interview from escalating to ‘red’. If aggression, intimidation or other threatening situations occur, the interviewer has to keep a cool head, stay calm and know how to act next. “This includes knowing that you can press the red alarm button to call in security, familiarising yourself with ways of escape and registering the incident.”

Training

This interviewing technique was taught to staff as part of a training programme. As part of the training in Utrecht, an actor was called in to role-play different workplace scenarios with IND personnel. A trainer explains how to respond. Managers have their own training programmes, so that staff can get on with their work in a comfortable environment. In addition, throughout our organisation, we have so-called ‘ambassadors’ who spread the news about the method in their own departments.

Internal studies have shown that the project is reaping its rewards. Employees have better job satisfaction and also feel safer. Staff and managers alike have rated the training workshops with an average score of 8. In 2013, clients gave IND an average mark of 7.6, as opposed to 6.5 in 2007.

Sevink thinks he knows where the key to the success of this change in culture lies. “Everyone should feel involved, from individual members of staff to senior management. This process can take years. We are looking for supporters in all departments within the organisation.”



“Stress affects the whole organisation.”



A promise of 100 percent

IT outsourcer Schuberg Philis has given its personnel the freedom and responsibility to look after their client's satisfaction in full. This has had a positive impact on its workforce.

Schuberg Philis develops, effectuates and manages business-critical IT systems for, for example, banks. Their client portfolio includes internet banks and energy companies. Should their IT systems crash, this could bring about disastrous effects for society at large. For this reason, the company promises to deliver 100 percent system quality and availability. This places an enormous responsibility on the shoulders of its 200 or so employees.

Maximum freedom

Despite this pressure, things have been going swimmingly for the last ten years. Notwithstanding periods of tight deadlines, unwarranted turnover of staff is less than 1 percent and absenteeism rates are no more than around 0.89 percent. "At Schuberg Philis, employees are given the chance to make good their promises to the client that you would have made as a team," explains Philip Dries, its founder. A team is given complete autonomy and control. At Schuberg Philis, there are no static job descriptions. Colleagues are free to delineate their own boundaries. They decide – as part of a team – when to go to full tilt and when to take their foot off the gas.

And there is a high level of commitment, both to each other and to the work. "If things aren't going too well, we investigate the underlying cause," explains Dries, "whether it's physical or psychological. Maybe things at home aren't working out so well. Perhaps a son is causing a headache at school, the partner is ill or someone needs care. If that's the case, you can free up time for this. That's equally so for the more enjoyable

things. For example, if a young daughter is about to take her final swimming exam. Or just if you feel tired after a long and demanding project, and you need to re-energise."

Honesty

"One condition attached to keeping promises as a team and an individual is that you learn to show yourself in good times and bad," adds Dries. "You can only be 100 percent successful if you're honest about your mistakes and are willing to learn from these." This honesty is also true when it comes to personal problems. "You can't always see what's coming and plan ahead." For this reason, teams meet on a daily basis, to talk about things like possible external disruptions. This enables direct measures to be taken. What's more, it doesn't have to be a make-or-break problem. "Sometimes it's enough to listen and to acknowledge the concerns of a colleague."

That might sound great, but if there are colleagues unable to work as a result of holiday or illness, they have to be replaced, and that costs money. "Absolutely," admits Dries, "but the project we get from our client is always carried out to his or her satisfaction. We always meet our targets." Only in some cases are we talking about the long-term absence of a colleague.

Schuberg Philis has a low absenteeism rate. Dries points to research carried out by the Harvard Business School, which shows that the core values just mentioned – freedom, responsibility and commitment – make the working culture of Schuberg Philips unique. "Our clients know that the health of our personnel comes first and foremost. Our philosophy therefore is instrumental in bringing about consistently high customer satisfaction scores over the years."

“Continuous attention to stress results in all round benefits.”



“The trick is to understand what makes your colleague tick and then offer the right support.”

The power of social support

De Rozelaar is aiming to become an organisation whose personnel goes to work with a spring in its step and can develop. Together with De PreventieCoach, employees have started getting to grips with the new communication model *OplossingsKracht voor de gewenste sociale steun* (‘solution capabilities for the desired social support’).

“Saying ‘no’ is not part of our DNA at De Rozelaar,” explains managing director Jan Vogel. “But if you plan on looking after others, you’ve certainly got to look after yourself properly too. If not, the workload will get on top of you.”

Finding a balance

De Rozelaar, a foundation which provides support to persons with a learning disability, is having to cope with a legion of changes. There are fewer resources, fewer people and less financing available, so in order to maintain the same high standards of quality, this is bound to put a heavy strain on the workload. Another aggravating factor is the culture within De Rozelaar. Its personnel is loyal, helpful and perfectionist. As such, these virtues only exacerbate the problem. The aim of the board of De Rozelaar is to help its personnel find a good work-life balance. That will take some doing.

Dealing with demands and pressure

“A sense of being supported by colleagues or management has a positive effect on psychological well-being and job satisfaction. It alleviates stress and helps bring about a positive attitude,” argues Ingeloes Bense, managing director of De PreventieCoach, an organisation that stimulates healthy, safe and enjoyable working conditions through training and coaching. However, it doesn’t necessarily follow that colleagues get the support they need. That can lead to misunderstandings, frustration and stress. We know that work-related stress is

dependent on a number of factors and can differ per individual.

The support that personnel receive from colleagues in seeking out solutions to psychosocial problems is important, Bense believes: “The wrong kind of support, or a lack of it, can not only cause work-related stress, but social isolation and health problems too. To this end, she decided to develop a communication model, *OplossingsKracht voor de gewenste steun* (‘solution-driven appropriate support’), to facilitate the right support. “Everyone has an intuitive problem-solving ability; a capacity to provide adequate support for yourself and others, unravelling problems together, identifying with someone else’s concerns and improving work-related situations in a practical fashion,” Bense explains. At the beginning of 2013, De Rozelaar introduced a development model, *Ontwikkelcyclus OplossingsKracht*, a ‘solution-driven development cycle’ based on the communication model. In team training, peer-group and individual coaching sessions, personnel were taught how to deal with the burdens of the job and workplace pressure successfully.

Social support is all about being receptive to others’ needs

“The trick is to understand what makes your colleague tick and then offer the right support. If it’s clear what kind of help your colleague needs, you’ve won half the battle.” Staff at De Rozelaar communicate more easily with each other now and are less reticent to pose questions like: “Can you hear me out and perhaps help solve the problem or provide practical advice?” Personnel now feel safer, listened to and understood and receive the support they wish for. This results in improved performance and greater self-confidence and job satisfaction. And last but not least: absenteeism from work-related stress is diminishing.



“Workplace stress got the better of me when my father died.”

Hetty speaks

Introducing myself..

My name is Hetty, I'm 31 years old and I work in Accident & Emergency at the OLVG hospital in Amsterdam. I qualified as a nurse and then worked in psychiatry and on various post-operative nursing wards for a number of years. In 2011 I started studying to qualify as an A&E nurse and I've really enjoyed working in the department.

When did you first discover you were suffering from work-related stress?

A&E is a hectic and dynamic place to work where the pressure can be quite unrelenting. I started experiencing more workplace stress after my father died. For me it became an emotional roller-coaster. I had to arrange a lot of things and was eating and sleeping poorly. I felt I couldn't take much more. It was more difficult to keep my concentration at work. After a few hours at work, I was shattered and needed two hours on the sofa just to recover. In A&E it was as if I could only do half my normal work and deal with fewer patients. I would forget things I would not usually forget. I had less contact with patients and wasn't able to give them the care and attention I wanted to. All the indications were that I was suffering from workplace stress.

What steps did you take?

After my father died, I went to speak to my manager. We came to some working arrangements and following his advice, I went to see my GP and the company medical officer. I had a number of appointments with them. My GP told me I needed time and I should get in contact again if the problem persisted. The medical officer arranged my shift patterns so that they reflected my situation. The meetings I had with the trauma reception coordinator gave me the chance to get more grip on things. I was able to get things off my chest, explain why work had become so demanding and I started accepting the situation more. As a result, two weeks after my father's death I was back at work part-time and after six weeks had returned to work fully.

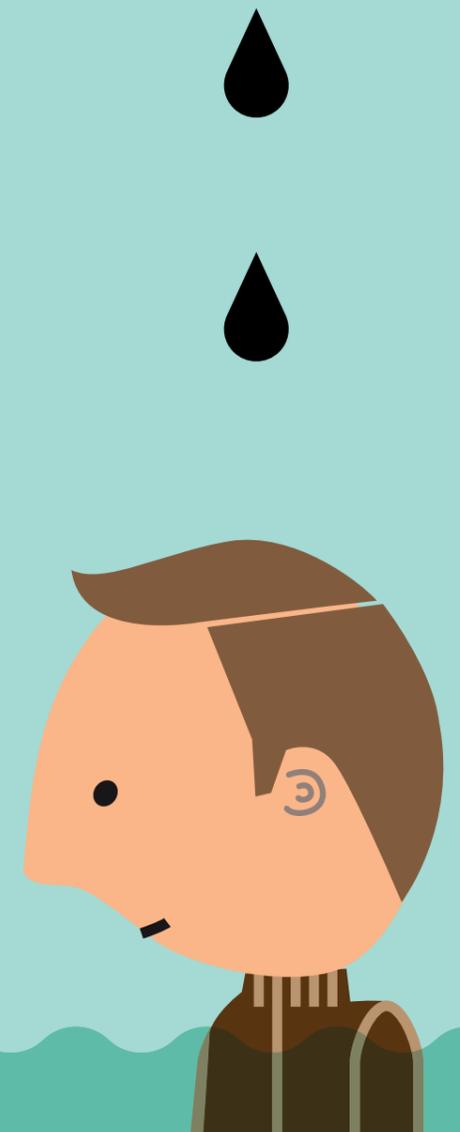
Do you have any helpful advice for others?

Keep talking to your manager so that he or she is aware of the situation. Take all available help! Even if you don't feel up to it, it can add greatly.

Join us!

Creating safer and healthier workplaces is something we would like to do in cooperation with you. The campaign Check je Werkstress (Check your work-related stress) is conducted in cooperation with a large number of partners. These include governments, institutions engaged in safety and healthy workplaces, businesses and employees and their representatives. These partnerships are indispensable for the success of the campaign.

See <http://campagne.arboineuropa.nl> for more details.





European Agency
for Safety and Health
at Work

Netherlands Focal Point

This magazine was created by Netherlands Focal Point in cooperation with the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. It contains interviews with the ten nominees for the Dutch Good Practice Awards which are awarded to businesses and organisations that have successfully eliminated or curbed instances of work-related stress. The competition is an initiative of Netherlands Focal Point and part of the European Good Practice Awards of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA).

The contents of this magazine was made possible through interviews with employers, employees and knowledge centres.

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