Work Ability Index: A Programme from the Netherlands

Short summary of the programme

The programme is called ‘Implementation of the WAI in the Netherlands’. 'Blik op Werk' was charged by the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs to promote the concept of workability as well as the use of the Work Ability Index (an instrument to measure whether people are at risk in terms of health or employability). The overall aim of this programme was to increase employees' sustainable employment by examining their workability. 'Blik op Werk' operated as an independent operation. The programme started in 2008 and is still running. Subsidised by the Dutch government with an initial start-up fund, the programme was established on a 'payback model'. It is now self-funded.

As a result of this project, Blik op Werk has successfully initiated the implementation of the WAI. The introduction of the Dutch licence to use the WAI was of crucial importance. It encouraged a growing number of organisations and sectors to increase sustainable employment by using the WAI and is likely to further promote the WAI application as a widely used feature of organisational development.

The business case: description of the programme

Aim of the project

In 2007, the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment wished to promote sustainable employability by increasing the workability of its labour force as its population is living longer and will therefore need to work longer. To achieve this, the government decided to set up the Work Ability Index (WAI) project.

The overall objective of the WAI programme was to promote the concept of workability and encourage a growing a number of organisations and sectors to increase sustainable employment by using the Work Ability Index.
The programme’s objectives address the main identified barriers to increased sustainable employability:

- The lack of national awareness and acceptance of the concept of workability
- The lack of knowledge, experience and data available (The Netherlands did not have any data relating to the sustainable employability of employees).

The programme was set up as an independent activity to be run by the Blik op Werk Foundation, an organisation representing both employers and employees’ (unions) and aims to contribute to ‘a lifelong healthy and happy career’ as well as ‘continued employment and the ability to find a job’.

To implement the programme, Blik op Werk set up a ‘payback model’ so in the longer term it would not need a subsidy from the government, and could repay the start-up funds.

**Tasks of the platform**

*Blik op Werk* operates as an independent platform and has the following four tasks:

1. Promotion of work ability and the WAI: Creating national awareness and acceptance of the concept of workability and the WAI at all levels in the Dutch economy.
2. Setting up and maintaining learning networks: Sharing and distributing knowledge and experience through learning networks and (digital) media. It also promotes research and innovation based on the Dutch practice.
3. Promoting the professional use of the WAI: Managing and issuing the Dutch licence of the Work Ability Index in accordance with the agreements with the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health and the Dutch WAI user agreement.
4. Developing and managing a national WAI database to support benchmarking of achievements through the use of the Index among sectors.

**What is the purpose of the Work Index Ability? How does it work?**

The WAI aims to increase employees’ sustainable employability by examining their workability.

The WAI is a tool to measure if people are at risk. The use of the WAI helps people become more employable and reduce levels of sickness and absence from work.

Blik op Werk managed and issued Dutch licences to use the WAI to self-employed consultants, accrediting them to work with the Index. Blik op Werk charged fees for the licences and the training associated with them. One of the keys to the
successful use of the WAI was when individual and company-wide scores were obtained under the WAI, the results of the questionnaire could be benchmarked against a database of other scores. Employers could then consider appropriate training, job design, health and career development interventions to improve WAI scores and work ability in general. The database results are aimed for use by licensees, policy makers and researchers.

**Methods**

To achieve these objectives, the programme used the following main methods:

- It obtained the exclusive licensing rights for the Dutch standard WAI from the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (FIOH). *Blik op Werk* concludes sub-licences with organisations that apply the standard Dutch WAI and are able to comply with the rules. Before this, about 20 different translations of the WAI were used in the Netherlands. *Blik op Werk* tests the practical use of the WAI by licensees by means of audit interviews. A fee is payable for a sub-licence plus a fee for each completed questionnaire.

- It develops and manages a national WAI database with reference statistics.

- This database is intended for benchmarking among sectors and will in time be a source for policy makers to review success and those areas where more activity is needed. Licensees submit their anonymous data to the national WAI database and have access to the database.

- Promoted workability through agreements between employers and employees.

- It promotes and raises awareness through *Work Ability Weeks*. In 2010 and 2011, *Blik op Werk* and a number of joint venture partners organised the Work Ability Week. During these weeks, several meetings were held, where topics such as vitality, work ability, age management, research, and workability training in companies and branches were discussed. Juhani Ilmarinen of the FIOH was the main speaker throughout, and addressed more than 2,000 participants. The Work Ability Weeks yielded a great deal of publicity.

- It used other promotional activities: events, DVD, games, study visits to Finland.

- It promoted best practices and used ambassadors to promote the WAI.

- It developed a training curriculum to allow independent trainers to work with the WAI.

- It built strong (international) networks and partnerships with the German, Finnish and Austrian WAI-networks, with whom joint training and conferences are held.
**Information about the project: size, duration, actor and organisation.**

The programme was set up in 2007 on the initiative of the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment and is still ongoing.

The programme operated by Blik op Werk received a first start-up subsidy of €380,000 for the period 2008-2010 followed by an additional subsidy of €300,000 for 2009-2010.

The project involves a wide range of direct and indirect stakeholders including licensees, employers and employee representative organisations, researchers, policy makers etc.

As the programme was established on a pay-back model, income was also generated by activities run by the programme (income from sub-licences, workshops, trainings and study visits). Since 2011, the programme has generated enough income to be self-sufficient and does not need any further support from the Dutch government.

How is the co-operation organised?
**The results so far**

The WAI promoted better knowledge of work ability through its different activities (database, training and learning networks) and had a wide reach:

It success can be seen in the number of stakeholders reached through its awareness raising and learning events.

1) **Learning networks**;

In 2009/2010, the project introduced 14 WAI learning networks and by the end of the year 200 additional companies had joined these networks.

All networks had a moderator who facilitated the meetings. The networks had different themes and participants. In addition to encouraging the use of the WAI and exchanging experiences, the networks led to the production of a booklet about the use of the WAI from the employee's perspective, and a research agenda (study trips organised helped the participants continue to network).

2) **Promotional activities including the 2010-2011 work ability weeks which attracted more than 2000 participants**;

- Training activity: study trips, informative meetings, workshops, training.

*Blik op Werk* organises informative meetings about work ability and holds various on-site presentations each month. A special study trip to Finland has been taking place each year since 2009. Experience has taught that after such trips participants continue to form networks.

3) **Database management and issue of licence**.

- *Blik op Werk* has successfully initiated the implementation of the WAI. The introduction of the Dutch licence of the WAI was of crucial importance. It encouraged a growing number of organisations and sectors to increase sustainable employment by using the WAI and is likely to further promote the WAI application as common feature of organisational development.

- The number of licences and records registered in the database within three and a half years is evidence of the success of the WAI project.
Licensees, questionnaires and database:

- There are currently over 50 licensees
- 20,000 WAI questionnaires were completed in 2009 and 30,000 in 2010.
- By the start of 2011, Blik op Wek's database contained more than 74,000 records. At the end of 2011 it contained 98,000 records of people, companies and organisations.

Using this data, researchers and others can create “live” reports and graphs. The database is becoming a very powerful, national WAI benchmark that can be used by licensees, policy makers and researchers. The Netherlands has no other large database with data on the sustainable employability of employees.

- The WAI is most widely used in the health care and education sectors and in industry, particularly metal working.

However, measuring the results at an individual or company level to assess specific change such as the impact on workability or change of attitude of employers or the number of people entering the labour market was not possible as Blik op Wek did not work directly with employers. This can only be monitored by licensees.

Case studies

The WAI collected 32 examples of best practice which are available on their website (Four of them are in English please visit the Blik op Werk website: www.blikopwerk.nl/WAI, and select ‘English’).

Case studies are also available on YouTube:

Gulpener Beer Brewery: http://www.youtube.com/user/BlikopWerk?blend=22&ob=5#p/u/0/-MWiwe3tSj
Elkerliek Hospital: http://www.youtube.com/user/BlikopWerk?blend=22&ob=5#p/u/1/9xdzNj9xmQ0
Sabic Innovative Plastics: http://www.youtube.com/user/BlikopWerk?blend=22&ob=5#p/u/2/hDS-N7NAwtk
Tangent foundation: http://www.youtube.com/user/BlikopWerk?blend=22&ob=5#p/u/3/D-ibpzXW_rk
Assessment of success factors

The ESF Age Network members considered the following to be the key success factors for the WAI implementation:

- Careful preparation of communication to ensure that the company and employee understand the benefit of engaging with the WAI so that the WAI is not viewed negatively. Individuals who fear a low score from Index would reflect badly upon them, or may be used to justify their dismissal, need to know that, in reality, the WAI will benefit everyone. Clear communication of the purpose and benefits of the WAI has achieved this understanding.

- Communication with stakeholders, and awareness raising within society at large helps to facilitate a better understanding of the usefulness of the WAI (strong networks and good ambassadors/advocates on different levels to promote workability are essential).

- Businesses in the Netherlands were interested in benchmarking (and in a national database) which could show their performance in comparison to others’. This element of comparison helped encourage more businesses to participate, drawing on their competitive nature.

- The project received state support. Important resources are needed to first set up such a project (€300,000) and this helped get the whole process off the ground in the Netherlands.

- The WAI method is both well researched and developed and received strong support from the Finnish government and employers. The index has been trialled extensively in Finland and has been translated into numerous languages. This has lent credence to the method. Both the Dutch employers and Dutch government were interested in this method.

- The cross sectoral applicability of the WAI is another success factor.

- The practical application of the WAI has been successful. The provision of a contract between the licence holder and the company ensures there is input into the overall WAI database.

- The implementation of an objective measure of workability in companies provided a sound basis for the discussion of potential solutions.

- An action plan drawn up for each individual or company extends the work beyond the initial WAI intervention, encouraging sustainability.

- The project had a strong marketing element and this has been essential in order to ensure buy-in from SMEs.

- Strong networks are needed to facilitate effective promotion of the method. SMEs can become ambassadors for the WAI.
Gender aspects

- At a national level, the WAI of women is lower than for men.
- Women were generally shown to hold more negative perceptions about their health than men.
- The work with SMEs has not found gender to be an issue; the focus has primarily been on age.

While the WAI did not consider a gender perspective, certain characteristics such as gender are recorded for participants and are available for analysis and benchmarking.

Validation/evaluation procedure

There has been no evaluation.

Potential for transferability

WAI is already known to be transferable and with a strong business case behind it. Transferable tools are available. It also needs strong political backing, but appears to have potential for self-sustaining systems based on a business model, currently being tested in the Netherlands.

Overall conclusions:

The WAI has already been transferred to a variety of contexts and sectors already. The WAI was simplified and applied in the Dutch context, further demonstrating its transferability potential. Blik op Werk itself has a variety of materials that can be translated into different languages including the WAI questionnaire (which has already been translated into 26 languages): workability coaches, training material, good examples of working with the WAI in companies, etc. The WAI Netherlands programme also cooperated with Austria, Germany and Finland - starting to offer the potential of an international comparison database. Both a strong business case and an effective rationale are required to promote the index into other contexts, but where this is achieved, the tools and methods of implementation are highly transferable.

Business case

The business case has been proven as the WAI has become a self-sustaining model in the Netherlands, through operating under licence in various sectors and organisational contexts.

Reference to related literature, expert reports, studies: None