

Summary:

Evaluation of the Senior Employee Trial Scheme in AS Oslo Sporveier

The Senior Employee Trial Scheme

From November 2001 until January 2003, the major public transport operator in Oslo, AS Oslo Sporveier¹ carried out a pilot scheme for a group of employees. The project was called the Senior Employee Trial Scheme.

This report gives the results from the evaluation of the project. The evaluation has been carried out by the Institute of Transport Economics (TØI), in co-operation with an internal group for evaluation of work environment projects within the public transport operator. This summary will give the main results from the evaluation.

Goal

The goal of the public transport operator for the pilot scheme was to find whether the number of sick days would be reduced for this particular group of employees, by introducing lower working hours and extra follow-up from staff advisors.

Target group

Seven drivers from the tram and metro divisions participated in the trial scheme. These employees were recruited to the pilot scheme because of their age (50+) and high seniority. The pilot scheme was designed to cover the special needs of this group. The employer had previous to the pilot scheme experienced that this group of employees had a higher number of sick days and long sick notes than the average employee.

¹ To learn more about the public transport system and the main public transport operator in Oslo, we recommend the websight of AS Oslo Sporveier: www.sporveien.no.

Main elements

The main elements in the pilot scheme were as follows:

- The senior employees were offered approximately one hour reduced hours worked each day in the trial period.
- The participants were not allowed to work any kind of voluntary overtime, or to engage in other businesses during the trial period. This measure was taken in order to secure that the reduction in working hours was realistic.
- The participants continued to receive their normal wages during the trial period.
- The employer offered specially adjusted working hours for each participant. Any one of the participants could suggest their special needs and wishes to the planners of the rota, who were instructed to make the necessary adjustments.
- The participants were subject to special attention from their superiors during the trial period. This special attention spanned from phone calls from their staff advisors when they handed in sick notes to more informal conversations in the company cafeteria.

Research method and design

The target group is small. This calls for a special research design and the use of qualitative methods.

Data collection

Two kinds of data have been assembled: Data from interviews with the participants and the sickness absence statistics for the target group in the trial period and the year previous to the trial period.

All participants in the trial scheme were interviewed twice. The first interviews were made when the

trial period had just started, in November of 2001. In the first interviews we asked for the participants opinions on how their lives currently were influenced by their occupation. Was their quality of life affected by their work? We also asked the participants to tell us what they expected from the trial scheme, and how they felt about being an employee in the future. An interview guide was used as a basis for the interviews.

The second round of interviews was conducted in November and December of 2002. We asked the participants if they had noticed any effects of the trial scheme on their own health, general well-being or quality of work and life. We also wanted the participants' opinions on the same questions about their views on the future.

Data quality and limitations

We would like to point out the methodological importance of the size of the test group and also the constellation of employees in the test group. This could in the worst case limit the quality and the possible use of the data. The qualities of the test group may have had effects for the value of the data and analysis. It is not necessarily advisable to generalize from a case study of this size and quality to other cases, or even to other parts of the company where the trial scheme was carried out.

Results

Changes in sickness absence

The sickness absence statistics for the target group changed radically during the trial period. The year before the trial period the target group had a substantially higher sickness absence than the average for the employees of the public transport operator. During the test period sickness absence was reduced considerably. The management of the public transport operator was very interested in reductions in sickness absence as a measure on how successful the trial scheme was: Did the company save any money by offering these employees shorter days for the same pay?

Absence was indeed substantially reduced during the trial period. However, there is an ambiguous connection between reduced absence and the success of the trial scheme.

We would like to point out that the statistics might be tainted by several other sources than the actual

work environment or the effects of the trial scheme. Because of this, it is not adequate to use changes in the sickness absence statistics as a measure of whether the project was successful or not. The sickness absence statistics may have holes or weaknesses that we are not fully aware of. The interviews with the participants provide more reliable data in this aspect.

How do the employees perceive their working situation?

The employees have described their day-to-day working situation in detail, both before the trial scheme and by comparing this to their situation during the test period. The descriptions given seem fairly balanced: On the one hand the employees describe a great amount of problems in the work place of differing physical and psychological character. Management is repeatedly described as lacking skills of communication and empathy. Still, on the other hand these employees express a great deal of pride in being an employee in this particular company, who is so important to daily life in Norway's capital. The employees are also proud that "their" company is able to provide care and a custom made rota for its weakest employees. This shows evidence of a strong corporate identity.

How does employment mark the private lives of the senior employees?

Interviews show that employment to a large extent has effects for the private lives of the senior employees. The Senior Employee Trial Scheme has allowed the participants to get valuable rest. On this background the participants reports that the effects on their private lives are lessened, compared to the situation before the introduction of the scheme.

The participants report of a higher degree of energy to live a fulfilling life after working hours, and an improved ability to care for family and friends. All in all, the participants feel that their quality of life has improved greatly as a result of the trial scheme.

Conclusions

The evaluation shows that the Senior Employee Trial Scheme has been successful.

- The company's goals for the trial scheme are reached. There is a reduction in sickness absence among the participating employees.

- As a result of the trial scheme, the employees feel that they manage their tasks better. Their quality of life has been improved as a result of the trial scheme.
- The trial scheme is well defined towards the needs of the target group. Before the trial scheme was introduced, management carried out a mapping of the target group, in order to identify needs and weaknesses of the group in question. The measures are well planned and well carried out by the employer.

This evaluation shows that this group of employees are very loyal towards the employer, and that they are proud and happy to still be employed in spite of all their problems and illnesses. The company appears as a decent and respectable actor in the labour market, showing a distinct social profile because of the willingness to provide necessary support for their weakest employees.

In January 2003 the board of directors in the company turned the trial scheme into a permanent arrangement for twelve employees. This report was part of the decision basis for the resolution.