

ASSESSMENT OF MEASURES FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

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The Norwegian government states that work place is an important arena to improve public health. When the Working Environment Act was revised in 2006 a new section, Assessment of measures for physical activity, was introduced. Section 3-4 states that concerning the systematic health, environment and safety work, the employer is obliged to assess measures to promote physical activity among the employees.

Key words: WEA, Section 3-4, Assessment of measures, Physical activity

Background

The Parliament White Paper No.16 (2002-2003) “Prescription for a healthier Norway” emphasises the importance of physical activity for the health and well-being of the population. The Paper describes public health work as the total effort of society to “strengthen whatever contributes to improved health and impair whatever involves health risks”. The Parliament White Paper as well as the World Health Organization points out that physical inactivity is the significant health challenge of the future.

The Norwegian government was asked to develop an Action Plan on Physical Activity in connection with the discussion of “Prescription for a healthier Norway” in Parliament. The plan had to comprise of concrete measures in various fields of society. Different parties in working life should be actively engaged in the work, also applied to The Sport Association of Norway. The Action Plan on Physical Activity is a national plan in order to improve public health through increased physical activity. It emphasizes the need of comprehensive approaches and cross-sectional strategy and includes a multitude of measures.

There has been a dramatic decrease in physical activity as a natural part of the working day of adults as a result of mechanisation implying an overall reduction of manual labour. Consequently working life, which in former times used to be an area of physical activity as the workers were concerned has now become an area of inactivity. There are, however, many indications that physical activity, as well as good physical health, has positive effects upon the working environment and productivity. Thus work places must be organised in a way that promotes health and well-being.

To make enterprises and companies focus on physical activity there was a proposal to include a provision in the new Working Environment Act that obliges employers to consider physical activity as a part of the company’s systematic health, environment and safety work.

The proposal is largely viewed in a public health perspective. Section 3-1¹ in the Act though is seen in an occupational health and safety perspective. Complying to the employer's duties to assess measures for physical activity shall not affect the employer's other obligations.

The new law and new section

When the Working Environment Act was revised in 2006 a new section, Assessment of measures for physical activity, was introduced. Section 3-4 states that "in connection with the systematic health, environment and safety work, the employer shall assess measures to promote physical activity among the employees".

Soon after the new section was introduced The Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority made available information on their web-site addressing the companies how to implement the new provision in the Working Environment Act².

The goal of the regulation

The employers' assessment should aim to reduce the negative health effects of physical inactivity at the workplace. By focusing on this theme we would like to gain positive health effects.

How do the employers comply with this new provision?

It will be fulfilled if the employers can document the assessment done in a systematic way, together with employees' representatives, and as a part of the systematic occupational health and safety efforts. It is recommended that the assessments should be one of the tasks of The Working Environment Committees, if they are present. Measures must be considered in co-operation with the representatives of the employees. The measures are bound to vary from company to company.

How should the assessment be accomplished and documented?

The assessment of measures to promote physical activity ought to be seen in connection with section 1-1³ and section 3-1. This assessment should be a part of the systematic work to improve the work environment.

As already pointed out, the assessment has to be done in cooperation with employees' representatives and the safety representatives. If there's no Working Environment Committee present the company has to find other arrangements to make a systematic assessment. Documentation is significant.

If the company does not have the knowledge about these kinds of assessments, it should seek for help from professionals, for example from the occupational health service or by fitness consultants. Competence, participation and cooperation are the keywords.

¹ Requirements regarding systematic health, environment and safety work

² Factsheet: <http://www.arbeidstilsynet.no/c26976/faktaside/vis.html?tid=42098>

³ The purpose of the act

The assessment has to take into account the characteristics of the enterprise and the employees's job demands.

There is no obligation that physical activity has to take place. The participation is voluntary, and the employer cannot force the employees to take part in the recommended activities.

How can this section be an arena for inspections?

The Labour Inspectorate's central role is to conduct inspections. Another part of our job is to provide advises to companies regarding to Working Environment Act and advise them on how to create a safe and healthy workplace. The new provision is above all a "consciousness raising effort" and is meant to improve physical activity in the workplace.

The Labour Inspectorate may give a citation in case the employers fail to comply with this new provision of the Work Environment Act. In example if the employers can not document the assessment done in a systematic way, together with employees' representatives, a citation can be given.

But the inspectors cannot give citation concerning measures the company should implement. The companies must design their own programs built on their own assessments.

Different types of measures

Labour inspectors will only provide guidance concerning the different types of measures. We will recommend measures within the Health Promotion Framework. In example the activities should be based on a proper assessment of needs, serve as a support for workplace health, well-being and safety, be managed by the workplace, take into account the structures, cultures, laws and policies of the workplace, include evaluation and of course be built on voluntary participation.

Effects

Will the section make a contribution to the effects on public health? What are the expected gains and costs due to the new section of the Working Environment Act?

The vision set by The Action Plan is a general improvement in public health through increased physical activity in the population. One of the central objectives of this plan is to increase the number of adults who are moderately physically active for at least 30 minutes per day.

It is difficult to estimate effects of this new provision. However this effort along with other national efforts concerning physical activity may contribute to significant gains in the health status of the population and may contribute to saving health related costs.

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