

Healthy working environment is a salvation

August 28 2014

Contract workers in Norway often face the worst and most unpredictable working conditions. But good management and support from colleagues makes these workers more robust.

Outsourcing and contracted personnel have been on the increase in Norway for a number of years. Fewer and fewer companies are retaining personnel with key skills, and the subcontractor market is booming. Norwegian building sites, for example, are a melting pot of different companies and nationalities; of clients, general contractors, subcontractors and [contract workers](#).

As part of a three-year project, researchers from SINTEF collected data from the cleaning, construction, shipbuilding and healthcare industries, in order to examine how outsourcing affected [working conditions](#) and sickness leave.

Social contact highlighted

In all the interviews – irrespective of sector and degree of outsourcing, [workers](#) highlighted one issue in particular – the importance of well-being and a good working environment.

"This aspect was described in the same way and given exactly the same significance by workers, regardless of their profession or nationality", says Kari Skarholt at SINTEF Technology and Society. Norwegian homecare nurses and Polish shipyard surface treatment contract workers all used the same words and expressions when asked to describe how

important they thought this was.

Compensating for negative aspects

Skarholt explains that outsourcing and the resultant hierarchy of suppliers often create problems for workers.

"International research has shown that outsourcing can compromise safety in the workplace. Unionisation also becomes less of a priority, which means that workers have no one to turn to if anything happens. It's easy for people to lose control of their working situation", she says.

The researchers' hypothesis was that contract workers might also have worse and more unpredictable working conditions than anyone else in a given workplace.

"Our results indicate that outsourcing and supplier hierarchy have a negative impact", says Kari Skarholt. "It can change working conditions and employment relationships, fragment responsibilities, increase pressure and reduce interaction with colleagues. But we also found that the social aspect can compensate for the negative aspects".

Good, local managers reduce negative effects

The researchers emphasise that it is local managers who can have an effect on many aspects of employment relationships and working conditions. They can make a big difference – much more so than the outsourcing itself.

For example, a [management team](#) that shows its face and is close at hand was highlighted as positive by its employees. Construction site managers who were on site, taking an interest in the work and 'noticing' workers

were appreciated. Foreigners also emphasised that working consistently at the same location had a positive value, and said that it helped if there were other people from their country working for the same company.

"The study showed that workers appreciated it when the organisation and management arranged for them to work with their colleagues. For example, a Polish contract company made sure that [surface treatment](#) workers were consistently sent to the same site and worked the same shifts. Nurses emphasised how important it was for them to work in a regular team at a hospital, with responsibility for the same patients".

Good contracts of employment are 'a must'

It is well known that in the cleaning industry, cleaners as individuals have little control over their working day, and many may have little or no contact with colleagues during a working week. Cowboy companies also tend to exploit workers so that they can provide services as cheaply as possible.

"If a cleaner has both little influence and a poor employment contract, this can affect their health. This means that it is important for a purchaser to avoid cowboy companies, and to be aware of the HSE challenges", says Skarholt. She emphasises that having a good contract of employment or a poor one can make all the difference to a worker.

In the shipbuilding industry, which hires in a great deal of foreign manpower, many of the Polish workers in the study said that they did not want more responsibility at work, and that they liked being told what to do. However, they emphasised that they appreciated the safety standards on Norwegian worksites.

Friendship and care at work

As well as good managers, it was camaraderie and the social environment with colleagues that was the salvation for many people. Skarholt says that when asked to describe their well-being at work, the interviewees said that they enjoyed themselves most when they got to work with their friends, take care of each other and help each other professionally and socially.

"They also said how important the part humour played in the workplace", she says.

List of suggestions

"The results of our research show how much can be done by a management team that is aware, and by [outsourcing](#) companies with a focus on HSE", concludes Kari Skarholt. The project has drawn up some proposed measures that are listed according to sector. The proposals range from clear communication and more key workers, to fostering social networks and getting more involved as managers.

Provided by SINTEF

Citation: Healthy working environment is a salvation (2014, August 28) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-08-healthy-environment-salvation.html>

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