

# **Supportive Service Companies**

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## **Abstract**

Conscious development of attractive work increases the possibilities to keep, motivate and develop current co-workers and to attract new competent personnel. Supportive Service Companies (SSC) such as Occupational Health Services, organization consultants, etc. can help the companies in their development. Theme Working Life at Högskolan Dalarna has together with companies developed concrete methods and processes for more attractive work. Altogether 34 persons from 13 SSC participated in four seminars and six method courses. A follow-up was made after 1½ year by 25 interviews with the participants. The methods were seen as impressive, concrete and useful. More than half of the participants had used some method with at least one client. The methods worked well in commercial use and could easily be combined with other methods. The “approach” of the methods, the ability to engage and motivate the employees and the concrete results were appreciated by the SSC and the clients.

## **Key words**

Attractive Work, small enterprises, Supportive Service Companies, methods, processes

## **Introduction**

Companies and work places must have competent and motivated co-workers in order to build efficient operations and get full pay-off on investments. Conscious development of attractive work at the work place increases the possibilities to keep, motivate and develop current co-workers and to attract new competent personnel. This supports long term sustainable operations. Supportive Service Companies (SSC) such as Occupational Health Services, organization consultants, etc can help the companies in their development. The SSC are hired by companies and work places to support the development of individuals, work-groups, departments or the whole company. Different SSC work with different focus, approaches and methods.

Since the end of the 1990's methods that support processes for Attractive Work have been developed by Theme Working Life, a research group at Högskolan Dalarna, in collaboration with the Swedish National Institute for Working Life. These concrete methods and processes have been developed in close collaboration with companies and workplaces. They also support a positive development by motivating and engaging the co-workers.

The aim of the project was to support the SSC by giving them knowledge about the use of the methods and their philosophy. By commercializing the developed methods the SSC may expand and improve their operation and adopt a consultative way of working.

## ***The methods***

The methods have different starting points but all stimulate the development of both work operations and attractive work. In all methods the experience, values and interest of each employee are used as a base for development.

All methods are based on Moveit qualities, i.e. qualities that have been identified as important for a method to create motivation and engagement. These qualities cover interactivity, change competence, work environment knowledge, freedom of action, systematic and ability of integration (Åteg, Andersson & Rosén, 2006).

All methods require motivated and engaged company leaders, a choice of starting point close to the interest of the employees and their work, as well as a competent external process leader. All methods include introductory meetings with leaders and staff, one or more work-shops engaging all personnel and one or more follow-ups. The contribution from the external process leader is at least 20-25 working hours.

*Attractive Work* – Initiates a process to develop more attractive work based on the experience and values of each employee. Each employee's view on what is important in an attractive work and on the situation at the current work-place is measured with a questionnaire. The results for the work-group are prioritized and used in a work-shop during which an action plan for development is put together. At consecutive meetings the action plan is followed-up. For more information about this method, see Hedlund, Andersson & Rosén (2009).

*Orderliness* – A process to develop new routines that helps build better orderliness which increases the efficiency. At the process start the work group decides what areas are important for their orderliness and develops routines for each area. The development and observance of the routines are measured at three follow-up meetings, which give a good account of improvements.

The method as carried out by Theme Working Life has been evaluated, showing positive results for the clients. The straightforward method, development of routines and the engagement of leaders and

co-workers had increased the orderliness and gave time over for other work. (Andersson, Andersson, Klusell, Rosén, 2008.)

*SAM-Right and easy* – A process by which a systematic work environment work (SAM) is developed. All Swedish companies are required to have a functioning SAM, which can be developed in different ways. By this method the whole staff is engaged in four work-shops during a full year supervised by a process leader. A working group carries out assignments together with the staff between the work-shops, supported by the process leader.

The development and use of the method at woodworking companies has been evaluated, showing that the method both contained success factors that support a functioning SAM in small companies and improved the work attractiveness. (Hedlund & Pontén, 2006)

*VEKO-Light* – A process in which premises, fittings and equipment are adapted to support efficient operations and work situations for the employees. A work-shop with the whole staff or representatives identifies factors which promote or hamper the work at the work-place. With these as a base the group designs drafts of possible new lay-outs from different points of view (e.g. customer or co-worker).

*Visit* – A method in which you visit yourself, with the eyes of a customer, an employee, someone who is seeking a job, or someone else. A group of co-workers take a critical view of the whole work-place, outside and inside, documenting their findings with a camera. The photos are used as a base for discussions on how to improve the work and work-place.

*Picture editing* – A method which visualize proposed changes in the work environment. Photos of the work-place are manipulated in a computer to visualize possible improvements. The photos are used as a base for discussions and decisions.

## **Approach and methods**

### ***Method courses***

SSC in the region of Dalarna were invited to information seminars and short courses for the six methods.

The seminars were planned together with representatives from companies and other actors. All SSC that could be identified in Dalarna were first invited to four seminars at different places. The seminars took 3 hours and gave a brief overview of the methods. At the end of the seminar there was a possibility to apply for the specific short courses for each method.

The six method courses took ½ to 1 day each. All courses used an interactive pedagogy and the participants learned about each method by practicing each step. The role as process leader was also discussed and there was plenty of time to exchange experiences. Documentations for each method were handed out.

### ***Participation***

Altogether 34 persons participated in the information seminars and courses. The participants represented 6 different OHS-services and 7 other SSC. The participation at the seminars and different courses were as follows (three persons went to more than one course):

- Only seminar – 7 persons
- Attractive Work – 10 persons
- Orderliness – 7 persons

- SAM-Right and easy – 5 persons
- VEKO Light – 3 persons
- Visit – 2 persons
- Picture editing – 2 persons

### ***Follow-up***

A follow-up was made after 1½ year. Interviews with 25 of the participants were made. The participants were contacted by telephone or e-mail and a time for a telephone interview was booked. Each interview took between ½ and 1 hour. In the qualitative interviews a template with open questions was used, covering the areas: The seminar, The course day, Experiences of practical use of the methods and Future cooperation.

### **Results**

#### ***The practical execution of the activities***

##### *The seminars*

Two thirds of the participants had no prior contacts with Theme Working Life. The interviewees felt that the seminars gave a good overview of the methods, made it possible to identify suitable methods and stimulated an interest to attend the specific method courses. A lot of well structured information was given in a short time in a pleasant atmosphere.

##### *The method courses*

The interviewees thought the courses were well arranged. Practically working with the different steps of each method gave a good insight in questions that may arise during the processes. The discussions, exchange of experiences and the access to information material were appreciated.

Many found it interesting to hear how people work in other professions, trades and geographical areas. It gives strength to learn about and use tested methods.

### ***The design of the methods***

The methods were seen as impressive, concrete and useful. The interviewees were especially positive to the fact that the methods work for all types of work places and have a promotive perspective. It was good that the methods created motivation, engagement and participation. The structure of the methods and the measureable results were also appreciated. There is a structure which makes it possible to make the methods work in reality. Instructions and manuals make it possible to carry out the methods on your own. The measurable results give confidence and the clients appreciate the verification of improvements.

The experience of the interviewees is that the top leaders of the companies need insights to see the benefits of investments in development of operations and attractive work. The processes are more likely to succeed with good support and enough resources.

### ***The practical use of the methods***

More than half of the participants had used some of the methods practically. Most of the others had adopted parts of the methods and many had marketed them to customers.

*Attractive Work* – Three of the seven interviewees had used the method at eight work places. The process had worked very well and the participants were very satisfied. Two of the work places were at the moment engaged in the method for the second time.

All interviewees had further contacts with interested clients and most of them had told colleagues and partners about the method.

*Orderliness* – Two of the five interviewees had used the method at several work places. They had combined the method with their own methods and adjusted it to the needs of their clients. The method had been used at for instance schools, municipalities and ambulance. The clients had been satisfied with the results, especially the making of an action plan.

Two of the other participants had started to market the method and had contacts with interested clients. The method did not fit into the present business of one of the interviewees. Several of the interviewees had spread the method to colleagues and other SSC.

*SAM-Right and easy* – One of the four interviewees had used the method at work places for three clients and also in combination with other activities. Three had been inspired by the method and see it as part of their future methods, but had not yet used it together with a client. One of these had used the method within her organization.

*VEKO-Light* – One of the three interviewees had made a prospectus of the method and had used it on a small group at a workplace. The two others thought the method was interesting, but had not yet used it directly. One of these had suggested the method at an office, but the company was a bit worried about the time it could take. One thought the method would work better at a larger company with an adapted design.

*Visit* – One interviewee almost always uses the philosophy of the Visit method and has integrated it into other process methods.

*Picture editing* – Picture editing had been used by two persons both as a process method and for other presentations for companies/clients.

### ***Future cooperation***

All interviewees see the need for exchange of experiences with other SSC. Some are already part of networks, one third were interested if some new network is started. Many would like to come to specific meetings, such as method work-shops, seminars on other subjects, exchange of experiences, etc. However, these activities must be adjusted to the situations and needs of the participants.

The interviewees thought that it is good that the methods have been developed, tested and evaluated at a University, it gives credibility. But, there is a need for even more evaluations and facts that show economic results and measurable improvements. The clients do not always believe in the promotive perspective, they often think strictly economically.

Many of the interviewees would like to have more support when working with the methods at their clients. The courses gave an overview of the methods, but in practical use other questions concerning the processes are seen. Some of the SSC needed more details around the method and some wanted more about leading processes.

### **Conclusion**

- The education of Supportive Service Companies resulted in substantial use of methods for development of Attractive Work.
- The seminars and course days were carried out in a good pedagogic way.

- The structure and content of the methods worked well in commercial use. They could easily be combined with other methods.
- The “approach” of the methods and the ability to engage and motivate the employees and the concrete results were appreciated by the clients.
- Initially there is a need for practical support to the Supportive Service Companies as leaders of processes at the work-places.

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