

Research report summary

**Corporate policy on the prevention of occupational risks
Results of a survey of Belgian companies and institutions**

Karen Peirens

Research group: Dominique DufRASne, Veerle Hermans, Chris Honings, Benoît Hubin, Rik Op De Beck, Marthe Verjans.

21 April 2004

Contents

Contents	2
1 Introduction.....	3
1.1 Objective	3
1.2 Methodology	3
1.3 Research group	4
2 Conclusions.....	5
2.1 Concern about prevention	5
An everyday concern	6
Sound arguments.....	6
Tight budgets?	6
Improvements	7
2.2 Challenges and problems facing prevention policy.....	8
2.3 Organisational aspects of prevention policy.....	8
Consultation	9
Introduction policy	9
Information	9
Training	9
2.4 Taking new risks into account	10
Technological and organisational change.....	10
Psychosocial stress.....	10
Work-life balance	11
2.5 Expertise.....	11
3 Recommendations / conclusions	12

List of tables and graphs

- Figure 1 – Comparison between the survey group and the population, by company size
- Table 1 – Prevention in day-to-day practice
- Table 2 – Concern about health, safety and quality of working conditions, by company size
- Table 3 – Progress on the 8 areas of the Health and Safety Law
- Table 4 – Challenges facing prevention policy
- Table 5 – Problems facing prevention policy
- Table 6 – Content of training courses

1 Introduction

1.1 Objective

Prevent, the institution for prevention, protection and well-being at work, has conducted a survey into prevention policy in Belgian companies and institutions.

The objective of this survey is to obtain an overview of the policy of Belgian companies and institutions in the field of health, safety and the quality of work. What importance do companies attach to prevention? How has policy in this area developed over the last few years? What do companies view as priorities for the near future? The purpose of this survey is to map trends and developments and highlight future priority areas.

In addition, this survey supplements existing data relating to prevention, such as statistics on occupational accidents and data on occupational diseases and absenteeism. As these data provide little information on how companies and institutions design prevention policy, the survey seeks to provide material to fill this gap. Therefore, it aims to supplement existing data with figures on the perceptions of managers within companies and institutions. In other words, the survey looks at why prevention policy takes the form it does and the challenges and problems as perceived by the companies and institutions concerned, rather than at the results of actual prevention policy.

In this way, the survey can provide interesting information on the basis of which social policy on prevention can be adjusted and improved, so as to offer employees better protection at work.

1.2 Methodology

The survey was conducted on a representative sample of Belgian companies and institutions. The sample was assembled on the basis of the data in the National Social Security Agency's directory of employers.

The population of Belgian companies and institutions was first mapped on the basis of the National Social Security Agency's statistics.¹ These figures formed the basis for assembling the sample and weighting it in accordance with the following three criteria:

- region (Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels);
- staff numbers by size of company; and
- sector (NACE code).

The companies included in the sample were sent a letter providing information about the survey and referring them to a website where the questionnaire could be completed.²

The survey was conducted under the guidance of a group of Prevent staff with extensive in-company and/or research experience. The working group put the questionnaire together and, after an initial rough description of the data, formulated relevant hypotheses, which were then tested.

¹ Source: National Social Security Agency statistics (yellow brochure), 2002 figures.

http://www.onssrsznlss.fgov.be/Onssrsz/NL/Statistics/Brochures/Yellow/yellow_text.htm

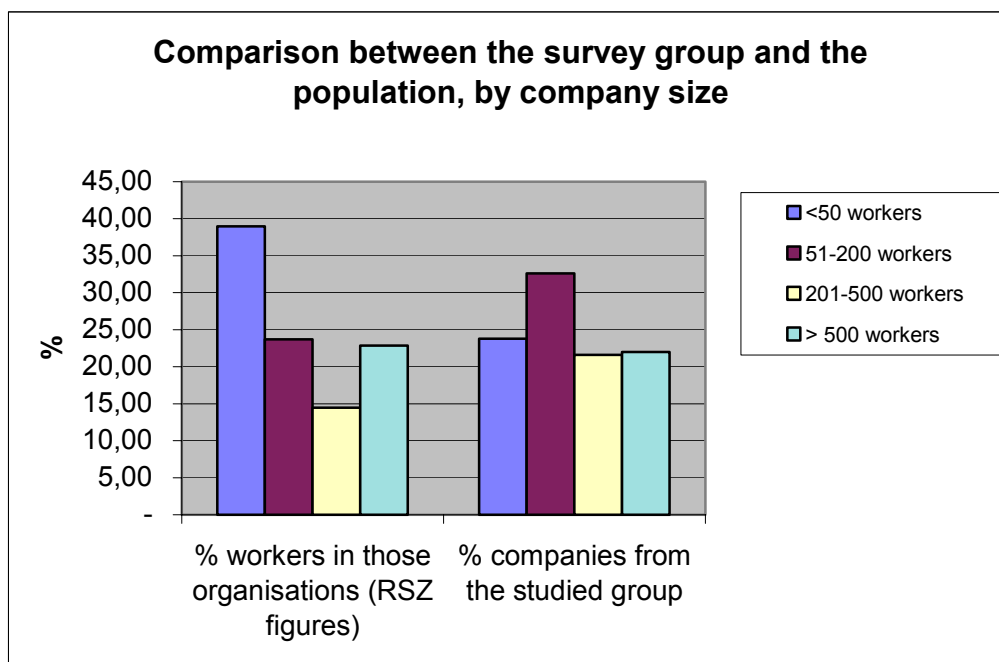
² This letter was sent to companies in Flanders in Dutch, to companies in Wallonia in French, and to Brussels-based companies in both languages.

1.3 Research group

534 companies and institutions took part in the survey³. The composition of the survey group was compared with the data on the relevant population in the statistics of the National Social Security Agency.

This comparison (see Figure 1) showed that the survey group is not perfectly representative. However, all economic sectors and the various categories of company size are represented.

Figure 1 - Comparison between the survey group and the population, by company size



³ 5000 companies and institutions were asked to take part in the survey. This means that the response rate is 10.68 %.

A comparison of the survey group with the National Social Security Agency's statistics shows that the following sectors are under-represented: retailers and wholesalers (G) and real estate, hire firms and companies providing services to companies (K). Industry is over-represented (D). The health sector (N) is also over-represented in the survey group.

Survey participants could indicate their function within the company. In some cases functions were combined, and the category "other" was frequently used to clarify the precise nature of the respondent's function.

72% of questionnaires were completed by prevention advisers, some of whom combined this function with another. Only 18% of questionnaires were completed by CEOs.

In view of the characteristics of the survey group and the fact that responding to a survey on Internet is a hurdle for some people, it seems probable that the respondents were already motivated and interested in prevention policy. This implies that the picture of prevention policy emerging from our survey data appears somewhat more positive than is really the case.

Nonetheless, some noteworthy conclusions can be drawn.

2 Conclusions

2.1 Concern about prevention

The survey gathered information in a number of ways about the extent to which companies and institutions are concerned about prevention and the importance they attach to it.

An everyday concern

Respondents could indicate how the prevention of occupational risks is incorporated into day-to-day practice (Table 1). It emerges clearly that the highest-scoring category is "constant vigilance with regard to occupational dangers and risks".

Table 1 – Prevention in day-to-day practice

Prevention in practice through	% of respondents
Constant vigilance with regard to occupational dangers and risks	71%
Involving line managers	59%
Health, safety and the quality of working conditions are regularly placed on the agenda at senior management meetings	54%
Employees contribute to policy through set procedures or consultative bodies	53%
Health, safety and quality of working conditions feature in the company's policy statement	52%
Implementation of management system	25%

Looking at company size (Table 2), we note particularly noticeable that the percentages in small firms are consistently lower than those for the survey group as a whole. However, it cannot be firmly concluded on this basis that SMEs firms pay no attention to health, safety and quality of working conditions in day-to-day practice. After all, several categories of response refer exclusively to formal instruments which may well be less well represented in SMEs.

Table 2 – Concern about health, safety and quality of working conditions, by company size

	Number of employees (major categories)				
	Survey group	<50	51-200	201-500	>500
Safety, etc, is part of day-to-day practice in the firm	95.00%	87.00%	97.00%	96.00%	99.00%
Constant vigilance with regard to occupational dangers and risks	71.00%	50.00%	78.00%	77.00%	75.00%
Featured in policy statement	52.00%	27.00%	54.00%	63.00%	64.00%
Line managers are involved in prevention policy with regard to health, safety and quality of working conditions	59.00%	37.00%	60.00%	72.00%	66.00%
Health, safety and quality of working conditions are regularly placed on the agenda at senior management meetings	54.00%	37.00%	57.00%	58.00%	62.00%
Employees contribute to policy through set procedures and/or consultative bodies	53.00%	25.00%	58.00%	61.00%	67.00%
Implementation of management systems (OSHAS, EMAS, ISO 14000, etc)	25.00%	14.00%	25.00%	36.00%	25.00%

Sound arguments

The survey also asked why health, safety, and quality of working conditions are considered to be important. The main reasons given are:

- to ensure that employees are satisfied;
- to maintain a good social climate; and
- to meet responsibilities with regard to legal liability.

Companies that implement management systems, involve line managers, have a policy statement and place health, safety, and quality of working conditions on the agenda of senior management meetings do so mainly to enhance their corporate image and boost productivity.

Tight budgets?

One of the survey questions related to the budget that companies and institutions assign to prevention. The responses show that they have little idea of what budget is allocated to health, safety, and quality of working conditions. 86% of companies say they do not keep separate records of this budget and cannot therefore say how big it is.

This naturally makes it considerably more difficult to carry out proper cost-benefit analyses. There is thus a clear need for better information on the financial implications of prevention. If information on the size of the prevention budget is lacking, this may also mean that prevention costs are included in the overall budget. However, it is noteworthy that nearly a third of companies say the prevention budget is a problem when it comes to developing a prevention policy (see Section 2.2). This may indicate that the budget available for prevention is inadequate in some cases.

Improvements

Although there is little awareness of budgets, many companies nonetheless say that the efforts made in the area of prevention have led to improvements. These improvements occur in areas such as occupational accidents, employee satisfaction and motivation, and the social climate. These efforts also improve the company's image, although small companies (< 50 employees) perceive this effect to a lesser extent than do large ones.

In other words, that a company does not know what budget is allocated to prevention does not mean that no efforts are being made. Nor does it imply that such efforts do not bring about any improvement.

It was also examined whether there is any link between concern about prevention in day-to-day practice – or lack of it – and observation of improvements in prevention achieved as a result of these efforts. The results show that those companies which are concerned about health, safety and quality of working conditions in day-to-day practice report more improvements.

The efforts made result mainly in improvements with regard to occupational accidents, corporate image and productivity, employee satisfaction, maintaining a good social climate, and product quality (in order of importance). Concern as expressed in day-to-day practice is shown by such measures as implementation of management systems, the involvement of line managers, the mention of health, safety and quality of working conditions in the policy statement, and the discussion of prevention policy at senior management meetings.

Respondents were also asked whether they think their company or institution has made sufficient progress as regards the 8 areas of the Health and Safety Law (Table 3).

Table 3 – Progress on the 8 areas of the Health and Safety Law

Areas of the Health and Safety Law	% of respondents
Health	88%
Safety	85%
Hygiene	85%
Environment	76%
Furnishing	74%
Bullying, violence, sexual harassment	73%
Ergonomics	56%
Psychosocial stress	42%

The survey shows that 88% of companies and institutions think they have made most progress with health (88%), safety (85%) and hygiene (85%). They have made least progress on ergonomics (56%) and psychosocial stress (42%).

In addition, the results reveal a link between the degree of progress made on the various areas of the Health and Safety Law and the reasons why companies consider health, safety and quality of working conditions to be the most important aspects. It is, for instance, apparent that those companies that have made a good deal of progress on health take the view that health, safety and the quality of working conditions are much more significant when it comes to ensuring that employees are satisfied and motivated than those that think they have not made much progress on health.

2.2 Challenges and problems facing prevention policy

Respondents were asked open-ended questions about the challenges (Table 4) and problems (Table 5) they face in developing a prevention policy for their company or institution.

Table 4 – Challenges facing prevention policy

Challenges	% of respondents
Improving prevention policy/structure	40%
Reducing occupational accidents	26%
Psychosocial stress	21%
Involvement and motivation of employees	20%
Machine safety	19%
Increasing awareness and training	16%
Ergonomics	15%
Improving workstations	15%
Implementing care systems	13%
Promoting health	12%
Policy on specific groups (new employees, young employees, interns, volunteers, workers with limited education, monitoring of teams at building sites)	12%
Enforcing legislation	11%

Table 5 – Problems facing prevention policy

Problems	% respondents
Motivation/behaviour	37%
Budget	30%
Involvement and motivation of management hierarchy	16%
Implementation of legislation	12%
Organisation	11%
Policy on specific groups	11%

The following aspects represent both challenges and problems for companies:

- Employees' involvement, motivation and behaviour;
- Enforcement of new legislation;
- Development of policy on specific groups.

Appropriate information, support and back-up are therefore needed in these areas.

2.3 Organisational aspects of prevention policy

The survey examined a number of key components of prevention policy. The following organisational aspects were investigated:

- consultation of employees and third parties;
- introduction policy;
- information;
- training courses.

Consultation

Structured consultation (committees, trade union delegations) occurs mainly in companies with more than 50 employees.

There are no differences between large and small companies as regards informal consultation of employees (60% in all groups).

The survey also asked whether companies had bottom-up communication channels. These are another way of gathering information from employees and using it in prevention policy. 89% of companies have such channels. Most of them are mechanisms for reporting complaints and problems. This, too, is commoner in large companies.

Companies with bottom-up communication channels report more improvements in employee satisfaction and motivation.

Surveys of staff contentment can also show employees' views of policy within the organisation. 41% of companies and institutions claim to conduct such surveys. This is done mainly in the larger companies. Companies that have carried out surveys of staff contentment report more improvements in staff contentment and motivation as a result of their efforts.

Introduction policy

77% of companies state that they have an introduction policy. It is again noticeable that this applies mainly to the larger companies (those with over 50 employees). However, one cannot exclude the possibility that respondents interpreted the question on introduction policy in formal terms (having procedures, booklets for newcomers, and so on). Smaller companies and institutions probably organise the introduction of newcomers in a more informal way. However, the survey did not examine in greater detail what form the introduction policy takes.

The survey also asked what groups the introduction policy is directed at. The results show that companies develop an introduction policy for new members of staff, and, to a lesser extent, for particular groups such as agency staff, students doing short-term jobs and others.

A further question asked whether respondents directly consult others (subcontractors or maintenance firms) in their company or institution when contracts are being carried out. 49% of respondents said such consultation did take place. However, the results differ according to company size. Only 34% of companies with fewer than 50 employees carry out direct consultations, as compared with 55% in the group with over 200 employees and 61% in the group with over 500 employees. Here, too, it is quite possible that small companies operate more informally.

Information

The companies could also give their views on the availability of information on health, safety and the quality of working conditions. The results show that 81% think there is enough information, which comes mainly from safety services (75%), the Internet (66%), or publishers and subscriptions (64%). 40% mention sector organisations and insurance companies.

Small companies are less well informed than large ones. Internet and published information (through subscriptions) have less of a presence in small companies. This could have to do with availability, price and the degree to which such information is readily comprehensible.

This dissemination of information to small companies could be more efficient.

Training

Another prevention policy indicator is whether or not training courses are held. 82% of the respondents have held such a course in the last 5 years. However, training is less common in small companies

(those with fewer than 50 employees). It is not always straightforward in organisational terms for small companies to offer their staff appropriate courses. Safety is the main topic in which training is given (see Table 6).

Table 6 – Content of training courses

Topics	% respondents
Safety	73%
Health	42%
Ergonomics	41%
Undesirable behaviour at work	35%
Hygiene	29%
Environment	26%
Psychosocial stress	17%
Furnishing	10%

Companies that have designed a training programme are also more concerned about health, safety and quality of working conditions in day-to-day practice. They feel that efforts they make also result in more improvements. This applies in particular to occupational accidents, maintaining a good social climate, and employee satisfaction and motivation.

There is more consultation of staff in companies where training courses are held.

2.4 Taking new risks into account

The survey also looked at what constitutes the substance of an up-to-date, dynamic prevention policy that includes aspects such as taking account of new risks, developing a psychosocial stress policy, and initiatives designed to achieve an appropriate work-life balance.

Technological and organisational change

63% of respondents report that new risks have emerged in the course of the last five years. This item also confirmed that it is mainly the larger companies that identify such risks. New risks relate mainly to technology, the organisation of work, the changing working environment, human and social factors, and products. Companies with sufficient information more often identify new risks than those that lack adequate information. Companies that have held training courses over the last five years also identify new risks more frequently. The availability of information and the practice of holding training courses are thus important for in heightening awareness of new risks.

Psychosocial stress

The degree to which prevention policy takes relatively new issues into account can indicate how dynamic it is. Psychosocial stress is a relatively recent topic in prevention policy.

Of the companies, 19% have developed a policy within the framework of collective agreement 72,⁴ and 60% have developed a policy within the framework of the new legislation on undesirable behaviour at work. Again, it is apparent that this is mainly the case in larger companies.

Those companies that make use of external expertise appear more often the others to have a policy relating to the new legislation on undesirable behaviour at work.

⁴ Collective Labour Agreement No. 72 of 30 March 1999 on the prevention of work-related stress (Royal Decree of 21 June 1999, *BS Gazette* of 9 July 1999).

Work-life balance⁵

A way of fostering a good work-life balance is to take initiatives that make it possible to combine work and private life more satisfactorily. 35% of companies and institutions indicate that they take initiatives to make it easier to combine work and private life. These initiatives are commoner in larger companies and relate mainly to working hours (flexi-time, reduction of working hours, time credit, half-time work, and so on).

2.5 Expertise

The survey looked at how expertise in the area of prevention policy in companies and institutions has developed. The respondents were asked whether they think there has been any improvement in the way the prevention service operates, and whether they make use of external experts.

84% of the respondents make use of external experts. Companies with between 50 and 200 employees do so more frequently than companies with fewer than 50 employees.

51% of the respondents say they make use of external experts because the internal prevention service itself lacks sufficient areas of expertise. It is noteworthy that this reason is frequently cited in companies with more than 50 employees. 50% make use of external experts because they are legally obliged to do so. 86% of respondents think the prevention service in their company/institution has made progress in the last few years.

Respondents could indicate the type of experts they consult, ticking several answers if they so wished. In 75% of cases expertise is provided by the external services, consultants are mentioned in 25% of the cases, and insurance companies 24%. Medium-sized companies (between 50 and 500 employees) more often make use of external services than small companies. Large companies (>500 employees) make use of consultants with significantly greater frequency than small companies (< 50 employees).

52% of respondents use external expertise in health, 41% for expertise in ergonomics, 38% for expertise in psychosocial stress, and 33% for training purposes.

Small companies use external experts mainly to develop their general policy. Larger companies use external experts to work on particular areas or tasks. Larger companies are probably better aware of the exact areas in which they can use external experts.

Companies that use external experts identify new risks significantly more frequently. This applies particularly to new technological risks.

Companies that use external experts also report more frequent improvements as a result of their efforts to enhance prevention. This applies, for instance, to those that consult insurance firms; these respondents report more improvements with regard to occupational accidents. The same applies to the external services. Those that use the services of a consultant report improvements with regard to occupational accidents, image and productivity.

⁵ A number of questions were added in connection with the study conducted by the King Baudouin Foundation into the quality of working life (*Mijn werk mijn leven? Verslag van de task force "quality of working life" aan de Koning Boudewijnstichting. Ondernemers lichten hun initiatieven toe inzake de balans tussen professioneel en privé-leven en inzake welzijn op het werk.*).

3 Recommendations / conclusions

Prevent's aim in conducting this survey was to form an impression of prevention policy in Belgium, not by focusing on the "results" of prevention policy (in the form of figures on occupational accidents, absenteeism, occupational diseases, and so on), but by examining how companies and institutions perceive prevention policy. What do they consider important? What obstacles are there to policy development? Do efforts to improve prevention have a real impact? In this way, the survey seeks to supplement the more "traditional" statistical data.

An initial observation needs to be made on the composition of the survey group. Owing to the method used (a representative sample of Belgian companies that received a written invitation to take part in the survey), one cannot rule out the possibility that the companies and institutions taking part already had a particular interest in, and knowledge of, prevention policy. This may mean that the results are more positive than the reality.

The survey was focussed on the management staff of companies and institutions. In most companies and institutions, however, the questionnaire was – as was to be expected – passed on to the prevention officer.

In other words, the survey recorded the views of employers (and internal prevention experts). In future, it may be interesting to investigate the views of employees and external prevention experts in companies and institutions (external services, insurance companies, research institutions and training institutions). A panel of experts from different companies could then consider these findings.

Even though the small companies score lower in a number of areas than did the larger companies, it cannot be concluded from this that such companies (with fewer than 50 employees) are less interested in improving their prevention policy. This may have to do with the fact that the dissemination of information to small and medium-sized companies is less satisfactory. Information on prevention policy often fails to reach smaller companies adequately. Information is vital when it comes to taking action and developing a policy. Where new legislation, new risks, and important issues are not communicated, one cannot expect the necessary efforts to be made.

The nature of the questionnaire used may have influenced the results. The drawback of a relatively closed questionnaire is that it is not always clear why a given category of answers is not chosen. This may not necessarily imply that the company is not taking any action in that particular area. In smaller companies and institutions, in particular, it is quite possible that efforts are being made to improve health, safety and the quality of working conditions, but these may be less formal than is suggested by the questionnaire. There is, then, a need for awareness campaigns to inform small companies of the importance of a sound prevention policy.

There is clearly room for improvement as regards the introduction of particular groups (agency staff, students doing short-term jobs, new staff and other categories). Here, too, there is a need to increase awareness. It is important that these specific groups of employees be instructed properly and given sound information about the risks they run at work. Statistics show that these groups are particularly vulnerable. However, many companies and institutions consult their workforce formally or informally. 89% of companies and institutions state that they have bottom-up communication channels.

The ideas expressed about the development of prevention policy in smaller companies and for specific groups are linked to the problems and challenges mentioned by the respondents themselves. The companies take the view that there is a need to take measures to improve the structure and organisation of prevention policy, motivate and increase the awareness of everyone concerned within the company (managers and staff), and implement new legislation.

The survey also shows that it is important to have information and expertise and to organise training courses to keep prevention policy up-to-date and dynamic. Information and expertise play an important role in identifying new risks.

These concluding remarks indicate that this descriptive survey should be fleshed out in future. A number of topics could be examined in greater depth. For instance, how is the introduction of staff organised in actual practice? What is done with the information? How are training courses organised (in conventional fashion, or using new ways of learning)? Moreover, in-depth interviews in the companies concerned are needed in order to interpret descriptive information correctly. There is a need to look into cooperation with multiplier organisations or institutions for this purpose. Reflection together with the parties involved in actual practice may serve to complement the survey in a very interesting and useful way and can help clarify the story behind the figures and make it more meaningful.