

Summary

1. Introduction

Generally speaking, in the field of Dutch industrial relations the phenomenon of work-related stress is considered to be a major problem. Various studies at national and branch level have shown that there are large groups of employees with workload-related complaints. These complaints concern working at a high pace, reduced leisure time, increased fatigue and emotional exhaustion. A high level of work-related stress is also considered to be an important factor as regards the increased number of disability benefit claimants. As employees' representative the trade union is the ideal party to put forward work-related stress as a subject for discussion. On the other hand, this matter can be regarded as a new topic for the trade unions, which to some extent goes beyond their traditional sphere of activity, namely working conditions and legal status. The aim of this study is for trade unions to acquire more knowledge about prevention of work-related stress. The problem has been defined as follows: under which conditions can the trade unions contribute to the reduction of work-related stress?

2. Trade unions and influencing work-related stress - the theoretical framework

- trade union influence on the quality of work

In order to find a manageable research model we can turn for inspiration to the literature about trade unions and about influencing the quality of work. First of all, it is important to gain more insight into the processes of influence. In bargaining situations all parties have scope for negotiating. The concept of scope is defined as the various policy options that are negotiable within a bargaining situation. It is possible to speak of trade union influence if, after a trade union initiative has been tabled, management's preference shifts from policy option a) to policy option b). In this way, this influence is situated within the bargaining scope that negotiators have. Trade unions also have the opportunity to increase their scope by making use of means to exercise power. An increase in bargaining scope may result in a new policy option c), which becomes negotiable to the management. In addition to the process of influence, the attitude adopted by the trade union is also important. Four strategies are used by the trade unions to try to improve the quality of work:

- With the quantitative approach, aspects such as the quality of work are expressed as quantitative variables.
- According to the qualitative approach, the trade union seeks the causes of the problems and tries to provide

alternatives.

- The strategy of direct employee participation entails improving the measures that enable employees to exercise more influence on the basis of their job.
- Finally, the curative strategy, with which the trade union primarily aims at reducing the negative effects of poor quality of work.

In addition, various orientations prevail with regard to the structure of trade union work. If activist orientation dominates within the trade union approach, there will be a high degree of participation by key trade unionists ('kaderleden'), whereby the union official primarily plays an encouraging and implementing role. With a union official-oriented approach the trade union official will be the main driving force within the process. Furthermore, it is possible that the approach is characterised by staff orientation, whereby progress of the trade union initiative is monitored by the trade union expert.

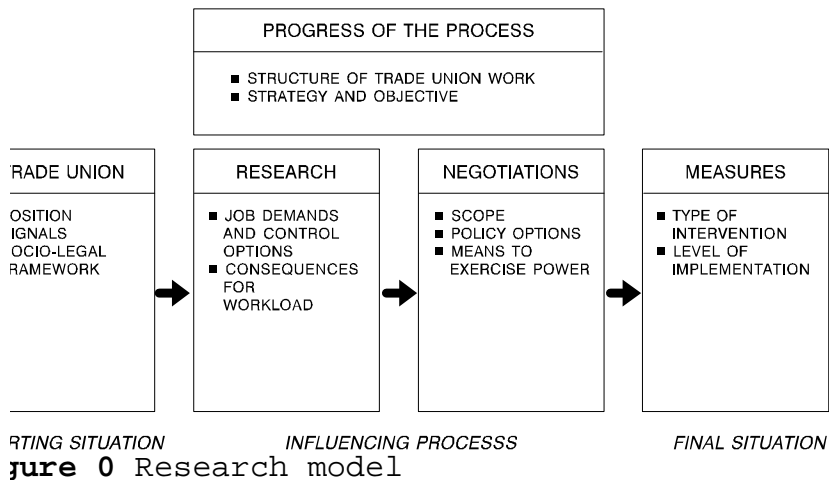
- excessive workload

One of the characteristics of paid work is that it has to be done in accordance with specific rules and standards. The concept of job demands is used to specify the entire package of demands made by the employer. It is possible to speak of excessive workload if the time available to carry out the job is shorter than the time needed. Excessive workload is described as a situation within which the employee cannot do the job within the allocated time, or can only do it with difficulty. Consequences of excessive workload might be: work-related stress, fatigue and reduced performance. 'Control options' are important tools to prevent the adverse consequences of work-related stress. These include all of the options an employee has at his disposal to intervene in the work situation and are mainly characteristics of a job. Some jobs provide more control options than others. The results of efforts to reduce or avoid work-related stress can be classified in various ways. This study uses a two-dimensional model. One dimension refers to the type of intervention in the process whereby work-related stress originates; the other dimension refers to the level of implementation of the intervention within the company or sector. Results are evaluated as less successful if the implementation is limited or the intervention is focused to a lesser extent on the origin of work-related stress.

- experience of the trade unions with regard to work-related stress

No scientific evaluations are known of trade union activities that focus on the reduction of workload. In the meantime documentation has become available describing trade union activities, which vary quite considerably. The qualitative approach, which focuses on research into the causes of work-related stress, proves most common. The quantitative approach

is opted for if the problem can be converted into figures or when there is a lack of funds, time or precedent to raise the matter in a more qualitative manner. When activities are started, the orientation is usually seldom focused on solutions to do with direct employee participation. During the negotiating phase, however, compromises can be made in this area with the employers. The curative approach is seldom the main objective of the trade union's approach, but is usually part of the services the trade union provides for its members. The diversity in themes that the trade unions put forward for discussion is striking. Nevertheless, the problems can be reduced to the twin concepts of job demands and control options.



- a research model

The theoretical deepening process results in a research model that is a useful tool in assessing trade union initiatives in detail. The model is shown in Figure I. First of all, the starting situation is shown (the moment when the trade union intends to concern itself with the problem of work-related stress). Subsequently, the trade union initiates activities and it is possible to speak of a process of influence. Eventually there will be a moment when stock is taken of the entire process (the final situation).

3. Research method

The research model is applied to eight trade union initiatives that took place in the services sector during the first half of the 1990s. The research uses both quantitative and qualitative methods.

- quantitative research

A survey on paper was distributed for seven out of the eight trade union initiatives. The aim of the survey was to build up

a picture of work-related stress within the company or sector. Basically, the same questionnaire was used for all of the surveys. This resulted in a database with a total of 12,382 questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed using the trade unions' infrastructure and it is therefore not possible to determine an accurate response percentage. Classification of the responses on a number of business and personal characteristics has shown that these reflect the variety of employees within the companies. The response is not representative of employees with flexible contracts or of companies with a low level of union membership. By means of factor and reliability analyses, groups of items can be determined within the database, which form the basis for the construction of seven scales. These scales offer the possibility of examining the link between opinions about work-related stress, influence, development, physical and mental strain in connection with the fatigue or health complaints experienced. The scales will be given a reference value and will be standardised. Value '0' of each scale is the average score on the scale of the group of employees experiencing little or no work-related stress; a value of '+1' means that the score on the scale is one standard deviation higher than the reference value.

- *qualitative research*

The process of influence by the trade union will be described by means of a multiple case study. In this context a case is a trade union initiative in the field of work-related stress within a company or branch. The qualitative study consists of a document analysis on the basis of the trade union file, secondary analysis of the research material in the field of work-related stress, and interviews with the trade union official, key trade unionists and management. The aim of qualitative research is to draw up a specification in which the concepts of the research model are characterised. In gathering together and depicting research material, the scientific requirements in the field of construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability are being met. Table I gives an overview of the various cases.

| para. | company (c) or branch (b) | total workforce | |
|-------|------------------------------|-----------------|-----------|
| 6.1 | retail group (c) | 20,000 | employees |
| 6.2 | bank (c) | 20,000 | employees |
| 6.3 | department store fashion (c) | 2,500 | employees |
| 6.4 | pharmacy sector (b) | 10,000 | employees |
| 6.5 | publishing sector (b) | 7,500 | employees |
| 6.6 | tourist association (c) | 2,750 | employees |
| 6.7 | audio-visual sector (b) | 6,000 | employees |
| 6.8 | department stores (c) | 13,000 | employees |

Table 0 The eight case descriptions

4. Industrial relations within the services sector

All trade union initiatives surveyed are taking place in the commercial services sector. Within a few decades this previously quite protected, organised and small-scale sector has undergone a substantial metamorphosis. Today, the services sector is characterised by dynamism, turbulence and focus on the European and global markets. In addition to enhanced flexibility in various areas, the application of information and communication technologies has an impact on the employees' job demands. Another specific element in this sector is contact with clients, which requires particular communication and improvisation skills.

However, within the services sector not everything should be placed in the same category. A distinction can be made between various segments. These segments can be categorised by the extent of interaction and personalised approach towards the client and by labour-intensive and capital-intensive work processes, which vary substantially per segment. Furthermore, various combinations of circumstances could result in work-related stress. The trade unions are characterised by a low level of union membership and a limited tradition of action. Nevertheless, a trade union can be successful within the services sector. This success can be explained by the fact that the scope in specific bargaining situations has been utilised and alternative resources such as publicity have been used to exercise power.

5. Work-related stress and fatigue in the services sector

Using the statistical material it will be possible to gain more insight into aspects in the services sector that are linked with work-related stress and fatigue.

- objective characteristics of employees and jobs

All along the line, women experience more work-related stress than men do, but there is only a slight difference. Young employees in jobs of a lower level and older employees at a higher level experience less stress. In addition, the first group has more complaints with regard to lack of influence and development and in the area of physical strain. Higher-level positions report more complaints with regard to mental strain at work. Age proves the most decisive factor for fatigue-related complaints. There are few differences between employees with a full-time and those with a part-time job when it comes to how work-related stress is experienced, but there are differences with regard to the level of fatigue. This is attributed to longer exposure and a shorter recovery period.

- patterns in how fatigue originates

Through multiple regression it is calculated which variables contribute to a (statistical) prediction of how signs of fatigue originate. The analysis is conducted for higher-level jobs, lower-level jobs and a group of homogenous jobs (pharmacist's assistants). It was found that work-related stress and control options are the most important predictive elements where fatigue in the services sector is concerned. With regard to higher-level jobs, mental strain is also a relatively important predictive factor and for lower-level jobs the same applies to physical strain in the workplace.

- hazardous professions in the services sector

It is possible to build up a picture of risks for about thirty professions. None of these professions scores extremely low with regard to the level of work-related stress. Some professions, however, have a relatively lower level of work-related stress than others, but they may have other unfavourable elements such as a combination of physical and mental strain. In addition, there are professions with a higher risk of fatigue; without exception, these are professions that are ranked as 'jobs of a lower level'.

6. Eight case descriptions

In each case description, the position of the trade union is analysed and the problems associated with work-related stress are described. This summary primarily focuses on the process of negotiations between the trade union and employer and on any results that are achieved.

- *the retail group*

Of the various cases, the trade union initiative in the retail group lasted longest (from 1991 to 1996). Shortly after the presentation of the results of the trade union survey a collective agreement was concluded including an arrangement covering work-related stress. In the months that followed a joint working group was set up. Key trade unionists felt that the dynamics of this working group were somewhat slow; nevertheless, twelve months later the employer produced an overview of changes that had been introduced. The changes related to extension of the budget of hours, ergonomic improvements and assistance by an institution specialising in working conditions. The trade union initiated a follow-up study to examine whether the activities actually contributed to a reduction in workload. In the popular report on the second survey it was concluded that improvements were noticeable. These improvements in particular related to planning and organisation of the work and communication within the business units. In the years that followed, the joint working group worked on the development of a 'work-related stress instrument for department stores'. This instrument was realised in 1996 and the trade union considers it to be the pinnacle of its achievements.

- *the bank*

The trade union's research into the bank was primarily an initiative of the trade union's staff. The research results were presented during various meetings, but no real negotiations took place about workload between the employer and trade union. During the period in question, the bank was involved in two substantial mergers as a result of which a reduction in workload was not one of the main priorities of the trade union. The trade union's research report, however, did play a role in the further development of the company's personnel policy.

- *the department store fashion*

With regard to the department store fashion, the trade union initiative focused on the policy on older workers. The aim was to develop personnel policy as an alternative for the - in the eyes of the trade union - reprehensible 'arrangement' for older workers the companies applied. After the purely qualitative research carried out by the trade union, most proposals were not negotiated with the employer. Proposals regarding rotas, lifting and the general status of older workers were adopted by the company. No agreement was reached about one trade union proposal, viz. the introduction of flexible early retirement. This matter escalated when the company experienced some financial problems and wanted to reintroduce the 'arrangement' for older workers. Despite this difference of opinion, both parties subsequently agreed on a successful trade union initiative.

- *the pharmacy sector*

Right from the start, the trade union initiative in the pharmacy sector was an activity of the jointly organised company social fund within the sector. The reason for action was the structural shortage of pharmacist's assistants. Research resulted in the recommendation to pursue more professional management in the pharmacy sector. Following the research, various activities were initiated within the sector with regard to information to pharmacies and support of assistants. The subject of work-related stress, however, was no longer a prominent item on the agenda of employers and employees alike. This was because, due to government measures, turnover and workload unexpectedly dropped substantially within the pharmacy sector. The initiative also gave cause for more attention to be focused on professionalisation of management and the introduction of staff meetings.

- *the publishing sector*

From beginning to end, in the case description of the publishing sector, employers had serious doubts about the phenomenon of work-related stress and the trade union's approach. The nature of work-related stress also differed slightly from other cases. Employees had control options to split up and carry out their work, but were still confronted with firm deadlines. The results were tabled during the collective bargaining talks. In the protocol, which was an appendix to the collective agreement, the intention was stated that 'work-related stress should be avoided'. The various parties did not attach much importance to realising this agreement. Nevertheless, according to key trade unionists the result of this initiative was that the issue of work-related stress became the subject of discussion more within the sector.

- *the tourist association*

The trade union initiative for the tourist association was occasioned by complaints about work-related stress within the techno-centres unit, which also had a hard time from a commercial point of view. The trade union's study of work-related stress also had to serve as an argument towards management for the introduction of a four-day working week. The study shows that there are major differences between the very diverse business units of the organisation. Within the 'Wegenwacht' unit (Dutch motoring organisation), which has the largest number of members, work-related stress occurred less often than elsewhere within the organisation, but employees had to cope with a high level of physical and mental strain. Moreover, the key trade unionists in the 'Wegenwacht' do not expect much from the four-day working week agreed by the trade union official. The results of collective bargaining were voted down. The subsequent deadlock in negotiations demanded so much energy on the part of the trade union that the subject of work-related stress was no longer a prominent item on the

agenda. However, measures that are relevant to work-related stress were introduced without making the relevance explicit. Within one of the business units, for example, the number of temporary workers was reduced and employees within another unit were given more say with regard to the rota.

- the audio-visual sector

The activities aimed at reducing work-related stress within the audio-visual sector were in two phases. During the first phase the trade union controlled the initiatives. Research was conducted and during the presentation of the results the employers, the company medical officer and the media within the sector demanded more attention for the problems associated with work-related stress.

After the presentation it still took another twelve months before negotiations about a new collective agreement were initiated in this sector. When two union officials left and a group of members branched off, the trade union went through some turbulent times. During this second phase the trade union no longer had overriding control. There were some local initiatives. Within one broadcasting company that was confronted with an increase in absenteeism through sickness, the human resources department and management once more carried out the trade union's study whereby a lot of attention was paid to problems associated with work-related stress. Within the sector of facilities and services for broadcasting companies the works council presented a new study looking at the hours actually worked. Due to the introduction of the Working Hours Act, the regime of working hours and breaks within the sector was examined more closely.

- department stores

Within this sector, research into work-related stress was linked with the introduction of a four-day working week. Two surveys were conducted, i.e. before and after the introduction of the four-day working week. When the first survey took place, relations between the trade union and management were a bit strained. Subsequently, the parties reached agreement with regard to the survey method and presentation of the questions. The second survey showed that the four-day working week did not lead to a higher workload. Nevertheless, following the second survey the various parties considered the work situation within the Group worrisome. Management decided on an approach focused on several elements. A communication working group was set up. Staff meetings were initiated throughout the company. In addition, job profiles within the sales organisation were subjected to closer scrutiny. The results of this approach, which focused on job structure, were assessed in a subtle way. All those involved were very positive-minded about the improvement in communications and the introduction of staff meetings.

7. Conclusions

None of the eight trade union initiatives described was either a complete failure or a complete success, although some cases were more successful than others. In the less successful cases the trade union 'only' succeeded in demanding attention for the issue of work-related stress. In the more successful ones, the company also has an approach focused on a reduction of workload, which is apparent in the workplace. In addition, there is an 'intermediate category': in those cases where the results of the project entail agreement between the social partners to reduce work-related stress without developing a plan of action. Concepts from the research model were compared with regard to the cases that were less or more successful. In addition, the combination of factors that contribute to the success of the cases was examined. In this way, it was possible to specify less and more important conditions. Important conditions are:

- The fact that in the past the trade union was willing and able to use means to exercise power increases the employer's willingness to take the initiative seriously.
- For the trade union it will be more difficult to provide an alternative if the problems with regard to work-related stress are complex, particularly when certain jobs already have many control options.
- If the trade union succeeds in pointing out the significant impact a high workload will have on operational management (which also becomes apparent outside the company, i.e. loss of sales, staff shortages or stagnation of a process of change), priorities will change at the negotiating table.

Other matters of importance are collective bargaining at company level and involvement of the employer in research into work-related stress. If the trade union can point out that there is a relatively high level of work-related stress and fatigue, this will contribute to the willingness to take measures. Another influential factor is a favourable commercial situation. These conditions will increase the scope at the negotiating table to take measures in order to avoid work-related stress. Furthermore, the internal trade union organisation is a point of special interest. Trade union initiatives in the field of work-related stress usually take many years, require a lot of patience and the ability to handle unforeseen external circumstances. Project management is of importance for a successful policy. It is also desirable that the trade union official takes the lead in the activities. Furthermore, it would be a good idea to have a well-balanced supporting group of employees and no internal problems within the trade union itself.