

Occupational safety in state workplaces

Compensation paid for occupational accidents and illnesses in state administration totalled 26,163,000 euros in 2008. The number of occupational accidents declined up to 2003 but has shown a slight rise since then.

In state workplaces the risk of an accident is generally not higher than average, but there are some tasks in which this risk can increase at times. Owing to changes in society some tasks have become more hazardous and threats to occupational safety exist. The state should be an exemplary employer that also manages occupational safety well.

The main question in the audit was whether occupational safety has been arranged properly in state administration. The question was approached from the perspective of management, measuring occupational safety and supervising working methods. The audit also examined occupational safety action programmes to see if they were practicable and up to date. Problems concerning shared workplaces received attention as well.

It has been estimated that 90 per cent of occupational accidents are due to unsafe work practices and only 10 per cent to unsafe working conditions. Although the legislative framework is in order, the number of accidents in state workplaces is rather high. From the viewpoint of public finances it has been necessary to determine whether agencies have taken proper and adequate measures to prevent accidents and have strived to develop their own occupational safety culture. An accident is a complex phenomenon: it is not a single event but a series of events. Keeping this in mind has a great deal of significance in preventing accidents.

The audit's target group was selected from state administration as a whole, with emphasis on working agencies and organisations whose tasks largely involve customer service. Data were collected from occupational safety managers and health and safety represen-

tatives with the help of a written questionnaire, supported by personal interviews.

On the basis of the audit, occupational safety in state administration has been arranged properly for the most part. Inadequate supervision and insufficient information were viewed as shortcomings. In some agencies occupational safety matters remained isolated from other activities. In some agencies management was aware of its responsibility for occupational safety, but information concerning accidents or dangerous situations did not always reach superiors and the upper level of the organisation. Many agencies had neglected their obligation to inform the State Treasury of changes in occupational safety managers and health and safety representatives.

In many state organisations occupational safety matters were in good order. There were some organisations, however, in which training and competence in occupational safety matters were lacking and there was a need for more supervision and support. Overall responsibility for occupational safety matters in state administration should be improved. At the same time information and guidance concerning occupational safety matters should be developed.

The assessment of occupational safety risks in state workplaces was somewhat fragmented, and the guidance received from ministries was considered insufficient. Risk assessment was often of a one-time nature and not a continuous process. The collection of information on safety deviations varied. The Border Guard had the most advanced system for collecting information on safety deviations, and this information was also utilised in training and supervision.

There are many fields in which personnel have experienced violence or the threat of violence in the course of work. In these fields personnel should be offered more training and practice to help them avoid and deal with threatening situations. Employees' knowledge concerning aggression, its causes, how to respond to aggression and what matters must be considered in dealing with the situation should be increased. Workplaces should also have appropriate alarm systems. Difficult and threatening customer situations were regarded as a challenge.

The audit indicated that in workplaces where some employees work for another organisation besides the main employer, i.e. shared workplaces, information about these employees' occupa-

tional safety was limited. Problems had been noted, however, and many workplaces had taken measures to correct the situation or had at least planned such measures. State organisations should bear responsibility for shared workplaces and stay informed concerning the occupational safety of all personnel.

Employees did not take advantage of occupational safety training mainly because they were not aware of it or did not have time. Furthermore the need for training was not always recognised. Respondents felt that occupational safety managers in particular needed more training, along with new members of occupational safety organisations. Attention was also drawn to the need to arrange training for line managers and increase their knowledge of occupational safety. Training for occupational safety personnel should be developed so that, after learning the fundamentals, personnel can participate in further training, which could be online.

Sharing information concerning occupational safety in one's own field and discussing occupational safety with related fields were considered beneficial. It would be good to increase possibilities for cooperation and peer learning and for agencies to make use of one another's experiences. There could also be more cooperation between occupational safety management and occupational health care.

Agencies should pay more attention to managing occupational safety and make it an integral part of general management. Occupational safety must be viewed as part of general safety.