

The Netherlands: report on emerging themes from the interviews

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Quality is an innovative, quantitative and qualitative research project that aims to examine how, in an era of major change, European citizens living in different national welfare state regimes evaluate the quality of their lives. The project will analyse international comparative data on the social well-being of citizens and collect new data on social quality in European workplaces in eight strategically selected partner countries: UK, Finland, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Hungary and a candidate country for EU enlargement, Bulgaria.

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The Netherlands: Telecom company

Introduction

Data collection for WP4 was conducted in the Dutch division of a telecom company. The company belongs to an American company with subsidiaries in various European countries. The company sells cable television, internet and phone services. The latest product is digital television. The company has several locations across the country and employs circa 2000 people of which 30% are female. About 20% of workers have a temporary contract or are employed by an employment agency.

218 employees filled in the questionnaire (response rate of 44%) and 13 employees were interviewed for WP4. Those who filled in the questionnaire were asked to participate in the follow up study on healthy organizations. Of those who were willing to participate we selected those who could be present at the date set for the innovation group and who worked at different locations and positions in the company. The participants work in sales, marketing and services, the core activities of the company. One respondent works in a staff department (facilities) and is a member of the work council. We had no difficulties finding enough people to participate only managers were more difficult to find. Within the group there are two managers (one middle manager and one higher-middle manager) and one supervisor (all men). The male respondents are engineers or managers; the female respondents have positions as call center agent, assistant shop manager or administration (see Table 1).

Table 1 Respondent open interviews, job position, sex and years of service

Job position	Sex	Years of service
Quality Auditor	male	12
Business analyst	male	10
Facilities employee and member of the work council	female	22
Field service engineer	male	2
Call center agent	female	5
Test engineer digital television	male	27
Supervisor Technical Services	male	6
Assistant shop manager	female	1
Network Administrator	male	14
Customer Communications Representative	male	3
Engineering & Implementation manager	male	18
Customer administration clerk	female	8
Sales manager	male	10

The company is highly segregated: male dominated in technical professions and an overrepresentation of women at the call centers and administrative departments. Many of the participants have been working for the company for a long time and have witnessed a large number of organizational changes.

Background

Respondents characterize the company as dynamic and hectic organization to work for. The organizational culture is described as performance driven, dynamic, hectic, open and informal. Reorganizations happen frequently. But also policy changes are very common. A sales manager note: *'priorities change quickly; planning is not our strongest quality. So I tell new people that they need to be flexible and to be able to deal with change'*. The company operates on a highly competitive market. It wants to be on the frontline with new technology and bring the newest possibilities and products to the mass market. Their latest product is digital television and they follow a 'push' strategy to put it on the market in order to get a large market share. In the past, the company struggled with a bad image of low quality service. With several projects and reorganizations they have tried to improve the service quality. The respondents note that the quality and as a result the reputation of the company has improved. Before they would hesitate to tell people at a party they work for the company because they feared to hear angry stories about but low service quality. This year the company has introduced a new logo, which also aims to reflect a more customer friendly image.

In the past 7 years, there have been two major company wide reorganizations. In the beginning of the century, there has been a reorganization in which a large number of people were laid-off. A few years later, the company switched from a regional structure to a centralized organizational structure. This latter reorganization was aimed to increase efficiency, to decrease work pressure and to increase uniformity of services. It entailed a higher degree of task division. Departments no longer offered different services to clients but focused on one or a limited number of tasks. In addition to these two company wide reorganizations, reorganizations on department level happen frequently.

"In the past we had problems with the organizational structure. The last 12 months we had 6 or 7 reorganizations on department level" (Business analyst, male)

Recently - in the last few months – targets are increased and output monitoring is intensified.

"Last year we had a target of 115 as a sales worker; this was increased to 135 and now to 200. In one year time it is very high, this motivates people to sell more but it can also de-motivate people." (Ass. shop manager, female)

The sharp increase of targets leads to work pressure. The company increasingly manages on output figures (i.e. number of sales, number of solved technical failures, network problems, number of phone calls, etc.). Hence, there is not only a focus on task division but also an emphasize on targets and standardization of work. A reason mentioned for the higher targets is the need for costs reduction because there are fewer customers for digital television than expected. Some respondents expect reorganizations in the near future in which people will be laid-off; others note that employees who leave the company are not replaced.

Emergenced themes and challenges

Survival on a highly competitive market

All respondents note that survival on a highly competitive market is a crucial challenge for the organization. This is seen as both an economic and an innovative challenge. Respondents raise different issues in relation to this theme, for instance:

- The strategic decision to start constructing glass fiber networks as competitors do;
- More attention for the quality of services;
- Not only pay attention to increasing the market share of new products but also to maintain the companies market position in those areas they have been strong but in which they face a growing competition;
- To sell a larger packet of services to customers.

Work intensification

Work pressure is noted by all respondents as a major issue and has major consequences for the quality of work in particular in combination with increasing task division. Respondents note several causes for the increase in work pressure: higher targets and performance pressure has increased work pressure but also frequent reorganizations. Reorganizations that involve relocation of workers increases turnover rates because not everybody is able to fit relocation with their work/life balance. People who stay see experienced co-workers leave replaced by new colleagues who need to be trained, raising feelings of work pressure. In addition, the company has become leaner over the years. As a result of growing work pressure, people feel less satisfaction in their work and have the feeling that they cannot do their work well. In some cases people get de-motivated because they feel unable to reach targets set. As a result, commitment decreases and people feel less in control of their work.

“Yes, you work a bit hastier, for instance, if you are working for a costumer and you replace something and things seem good after that, you assume the problem is solved. You are not going to check more. Before, you would check whether there might be something else too, but now you don’t have the time to do that. You move on. (...) for me personally, it is not nice to solve a male function that way. You feel much more satisfaction if you have the feeling you solved it well” (Field service engineer, male)

To decrease and improve transfer moments within the work processes

Task division has increased in the last few years, as a result the transfer moments in work processes have increased and workers become more dependent on the input of co-workers and other departments to finish their work. Many workers no longer do the whole work process by themselves but only a part of it. Because of work intensification and higher targets, dependency relations are under pressure. In order to meet the higher targets people tend to prioritize their own work before doing things for other departments.

“It is not that people do not want to work together that is not what I am saying. You first want to finish your own work and then you check whether you can help someone else. There is much more self-interest now a days” (Network administrator, male).

Internal communication

In relation with the previous theme, respondents note that the internal communication between departments needs to be improved. The company not only needs to monitor the output but also needs to consider the content of the work. Communication between workers and management needs to be improved in order for management to see unintended effects of current policies and problems people face in the daily practice of their work. One respondent also notes that the communication between different IT systems needs to be improved in order to work more efficiently. Communication has gained importance because of the rising task division and transfer moments.

Demanding customers

Customers becoming more and more demanding and critical and demand good services. In addition, the number of dual-earner families has increased in the Netherlands and more and more customers are no longer at home during normal working hours. Consequently, workers increasingly have to work atypical working hours; in the evening or the weekend. The company does pay attention to demanding customers but many respondents (in particular those directly dealing with customers) feel that the quality of services is under pressure as result of increasing work pressure.

Summarizing, a central challenge seems to be the balance between sales/targets and quality of services (services and targets). The quality of work is clearly affected by work pressure and strong task division, however, the degree to which this is the case varies between departments and job positions. Reorganization causes unrest and job insecurity, although this varies greatly between departments. Job insecurity is not always about losing your job but also how your job will look like in the near future or if your department will be moved to another location. Also the degree to which workers faces performance pressure and monitoring differs between departments. In particular workers with direct customer contact (call center agents, service engineers, and sales workers) are confronted with output management, monitoring and standardization of work. On the other hand the company pays well and working conditions are good, a reason for people to stay despite the high level of work pressure.

“Working conditions are well taken care off; financially it is a good place to be” (field service engineer, male)

Examples of task division and decreasing work autonomy

Service engineers have a track system in the car, so the supervisor knows exactly where the engineers are at any moment in time. They need to solve a certain number of problems per day. They need to do the standard problems while things out of the ordinary are left to a senior engineer: a ‘trouble shooter’ for each region. Consequently, the job becomes less interesting and challenging.

Call center agents work according to a certain script and time frame for each call, which they have to follow very strictly. When they use standard sentences slightly different, they do not get a 100% score. They are closely monitored and have to keep to rules what they can and cannot do. Sometimes they cannot help a customer because it is out of their scope of authority and they have to refer the customer to someone else. In some cases they feel frustrated to do so because if they were allowed they could solve the problem.

Sales workers experience a tension between reaching the target set for the number of sales and time left for the quality of service. Although quality of service is highly valued and it feels good when costumers are satisfied, at the end of the day they are evaluated based on the number of sales.

Future/anticipated challenges

Many of the current challenges are also challenges for the future. However, respondents did mention some additional future challenges.

Take over's and mergers

A lot of cable companies have already merged. Hence, some respondents expect that this will happen to their company as well. However, they are not sure of the consequences of a merger or take over. Some emphasize negative consequences, like the lay-off of people because of overlap. Others envision new career opportunities.

Outsourcing

To save cost outsourcing of certain jobs is understandable, however, respondents worry about the impact it has on the quality of services and the commitment of outsourced workers.

Gender differences

It is a highly segregated company, in particular technical positions departments are extremely male dominated. In those departments, women are only found in staff positions. In marketing and sales departments there is a more mixed workforce but very few women are part of the management team.

What can the organization do to meet current and future challenges?

Some respondents offered some suggestions the company good use as a way to meet current and future challenges:

- Setting realistic targets, not only punish people when they do not reach their target but also reward people when they do;
- Decrease and improve transfer moments by looking at work processes in detail;
- Improve the internal communication between departments and between management and workers;
- Provide workers with more responsibility and trust.