

# **Self-directed workteams in facility management**

## **Does it pay?**

### ***Assessment of the implementation of self-directed workteams with the Ministry of Economic Affairs***

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## Summary

One of the management theories considers an organisation as a sociotechnical system. Such a system can cope with the influences of the environment by adapting both the technical system of the organisation (the "hardware") and the social system (the human side or "software"). Empowering people is one of the important tools to make better use of the potential of the employees. To enhance the potential of the individuals the synergy of the group should be used. Redesign of business processes usually results in the forming of teams too. The workforce develops from a hierarchical organisation into an organisation in which teamwork is used to improve quality and to motivate the employees. The results are no longer the responsibility of the line manager only but of the complete team, a so-called self-directed workteam.

These principles are usually applied to production companies and less to non-profit or service organisations. At the facility management organisation of the Ministry of Economic Affairs (a bureaucratic, non profit service organisation) a start has been made a few years ago to introduce the principle of self-directed workteams. These teams have been introduced in the four sections of the Archives department. Some 30% of the 150 employees of the facility management organisation work in this department.

The implementation process of self-directed workteams is well documented in the literature as are the success stories of introducing these teams.

However the literature does not give tools to monitor the implementation process and to steer or evaluate it. These tools had to be developed.

From the literature three evaluation methods have been deducted. The first method charts the responsibilities for operational tasks and management tasks. The second method measures the perception of autonomy based on the theory identifying four phases in team development. The third method evaluates the autonomy of the individual job extended towards teams. The literature on these three points of view on team development have been successfully used to create a questionnaire with which the status of the teams can be measured. The three methods confirm each other.

The results of the employee survey show that the various groups are half way the process of developing from a group of individuals to an autonomous group or self-directed workteam. There are differences between the various teams but in general the autonomy for operational tasks is greater than the autonomy for management tasks. To stimulate the autonomy of the groups emphasis has to be placed on the autonomy for management tasks.

The influence of the section head with the Archives department is still very large. Admittedly certain management tasks cannot be

delegated to the team as the responsibility for these tasks is formally determined and placed with the management.

One of the aims of introducing self-directed workteams is to increase customer satisfaction. The level of customer satisfaction can be measured. Three surveys have been held over the past year covering the customers of three sections (so excluding the Research & Development section) of the Archives department. The customer satisfaction is high: 65% of the respondents think the service of the Archives department to be at least 'good'. The customers see little change in service level compared to a year ago, but they indicate that the Archives department has to concentrate on information technology to improve the service level in future.

Literature shows that cost savings have resulted from using self-directed workteams. In government organisations cost figures for individual services or products are virtually impossible to obtain. Knowledge of cost is therefore limited to personnel reductions, which can probably partly be attributed to the introduction of self-directed workteams.

Measuring motivation is very hard. The study did not aim at developing measures to assess employee motivation. The questionnaire contained general questions to obtain an impression of the attitude of the employees towards the organisation and items such as reward and salary system. The employees appear to be



rather cynical about the organisation. The salary level is termed in general satisfactory, which was to be expected given the salary group of the people in question. The relation to superiors or group members is not characterised by a classical attitude of respect for vested authority. Especially the results of these general questions indicate that considerable effort will be required to improve the motivation of the employees.

Self-directed workteams require a change in management style and the effect of empowering people is usually also the opportunity to reduce the number of management levels. The total facility management organisation is at present reorganising as is the Archives department as such. The result will be a reduction in management levels placing responsibilities lower down in the organisation. This is not necessarily a direct result from the introduction of self-directed workteams. One of the remarkable results of the survey was though that the management of the Archives department considers the process of introducing self-directed workteams in their organisation to have progressed further than the employees think. Management has to be aware of this discrepancy in opinion.

Self-directed workteams can be used in non profit service organisations. Application of the principle in other parts of the facility management organisation is worthwhile investigating.

Investing in education and information of the employees will play a crucial role. Working in self-directed workteams can influence customer satisfaction but regular customer surveys will be necessary to quantify this effect. This report can serve as the base case.

In an environment where cost control becomes increasingly important in view of the budget restrictions, objective indicators e.g. for cost figures, have to be developed to measure the efficiency and effectiveness of the organisation. As facility management organisations in all ministries face the same problems co-operation and exchange of ideas, as initiated, will be beneficial.