

State's Activities in Reducing the Number of Work Accidents

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Summary

The National Audit Office audited the activities of the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Labour Inspectorate in ensuring a safe work environment in order to ascertain whether the state has done everything necessary to improve the work environment and avoid work accidents. For this purpose, the National Audit Office checked whether the state has a clear overview of work accidents and occupational illnesses and whether it has an action plan for making the work environment safe; and whether supervision over compliance with requirements and precepts regarding the work environment ensures the detection and prevention of shortcomings.

Shortcomings in work environment work are one of the main reasons for occupational illnesses, work accidents and work-related diseases. Each life lost and each sick day costs the state tens of millions of kroons, but the costs to society are even bigger. According to the Labour Inspectorate, work accidents cost the state 48.7 million kroons in 2004, which cost society almost 600 million kroons. It is likely that these costs have increased over the last few years.

There are more than 3000 work accidents and about 100 occupational illnesses registered in Estonia each year. On first viewing, the data indicates that the situation is good compared to the EU average, but such a conclusion is wrong because the data is incomplete. Eurostat's data gives quite a different picture of the work environment in Estonia. According to Eurostat, there were more than twice as many fatal work accidents per 100,000 workers in 2004 than in the old member states of the EU. As concealing fatal work accidents is nearly impossible, such statistics may be considered the most accurate indicator to compare the work environment in Estonia to that in other states in Europe.

As a result of the audit, the National Audit Office has come to the conclusion that the state has not done everything necessary to ensure a safe work environment for the people in Estonia. Such a conclusion was based on the following observations:

- **The state has no reliable data regarding work accidents and occupational illnesses.** The number of registered accidents and patients is known but various analyses show that these cannot be considered accurate. The system employed in the state does not motivate employers or employees to register work accidents and occupational illnesses. The clumsy process of diagnosing occupational illnesses hinders the identification of any possible occupational illnesses.
- **The state does not have a common strategy for making the work environment safe.** The Ministry of Social Affairs is currently working on a strategy regulating employment. It should cover employment, work relations and the work environment and be ready by the end of 2007. Although the law prescribes that the Working Environment Council should convene to involve social partners, it did not meet at all in 2006.
- **There is no work accident and occupational illness insurance.** A system of work accident and occupational illness insurance has been planned for more than ten years, but nothing has come of them. A working insurance system would force social partners to make the work environment safer and to register work accidents and occupational illnesses.
- **Prevention has not received adequate attention so far.** Prevention is treated primarily as part of surveillance. There has not been enough systematic training, counselling and provision of information. Vocational education does not provide students with adequate knowledge of occupational safety and adequate skills to protect themselves against such hazards. There are few training events conducted for work environment specialists and the quality of training provided for work environment representatives and members of the Working Environment Council is not checked.
- **Information for planning surveillance is inadequate.** In order to plan surveillance activities, the Labour Inspectorate provides local inspectorates with general guidelines and the Ministry considers it necessary to have an overview of the work environment in all fields of activity. Unfortunately, the prerequisites for better planning of surveillance are statistics on work accidents and (occupational) illnesses and a thorough analysis of the results of the surveillance activities, which are all inadequate at the moment.
- **Compliance with the precepts made during surveillance is often not checked.** Information from employers that precepts have been followed is often considered enough, although the reality may be that the work environment has not been made safer. It has not been

determined in which cases compliance with precepts needs to be checked on site. As compliance is only checked on site in the case of a small number of precepts, the sanctions for failure to comply with a precept are applied rarely.

Main suggestions for

the Minister of Social Affairs

- In cooperation with social partners, to devise an up-to-date work environment policy which describes a clear division of work, targets with due dates and the resources necessary for achieving these. This document could improve the development of a safe work environment and effective prevention and the Labour Inspectorate could plan its surveillance strategy and activities better.
- To consider assigning the task of work environment training to the Labour Inspectorate, which is the most experienced institution in the field, e.g. by forming a training unit in the Inspectorate, and to initiate amendment of the statutes of the Inspectorate. In the planned occupational health and safety strategy, to discuss the issues of youth training and prevention of work accidents.

Minister of Social Affairs in cooperation with the Minister of Finance

- To initiate the implementation of work accident and occupational illness insurance. The insurance would have a positive effect on the work environment and improve measures meant to ensure occupational safety.

Director General of the Labour Inspectorate

- To prescribe in which cases and how compliance with precepts needs to be checked on site in order to ensure elimination of shortcomings that have been identified and a safe work environment.

The Minister of Social Affairs stated in her response that the Ministry of Social Affairs is aware of the importance of a safe work environment in achieving a long-lasting efficient working life which provides satisfaction for all parties. The Ministry has begun to devise an employment strategy, which should be completed by the end of 2007.

As the Minister considers it necessary to make national surveillance more efficient, an organisational analysis of the Labour Inspectorate has been launched in order to make the structure of the Inspectorate region-based, which should ensure greater flexibility in the division of work and efficient functioning. The Minister has agreed to establish clear and unambiguous principles for checking and assessing compliance with surveillance decisions.

For the purpose of increasing employers' awareness, it is planned to harmonise the occupational health and safety training programme, which is compulsory for employers, and to conduct comprehensive basic and in-service training events for work environment representatives and specialists from 2008.

The acting Director General of the Labour Inspectorate agreed to all of the suggestions of the National Audit Office.

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