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How the social partners in trade and industry are tackling low literacy

Low Literacy Agreement

The social partners put the issue of low literacy on their agenda in 2007, in part at the request of Her Royal Highness Princess Laurentien, chairwoman of the Reading & Writing Foundation [*Stichting Lezen & Schrijven*]. One in ten adults in the Netherlands has trouble reading, writing and doing sums, making it more difficult to function well in society or perform satisfactorily at work. Approximately one in fifteen employees has so much trouble reading and writing that it is impossible to read an employee magazine, a timetable, or safety instructions. Low literacy can lead to inefficiency, lower productivity, higher rates of absenteeism, and increased safety risks. For all these reasons, it is essential for people to enter the labour market with sufficient literacy skills. In addition, it is also important for low-literate workers to reduce their language deficiency.

In September 2007, the employers' association and trade unions united in the Labour Foundation [*Stichting van de Arbeid*] signed an agreement with the Dutch government on a long-term approach to low literacy in society and in trade and industry. Government is responsible for low-literate individuals who are not in employment, whereas the social partners and government share responsibility for eliminating low literacy in the working population. In their Low Literacy Agreement,¹ the social partners and government have undertaken to reduce the number of low-literate workers by 60 per cent in an eight-year period, from 420,000 in 2007 to 168,000 in 2015.

Action taken by the social partners at national level

The social partners at national level are working in various ways to achieve the targets set out in the Agreement. One method is to act through the Labour Foundation in making recommendations to employers and trade unions that are negotiating collective agreements. The Labour Foundation has, for example, called on such parties to agree on a strategy for tackling or reducing low literacy in their sector or enterprise (January 2008). The Labour Foundation also recommended (in July 2008) that money from the Education & Training [*O&O, Opleidings- en Ontwikkelingsfondsen*] and sector-specific funds should be used to combat low literacy by encouraging low-literate employees to improve their language and mathematics skills through training and by covering any wage bill for employees who are absent in connection with such training.

¹ Agreement between employers, employees and government. Long-term approach to low literacy in society and trade and industry 2007 – 2015, September 2007, www.stvda.nl.

In addition the Labour Foundation has identified concrete measures to tackle low literacy in enterprises. In *Learning pays [Leren loont]*,² a working document published in June 2009, it offers a long list of recommendations and proposals for improving worker employability, aimed at the education sector, parties to collective agreements, enterprises, government and the Education & Training funds/expertise centres. One recommendation that specifically addresses enterprises is to improve employees' basic literacy and numeracy skills (reading, writing, and sums).

Tools and arrangements made by local social partners

Since signing the Agreement, the social partners have developed a range of different activities both within the context of the Labour Foundation and separately. Agreements have been reached at sector and regional level, and the relevant parties have developed tools and courses aimed at tackling low literacy in individual enterprises and across sectors. A number of these activities are described below.

Various enterprises and sectors have developed follow-up courses to the project launched by the Netherlands Trade Union Confederation (FNV) in 2007, entitled *Dutch in the workplace [Nederlands op de werkvloer]*. The course is meant to improve oral and/or written communication between employees on the one hand and between employees and their employer on the other. It focuses as much as possible on practical situations in the workplace and the language skills that such situations require. The enterprises that participated in the project have set up language courses as a standard employee facility. Thanks to the project, the concept of "language buddies" has become a familiar one.

FNV has also joined forces with the Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers/SMEs (VNO-NCW/MKB) in developing a *language scan* (April 2010). This handy tool enables employers, HRM staff, trade union officials, and works council members to test whether the employees of a particular enterprise require language proficiency training.

The social partners in various regions (such as Utrecht, Nijmegen, Rotterdam) have concluded *cooperation agreements* with enterprises, local councils, and senior secondary vocational schools in the relevant regions. In these agreements, the parties undertake to join forces in tackling low literacy.

What next?

After three years, the time had come to take stock and to assess the extent to which the targets defined in the Agreement were being achieved. In 2010, the Labour Foundation asked an independent policy research company (*Research voor Beleid*) to analyse the results of the battle against low literacy in enterprises and at sector level.³

Their study reveals that the national approach, including efforts to make literacy arrangements within the context of collective agreements, has resulted in too little improvement so far. Notwithstanding their acknowledgement of low literacy as a problem, for many sectors combatting it is not an issue they should get involved in. They believe that it is up to individual enterprises to tackle that at their own level. Those enterprises that have taken such steps have quickly discovered that their efforts are not fully supported in their own sectors.

² Stichting van de Arbeid, *Leren loont*, June 2009, www.stvda.nl.

³ Research voor Beleid, *Werken met taal - Bestrijding van laaggeletterdheid door sectoren en bedrijven*, 14 October 2010.

Another obstacle that enterprises encounter is that it is difficult to find out how many employees suffer from low literacy. That may be owing to the taboo nature of this subject, both among employers (“That’s not a problem in my enterprise”) and employees (embarrassment). Many employees are also reluctant to enrol in language classes that meet at least in part during their hours off. It is notable that enterprises make no effort to obtain information about sector-specific funding for language courses.

On the positive side, the study did reveal that five of the eight sectors investigated had made specific agreements related to improving employee language skills. These sectors are construction, cleaning and window-washing, temporary employment, meat processing, and metalworking. Efforts to combat low literacy are often linked to some other interest, for example improving safety in the workplace in the metalworking sector.

Based on these findings, the Labour Foundation has arrived at a number of conclusions. One is that workplace language courses tailored to the targeted employees are clearly successful. Employees enrolled in such courses say they feel more self-confident and empowered and are better able to follow instructions. Enterprises say that the atmosphere among employees improves, that safety in the workplace increases, and that employees can be more easily deployed and are more productive.

Another conclusion is that the battle against low literacy must proceed along two different strategies. The first involves building on the previously followed sector-specific approach. This means making the sectors more aware of the nature and size of the problem and emphasising the risks associated with low literacy and what can be achieved by combatting it. Because it has turned out to be impossible to build enough mass with this approach alone, a second strategy has been identified: approaching individual enterprises and employees directly. This involves providing advice on detection and training and using low-threshold mass media and multimedia tools to draw attention to the problem and to offer encouragement.

By following these strategies in close cooperation with the Reading & Writing Foundation, the social partners will be implementing the arrangements arising from the Agreement. They are convinced that by doing so they can seriously contribute to achieving the set targets.