

De Klink: residential home

De Klink, Belgium: flexible working practices

Organisational background

De Klink is a residential home for 50 non-working adult men and women with a mental handicap located in Diegem. Residents are divided into six groups, according to sex, age and level of handicap and all are encouraged to lead as normal a life as possible. Established in 1986, De Klink VZW is under the joint direction of family members and representatives of the Christian national health insurance and is subsidised by the Flemish Fund for the social integration of disabled people.

In 2005, 12 men and 55 women were employed in the organisation. Only 11 employees work on a full-time basis. Fifty-six employees work part time and different part-time regimes are possible. In 2005, the organisation employed around 49 full-time equivalents. Approximately one-third of the employees (22 employees) are aged over 45 years of age.

Although the organisation is small, and thus there is no legal obligation to set up a works council, a structure exists within the organisation that allows personnel to participate in discussions on certain matters. Personnel representatives are informed about and involved in organisational matters.

The original initiative

Because of the close bond between staff and residents, it is important for De Klink to avoid staff turnover as much as possible. Therefore, a large range of individual working patterns is possible, a measure which is particularly appreciated by employees who are parents of young children and by older workers. This level of diversity is also of great value to the organisation as it allows for more flexibility in manpower planning. The turnover rate in De Klink is therefore low.

A collective agreement for the sector stipulates that from 1 January 2002, additional paid leave is granted to employees older than 45 years of age. This leave of absence is compensated for by employee replacement, paid for by the Flemish Fund for the social integration of disabled people. Although it took De Klink several years to apply this new regulation, i.e. to employ additional staff, it has been fully implemented since 2004.

Employees of all age groups are encouraged to avail of regular in-service training provided for by the organisation. Not only is lifelong learning considered important, additional training also contributes to employees' motivation.

Another element that has had a favourable impact on staff motivation has been the introduction of a consultation process involving all employees. From 1995 to 2005, staff numbers rose from 49 to 67 employees, and it became increasingly difficult to facilitate direct participation by all staff members in certain organisational matters. As a result, a group of worker representatives has been established and is informed about all relevant matters.

Good practice today

In 2005, De Klink numbered 67 employees, with approximately one-third of them aged over 45 years of age.

A wide range of time schedules is catered for, as the organisation wants to accommodate all the individual needs of employees and to limit staff turnover. For example, one particular employee only works four hours per week, while others work 13, 22, 24, 28, 30, 32 or 38 hours per week. Flexible working hours cater to the individual requirements of staff. For example, young parents often want to work part time, while older workers find their job too physically demanding or stressful, so they may choose to work part time. Another reason for older workers to opt for part time work is because they are more financially independent. The organisation considers this wide range of flexible options to be a considerable advantage. Because of the large percentage of part-time workers in the organisation, a variety of time schedules also gives the organisation more flexibility in manpower planning.

Besides the range of work schedules, since 1 January 2002, the organisation has a legal obligation to reduce the working hours of employees aged 45 years and over, based on a collective agreement stipulating additional paid leave for employees in this age group. This means that every year, employees aged 45 years and over are allowed 12 additional days off; employees aged 50 years and older have 24 additional days off; and employees aged 55 years and older have 36 additional days off.

Because of the relatively high average age of De Klink employees, the impact of the new regulation is significant, particularly in terms of manpower planning. De Klink predicts that the new regulation will present an obstacle in the future in relation to the recruitment of older employees. Moreover, the new regulation implies that an organisation needs to find a good balance between the proportion of younger and older workers (who are entitled to extra days off and need to be replaced).

All employees can voluntarily take part in different training courses, both internally and externally, and every month a new training agenda is introduced. The training is considered necessary, not only to enable employees to keep up with professional changes, but also to keep staff motivated and to enhance their employability.

Case study

Flexible work practices

Staff members and the individual teams are allowed a great deal of autonomy within the organisation. For example, each team is responsible for its own work planning, and timetables (start and end times) can be decided within the team. This arrangement provides flexibility both for employees and for the organisation. Problems concerning time schedules, leave arrangements, etc, are solved within the team.

As De Klink is still a relatively new organisation, it has not had many cases of retirement. One person retired in recent years, but decided to continue working part time in De Klink for four hours a week. This arrangement was possible because of the wide range of different time schedules. In De Klink, early retirement is possible at the age of 58 years. Although it is expected that, in the near future, more personnel will reach the retirement age, it is not really an issue for the organisation at present.

Since 2000, a quality decree has also been put into practice in the sector, the aim of which is to improve the quality of care towards clients (and their family) in the non-profit sector. One of the regulations stipulates that efforts should be made to preserve the collective memory of older staff. For example, knowledge gained should be recorded on paper in order to encourage transfer of knowledge. Therefore, the organisation developed a system for knowledge recording. This system led to the development a more professional, depersonalised databank of knowledge, which is useful for new and older staff members.

Further information

Contact person: Juliane De Ridder, General manager

Company website: www.deklink.be