

THE FUTURE OF JOBS AND SKILLS IN THE WASTE INDUSTRY

Experiences from a major plant-level change process in the Netherlands

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Amsterdam Institute for
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The VAM case in context



- Context: policy change for municipal waste treatment in the Netherlands in late 1980s/1990s: from landfill to incineration
- Largely realised: in 1989 landfill 60% of waste treated, in 2009 2%; incineration in 1989 4%, in 2009 40%; recycling constant at 30%
- VAM case: preparation, design and construction of first Dutch incineration plant with energy recovery and recycling capacity ('integrated')
- By then owned by VAM, state-owned, afterwards Essent Environment, currently RWE (GE)
- Long-term process, started in 1988 with legal framework and contracts with municipalities, construction fully finished in 1997
- Intensive involvement of trade unions and Works Council, with MvK as labour consultant, 1989-2000 (and incidentally afterwards)



The changing project context



- In 1990s growing overcapacity in waste incineration, VAM contracts new municipalities at much lower tariffs, in 1996-97 even price dumping
- Local action groups protest expected level of dioxine emissions, High Court orders construction stop → additional E 50 mln investment on top of E 450 mln
- First years of production (1997-98) problems in reaching both full incineration and recycling capacity, mainly for technical reasons
- Major financial losses, municipalities refuse additional contributions → 1999: State sells 50% share → VAM privately owned, part of market leader Essent



Characteristics of the change process



- Involvement of Works Council, including union activists: phased advisory procedure, 'from abstract to specific', following design and construction phases
- In early phase 'advances', as to avoid too abstract debates: visits to other plants, mock-ups, simulations, notably in H & S field
- Intensive contacts in all phases between Dutch project (design) team, H & S experts, Works Council, labour consultant
- Basic checks in each phase on: organisation and employment structure (hierarchical levels; span of control; number of workers); in later phases also on safety; shift schemes and working hours; job content; expected work pressure / potential work stress (f.e. problem of lonely posts)
- *Major problems of Works Council: insecurity in early phases; tensions in relation with management; information problems: how to select info, what and how to communicate with rank-and-file*

Main general problems in the change process



- ‘Jump’ needed in skill levels: from agricultural-type of work to process operator → only small share of workforce selected → disappointment
- ... but also jump in management capacities needed, and that was underestimated: limited experience of management in structuring of change process and in particular in shaping education/training
- Management initially (1990-1993) expects turnkey project / approach (with German head contractor) ‘to solve nearly everything’, conflicting with Dutch project team, H & S experts, Works Council, labour consultant → major pressure, late change of mind (*for example: hardly any management participation in visits to other plants in NL and DE*)
- Problem of being forerunner: a.o. over-all lack of insight in knowledge and experience needed by process operators – as such management not to blame, but lack of sense of urgency was to blame



Thank you for your attention

- Comments invited
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