Prevention is not complicated, but it does have to be implemented

acture

Employers are careful with their employees in this day and age, and absenteeism prevention is a key focus. However, according to a study by Acture, many employers experience barriers when formulating prevention policies. Employers find that preventive measures cost time and money and struggle to determine which ones work and which do not. In this Orange Paper on prevention, we offer our insight and present an innovative and effective method for prevention in organisations: Aanpak Design Studio Preventie (The Design Studio Approach to Prevention).

A study commissioned by Acture revealed that many employers have already implemented numerous efforts to keep their workforce at full capacity, including focusing on preventive measures. The priorities vary greatly from employer to employer; some believe more in an overarching company policy, while others prefer to focus on practical, hands-on measures. The prevention approaches by organisations in the Netherlands are a rich mix of predictable and sometimes exotic matters.

Do more: everyone healthy and fit

Why don't employers in the Netherlands do more? Why aren't they more emphatically looking for measures that make everyone in the workplace healthy, fit and happy? Employers run into barriers, the study shows. Some measures are not easy to implement—they take time and money.

The effort required

The fact that some employers do not follow through with their prevention policies is often related to the effort required: they cost time, attention and, often, money. Many measures, such as ergonomic workstations and an absenteeism protocol, are relatively easy to implement. Safety procedures are also not a problem. When introducing a holistic set of measures appropriate to the organisation and its challenges, things become more complicated. This takes time and effort, and for most employers, it means relying on the services of outside experts in the process. In short, some employers save money directly by doing little in the way of prevention. This is often penny-wise but pound-foolish, as absenteeism costs can run up quickly. It may seem obvious, but fewer sick employees results in more work capacity.

Barriers

What are employers' and employees' experiences with these barriers? Are there views in Dutch prevention practice that can effectively reduce them? Is there an approach that can demonstrably prevent absenteeism?

We answer these questions in this Orange Paper.

1 How do employers and employees in the Netherlands view prevention?

More focus on 'soft' measures such as a 'better corporate culture'

Employers know they are largely responsible for their employees' mental and physical health. Most know their legal duty of care and take various preventive measures to prevent absenteeism. However, there appear to be barriers that cause employers to miss opportunities. Taking action now costs energy and often money. Employers feel that the harm of ignoring the matter is limited as, in their perception, not much is done to enforce the duty of care, and the fines are low.

These are some of the results of a large survey Acture commissioned among employers and employees in the Netherlands. The survey of 433 employers and 1136 employees was conducted by research firm No Ties.

Duty of care important and necessary

It is reassuring that 89% of employers and 76% of employees are familiar with the duty of care. There is ample understanding of its necessity, and employers recognise their role in preventing absenteeism. A majority of workers perceive that their employer is active but note room for improvement: one in five workers (19%) answered no to the statement, "My employer is actively committed to preventing illness or absenteeism".

Why not take measures?

What are employers doing about prevention, specifically? The most frequently mentioned measure is the company emergency response officer (BHV). Many companies also have sick leave policies, ergonomic workstations and sickness absence protocols. Many companies also cite safety procedures, while others say they follow the Working Conditions Act or have flexible work arrangements. Relatively few companies have open consultations with a company doctor (33%), a staff welfare officer (27%) or occupational psychologist (21%) or an online employee health questionnaire (24%).

Meest genoemde preventiemaatregelen

1	Emergency Response (ER) (76%)
2	Sick leave policy (70%)
3	Ergonomic workstations (69%)
4	Absence protocol (67%)
5	Safety procedures (67%)

Why do companies ignore certain measures? The main reasons are "lack of enforcement and low fines", "lack of time" and to a slightly lesser extent, "lack of knowledge/competence" to arrange it. For the measures 'company emergency response''safety procedures', 'RI&E', 'sickness absence protocol' and 'safety training', the main reason given is, "enforcement is limited and the fines are too low". Many employers also consider these measures too expensive.

Investing in growth and development

The labour market shortage seems to be a reason to pay more attention to staff welfare. Employers are already investing in employee growth and development (69%), focusing on improved technology and automation (63%) and offering flexible working hours or work-from-home arrangements (63%). Attention to improving the organisational culture is also mentioned (57%). Interestingly, companies include the somewhat 'softer' measure on their list of intentions: 14 % (more than many other measures) say "not implemented yet, but plan to". 15% of employers say they do not yet offer health and vitality programmes but plan to do so.

Positive corporate culture

Remarkably, a positive corporate culture resonates with employees: If applying for a job now, 67% would choose an employer that pays attention to the corporate culture and encourages employees. Around 61 per cent would also prefer an employer that offers flexible work hours and work-from-home options. Higher-educated workers have an even greater preference for a positive company culture, flexible working hours and work-from-home options. Employers who offer health and vitality programmes also score higher here. There is an opportunity here for employers to focus on this and promote it in recruitment and positioning activities.

Prof. Wilmar Schaufeli on amplition

Prof. Wilmar Schaufeli, emeritus professor of Occupational and Organisational Psychology at Utrecht University and founder of research and consulting firm Triple I Human Capital, is the spiritual father of what has been called a different view of a fit and healthy workforce. His quest to optimise employee motivation and performance led to opening a Latin dictionary in 2009. "The approach I had defined to complement prevention and cure deserved a new word. 'Amplition' covered the context and had a positive association—it says something about strengthening and improving."

"Success hinges on attention to and love for your staff."

Absenteeism prevention is essential for employers who want to keep their teams up to par. Keeping employees from getting sick is only one side of the issue; what can an organisation do along the 'positive axis' with initiatives that make employees happy and motivated? It may be time for your organisation to shift its thinking outside the medical model and toward amplition. Long live the amplitive organisation!

Amplition is akin to positive psychology. The idea is that positively encouraging people contributes to growth and development.

So amplition is different from prevention?

"Curing is about helping incapacitated people recover and return to work. Prevention is about risk—things like workload. It is primarily a medical line of thought about unpleasant things that can happen to an employee. Amplition is meant for everyone. The approach moves beyond the nasty stuff and looks more at people's potential, with the aim of developing them, which creates a nice bridge between doctors and HR. From care to stimulation, optimisation, and performance. Amplition has gained a place in occupational and organisational psychology over the years."

How does it work?

"Amplition is about positive interventions across the board: structurally make space in teams for compliments; taking initiatives to create a more pleasant, sociable working atmosphere; encouraging employees to learn new things. Replace 'feedback interviews' with 'feed-forward interviews' about where an employee wants to go in their job and performance. The focus is not on what went wrong but on how to improve it and what the employee needs to achieve that. Engage in 'job crafting' and give people room to design their jobs and distribute tasks and responsibilities among colleagues to optimally utilise desires and talents. The initiatives can vary greatly between organisations, as each company and team has its own culture."

Do amplitive organisations work differently?

"They have a different philosophy and base decisions on people's potential. They try to empower employees, which increases well-being, motivation and performance."

Is there evidence that it works?

"Not in the traditional research sense, as it's hard to substantiate. The indications are often very strong, though, and also well reasoned. It's no surprise what happens when people receive positive stimulation and space—when work becomes more enjoyable and the mood improves. You can see the passion and enthusiasm among the staff grow, which is an important psychological mechanism. People work harder and longer, are friendlier to customers, you name it. There are plenty of case studies and enthusiastic stories of practical experiences. The number of amplitive organisations is growing, as is the number of organisations creating positions such as 'chief happiness officer', which I think is a wonderful development."

How do you become an amplitive organisation?

"Start changing your mindset. Sit down with teams—with a large group of employees from all walks of life—to see what positive incentives would work. Let HR facilitate it. The managers can keep quiet for a bit while their employees come up with ideas. Is it job crafting? Do we want other things? Work with available toolboxes for development and implementation, such as from Human Capital. There is plenty of literature available on amplition development paths."

"I would like to mention one key success factor. Make sure executives believe in it. Especially middle management—the ones managing the teams—you have to have them on board. That may mean an organisation needs to work on management development earlier to make managers wiser and stronger and not only focused on targets. Take them with you! Amplition hinges on attention to and love for your staff. This applies to any business: positive encouragement is the key to business success."

3 How do you put prevention into daily practice?

The Design Studio Approach to Prevention

There are many conceivable approaches to the problem of absenteeism, each with differing perspectives and chances of success. As Prof. Wilmar Schaufeli stated above, amplition is one of them. However, that alone won't get you there. What else can an employer do to prevent absenteeism? Where should they start? How can an organisation take an active and engaged approach that fits its own culture and is effective?

Over the past year, occupational health services provider ArdoSZ has developed an approach called the 'Design Studio Approach to Prevention'. This approach, based explicitly on the company's practical experience, gives the organisation tools to take control of absenteeism.

It involves a planned, well-structured group invention with employees from all levels of an organisation. The question to the group is ongoing: what do we stand for, and how and what do we convey to employees to help prevent absenteeism? As such, the approach ties into amplition. The method makes it possible to view and interpret absenteeism data through constructive dialogue to arrive at a concrete action plan for prevention.

The steps

The core of the Design Studio Approach to Prevention lies in a collaborative, group analysis of the prevention issue in an organisation, according to the following steps:

1 Sickness absence data: we look at the organisation's sickness absence data; what stands out (both positive and negative)? Where are the challenges? What trends and developments can we see?

2 Dialogue: Can you think of a reason? What stories are involved, and what interests are there? Can we distinguish important values?

3 Clarification: What is the effect of outcomes from steps 1 and 2? Is there a correlation that points to a possible cause? What opportunities are there for action?

4 Insight: this is how insight emerges; what stands out? What connections can we make?

5 Action plan: supported and shared action plan using The Crazy 8 method forces the group into creative thinking to produce concrete actions under time pressure. The ideas are plotted using impact vs effort: what is immediately achievable with immediate and great results. This provides immediate direction for a list of actions that will yield the most (see figure Crazy8 on the next page).
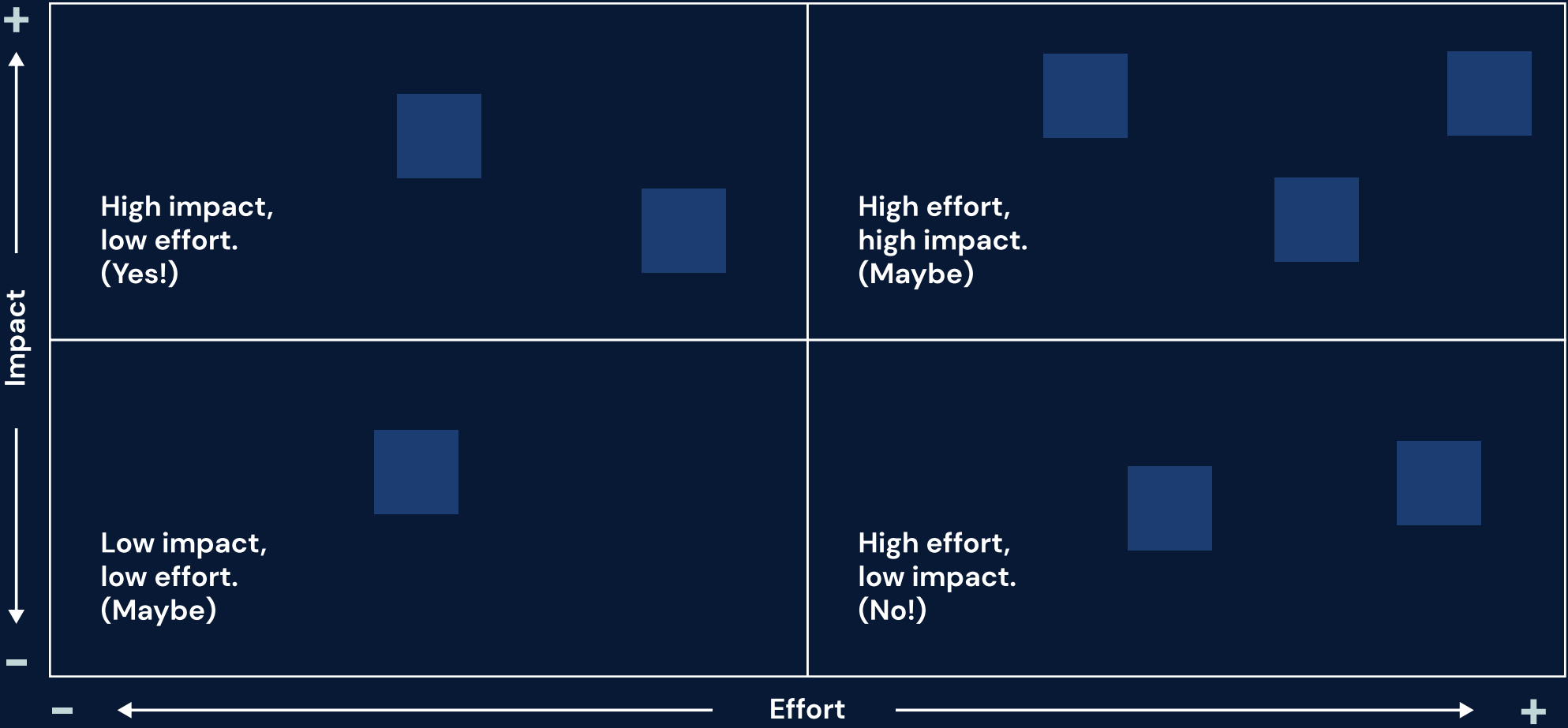
6 After implementation: Measure, evaluate and adjust where necessary

How do you bring prevention to daily practice?

ArdoSZ's Schedule "Approach Design Studio Prevention"

01 Absence data

Interactive monitoring
What stands out (positively)?
Where are the challenges?
What trend and development do we see?

02 Dialogue

What stories are involved?
What are the experiences?
What interests are there?
Which values do we hear?

03 Clarification

How do we characterise the subject?
What is attempted (interpretation)?
What is the effect of this?
What would we like to see (action perspective)?

04 New insight

What patterns stand out?
What connections can we make?
Making oe, ah, oi, eureka moments happen

05 Shared action plan

Crazy 8
Impact versus Effort
Supported and shared action plan

06 Measuring and evaluating

Crazy 8

Impact (vertical axis) / **Effort** (horizontal axis)

- High impact, low effort. (Yes!)
- High effort, high impact. (Maybe)
- Low impact, low effort. (Maybe)
- High effort, low impact. (No!)

The sessions

Led by an expert from ArdoSZ, a representative group of an organisation's employees collect and interpret sickness absence data. Using a proven approach, the group engages in discussions about work practices, stressors and other possible causes of absenteeism in the organisation. This reveals patterns and connections—there is a connection that points to a possible cause. What opportunities are there for action? This provides insight: what stands out, and what improvements can we make?

The stakeholders

To make the Design Studio Approach to Prevention successful, it is important not to limit the stakeholder group to the 'usual suspects' such as the HR Manager, but rather employees from all disciplines: from manager to employee. Achieving a good result requires the involvement of a good sample of employees in the process.

Tested in practice

This approach has been applied and tested at several organisations. Based on evaluations, results and practical feedback, the Design Studio Approach to Prevention is ripe for wide application in the Dutch business community.

"In the Design Thinking Session with ArdoSZ, we first looked at our absenteeism and its development and then focused on possible causes. The result was a set of improvement ideas from which we made choices. Those choices have led to concrete projects that are demonstrably adding value."

– Liz Weijel

Absence & Prevention Case Manager Picnic

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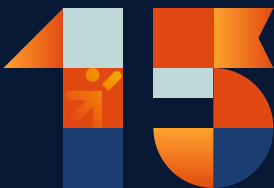### Social Innovation:
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