

Aspects on the Swedish provisions on work with VDUs in telework and at school

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I. Introduction

The Swedish National Board of Occupational Safety and Health is the central administrative authority for questions relating to the working environment and working hours. The tasks of the Board include issuing Ordinances and General Recommendations and exercising national supervision of compliance with work environment and working hours legislation.

The first Swedish provisions on work with visual display units came into force on the 1st of January 1986. The Ordinance was amended in 1992 on account of the implementation of the Council Directive of the European Economic Community on the minimum safety and health requirements for work with display screen equipment (90/270/EEC). The new ordinance Work with Visual Display Units (VDUs), AFS 1992: 14, came into force on the 1st of January 1993.

The Swedish National Board of Occupational Safety and Health is at present focusing two aspects regarding work with visual display units, telework and the use of visual display units at school.

2. Telework

19% of the women and 25 % of the men work at home at least one day a week (The Working Environment 1995, Statics Sweden).

The Swedish Work Environment Act and the Provisions issued by the Board, e.g. Work with Visual Display Units, fully apply even when working at any other place than the

ordinary workplace, for example at home. Concerning the application to telework, it can be concluded that the employer has the responsibility for the working environment without regard to where the employees work is taking place, Also the Boards provisions shall be applied anywhere in Sweden where an employee is working, unless there is an expressed exception or limitation of the provisions. Thus, it makes no difference if work is done within the employers premises, outdoors, within the premises of another company, in a vehicle or in the home of the employee.

On the other hand, the demands for actions to adjust the working environment can vary due to circumstances in the single case. There is room for such variation when applying the Work Environment Act and the Boards Provisions. Circumstances that must be considered are where the work is done, the duration of the work at a certain place, how often work is done at that place, what possibilities there are to change the working condition within reasonable limits and the employees freedom to organize his/her own work. All these circumstances must then be considered in a total judgement of the whole situation with special consideration to the foreseeable risks for health and safety. The employers general responsibility, according to the Work Environment Act, for the work environment and working conditions of the employees cannot be repealed by collective agreements or by agreements between the employer and a single employee.

Guide for a VDU workplace at home

The National Board of Occupational Safety and Health has taken part in the development of a guide for the working environment when teleworking. TCO, the Central Organization of Salaried Employees, initiated the work and a preliminary version of the guide was published in April 1997 by TCO. The work was based on Swedish provisions, mainly Work with Visual Display Units (AFS 1992: 14), and relevant standards, for example EN/ISO 9241 Ergonomic requirements for office work with visual display terminals (VDTs). The guide contains recommendations for the work table, the work chair, lighting conditions, environmental conditions etc. Examples of recommendations in the guide:

- Work table: depth at least 950 mm and width at least 120 mm
- Free space of 150 mm on the support surface immediately in front of the input device
- When using a mouse it should be possible to work with the mouse close to the body and with support for the arm
- Work chair: height adjustable in a range of 400-510 mm, adjustable height and angle of the backrest, adjustable seat depth in a range of 380-420 mm
- The VDU screen is best positioned at right-angles to incoming daylight
- Ambient lighting sufficient for VDU work
- Task lighting: adjustable and free from dazzle
- Noise, heat and electrical and magnetic fields may not be disturbing or cause the

user discomfort or unpleasantness constituting a risk to his/her safety and health.

Psychosocial aspects and the organization of the telework are also considered in the guide.

One problem which has been recognized is the lack of suitable furniture for a workplace at home.

Based on the guide TCO therefore invited manufacturers of office furniture to design furniture for a workplace at home. The preliminary version of the guide and the furniture prototypes were presented at a workshop in Stockholm in April 97. The furniture prototypes have now been evaluated during a period of three months by teleworkers in their homes. Based on the result of the evaluation the manufacturers will be given a chance to improve their furniture. The guide and the furniture will then be presented in the end of September this year.

3. Work with visual display units at school

Pupils from the first grade are covered by the Swedish work environment legislation and hence, the provisions on work with VDUs also apply to pupils at school, with the exception of the requirements for vision tests and glasses. The use of computers in education is becoming more and more frequent by pupils as well as by teachers. Pupils are using computers from first form or earlier, many children start at a very early age at home and/or in special schools. The main interest is often the technique itself and how to use the computer as a tool and a means for communication. Knowledge of good conditions when working with VDUs vary a lot and are sometimes low at school.

As many children who start school today probably will make a life-long use of computers there are at least two reasons for children and young persons to become aware of the importance of good working environment at VDU-work. In the short run they should not get musculoskeletal problems or other problems due to unsuitable working conditions/postures. Inexpedient tables and chairs, inaccurate playing of the screen, keyboard mouse etc are not unusual. As a lot of children also use computers at home playing games or doing their homework there is a greater risk for musculoskeletal problems if they know nothing at all about demands on VDUs, furniture, lighting etc. In the long run it is essential for young persons to leave school with knowledge of what good working environment means when they get into regular jobs. Working life is changing into greater flexibility, the turn-over will be more frequent partly because young persons want it that way, new forms of employment are growing side by side of the traditional; e.g. just-in-time, project, shorter contracts, self-employment etc. Hence, the knowledge of good working environment for each individual will become much more important than it is today.

Information to schools on work with VDUs

As an introduction to an ongoing project at the Board some schools on different levels were visited. The inspection showed a need of information on purpose of the working environment. The Board will produce information on working conditions and work with visual display units for pupils, teachers, principals and others concerned via different media, on one hand printed matter as brochures and sheets, on the other hand, interactive computer based information, e.g. on Internet and CD-ROM. The printed material is planned to be published in October 97. A first version of the computer based information is meant to be ready for testing the last quarter of this year.