I-WEB Action Manual

Improve Your Work Environment and Business for Micro Manufacturers

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The primary goal of the ILO today is to promote opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity.” Juan Somavia, ILO Director General

The ILO’s work in micro and small enterprise development has always been concerned with tapping the employment generation potential of this key sector, which in most countries accounts for the vast majority of firms and most jobs. While many of these formal and informal enterprises have proved themselves dynamic and competitive units, the quality of their owners’ and the workers’ employment is often extremely poor. The long hours they work, the low and irregular pay they receive, the low job security, the lack of organisation of their work, the hazardous working conditions, the lack of access to social benefits or services, difficulties in balancing their work with their family and other personal obligations, and the inadequate recognition of basic workers’ rights, are all characteristics of a “normal” working environment for the workers and owners of these enterprises.

The training package “Improve your Working Environment and Business” (IWEB) was developed to address some of these issues in the context of a business training programme, with emphasis on those aspects of job quality that are directly related to productivity.

The IWEB approach can be summarized as an adult learning process whereby participants draw lessons from their businesses and their in-class experiences as they learn new ways of doing business and organizing work. The IWEB combines self-diagnosis, structured learning exercises, and back-home application, as it enables participants to reflect on their businesses, learn from other participants, provide their own solutions, and test out these solutions. In this sense, the IWEB is a training programme that also integrates elements of counselling. Along this line, the Action Manual was designed for use in a learning process which combines training, self-assessment, and counselling, while the Trainer’s Guide provides guidelines and session plans which make use of different learning methodologies. After completing the programme the participant would have a set of action plans which could be combined into a business plan.

Two technical units of the ILO worked together to facilitate the development of this generic, international package consisting of a Trainers’ Guide and an Action Manual: the In Focus Programme on Boosting Employment through Enterprise Development (SEED), and the Conditions of Work and Employment Programme (TRAVAIL). The manuals made use of the concepts and approaches of the ILO’s Improve Your Business (IYB) package and the Work Improvements in Small Enterprises (WISE) programme, targeting the manufacturing micro entrepreneur.

Tests in two countries in Asia clearly confirmed that it is possible to improve the working conditions and the productivity of a micro enterprise in a mutually reinforcing manner. Micro-entrepreneurs were mostly quick to respond by actually implementing in their businesses some of the ideas they gained. The ideas for improvements in working conditions that were implemented were concrete and with clear benefits, quick to implement, low-cost or no-cost, and linked to another aspect of business improvement. For example, several home-based shoe manufacturers allocated a specific location in their houses as workplaces, moved dust-producing machines away from living areas, stored glues away from the reach of their children, and arranged shoe lasts and finished products on shoe racks. The enterprise development suggestions that entrepreneurs implemented quickly were those that were easy
and had an immediate effect on profits or the entrepreneur's understanding of her business. For example, a number of businesses moved to new locations for greater visibility and accessibility to their customers, and reported strong sales growth. Others improved inventory management and financial record-keeping. Making easy changes that produced immediate benefits encouraged entrepreneurs to attempt more complicated or costly changes.

With the aim of developing a generic and global IWEB package that could serve as the basis for local adaptation to meet the specific needs of micro manufacturing and service enterprises in improving working conditions as a means to enhance business performance, additional testing of IWEB was launched in several countries over three continents, in collaboration with ILO projects and offices. The local trainers and institutions involved were then brought together to finalise a new international version of IWEB based on the experience obtained, including feedback from trainees. The field tests demonstrated that IWEB meets a demand and its use is spreading in the pilot countries. Micro enterprise owners have improved their business performance as a result of the training, through better management and improved working conditions.

The experience has also enabled working conditions and related job quality issues to be included in the ILO’s main management-training programme with a focus on starting and improving small businesses, the Start & Improve Your Business (SIYB) programme.