

An Evaluation of a Small-Scale Farm Safety Extension Service

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to evaluate a small-scale farm safety extension service. This service was a 2-hour on-farm safety advice visit without charge and provided by farm safety engineers (with an option to pay for extended service). It was financed by the Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF) and the Federation of Swedish Forestry and Agricultural Employers (SLA) during the period 2007-09. In order to make an evaluation of this program, it was started with an interview of the program leaders from both organizations. There was also an interview with one of the farm safety engineers. Based on these interviews web-based surveys were developed and tested, before being sent to all safety engineers as well as a sample of farmers (111) which had visits during this period. The results were based on answers from all 7 farm safety engineers as well as 70 (63%) of the participating farmers. The survey to the safety engineers showed that they found it hard to motivate farmers; to book up visits as well as buying extra advice services besides the free service. The farmers who had visits were over-all quite satisfied with the visit and the free-service. The main reason for accepting a visit was that they had experienced an injury themselves or that they wanted advice on child injury prevention. Nine out of ten farmers said that they had done injury prevention measures after the visit. Only 20% wanted to buy extra services, since they were satisfied with this free 2 hour service. This study has shown that on-farm safety advice service, free of charge is one way of improving the safety standard among farmers. The issue of motivating farmers is still a key issue, but the experience of an injury or the presence of children on the farm changes the impression of resistance.

Keywords: farm safety, extension, evaluation, Sweden

Introduction

Injuries in Swedish agriculture are a matter of great concern and the injury rate is higher than in most other occupations. Besides adults, a number of fatalities involve children every year. A study by Pinzke and Lundqvist (2006) showed that about 5000 injuries each year require medical care, but only 10% are reported to the official injury register (SJV, 2007).

During the 1980s and 1990s there was an occupational health service for Swedish farmers with special health centers all over the country. Since this service was abolished it has been hard for farmers to find support for their extension needs related to safety and health. The Federation of Swedish farmers (LRF) have established a national network for health & safety, but there was still a lack of preventive support for farmers.

In 2006, a new project with a small-scale farm safety extension service was initiated and financed by the Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF) and the Federation of Swedish Forestry and Agricultural Employers (SLA) for the period 2007-09. This service was a 2-hour on-farm safety advice visit without charge and provided by farm safety engineers (with an option to pay for extended service).

Purpose and goal

The purpose of this study has been to carry out an independent evaluation of this small-scale farm safety extension service for the period 2007-09 (Alwall Svennefelt & Lundqvist, 2010). The evaluation was based on the project goals set up by the providers of this service:

- Farmers should know how and where they can access qualified extension service with a focus on work environment issues such as health and safety
- After the conclusion of the project the service should be established and the farm safety advisors should be able to provide extension service on their own, based on the farmers' needs without financial support from the farming organizations.

Method and material

The evaluation process was initiated by an interview of the project leaders from the farmers' organizations in order to get an in-depth view of the background, purpose and the goal of this small-scale farm safety extension service. There was also an interview with one of the farm safety advisors in order to get a closer view of their work and their experiences.

The evaluation was then based on a mail-survey sent to the advisors, and a web-based survey to farmers who had used the service. The survey by mail to the advisors involved all seven safety engineers, one female and six males (41-64 years of age).

A total of 111 web-based surveys sent to the farmers resulted in a response-rate of 63% (70 answers). The majority of the farmers (84%) were older than 50 years of age.

Results

The results are divided into two parts, the survey among the advisors and the survey to the farmers (the customer perspective), respectively.

The farm safety advisors

The result in this part is based on a mail survey including all seven farm safety advisors.

Networking and collaboration

It was concluded that the advisors had good contact with each other, but it differed in how often they used this network – from weekly contacts to a couple of times each year. Other contacts of importance for them were farm organizations, health and safety organizations as well as authorities and specialists at institutes and universities. For most of them it was important to have this network in order to handle problems, discuss solutions and methods.

The extension service

Almost all of the advisors found it difficult to start up their advisory mission due to lack of interest among farmers as well as insufficient marketing of their services. Most of them also found it hard to provide the marketing on their own. One of them said it was like “selling ice to Eskimos”. They also found it hard to sell additional services besides the free two-hour service.

They described the normal 2-hour extension service as a process:

1. Booking of the farm-visit
2. Short description of the farm and the production
3. What the problem is or the needs of the farmer / farm
4. A focused discussion of the problem and the possible solutions
5. Additional services needed, such as further evaluations or administrative support (reports to insurance companies, authorities etc.).

The advisors reported that this extension work took between 10-60% of their total full-time work. They also concluded that between 0-30% of their contacts led to further contacts or missions for the same farmer. Most of them only provided the free 2-hour service. It was less often that they took part in farm walks or farm shows.

Advisors’ experiences

The advisors were of the opinion that when they were engaged in this 2-hour service with the farmers it was often a creative and positive process with motivated farmers. The main problem was to reach the farmers and motivate them to accept a visit to their farm with this service. They also concluded that the farmers they had met now knew where they could find farm safety extension services in the future.

On the other hand, they did not believe that they would be able to provide this service to farmers without financial support from farming organizations. They did not believe that farmers – in most cases - would be willing to pay for a safety and health extension service with visits to individual farms.

Their final recommendations were to continue with this free service as an investment for safer and more motivated farmers, but that it then needs better support and marketing strategies provided by the farming organizations. They argued that they are safety and health experts, and not sales-people.

Farmers

Information and contacts

Most of the farmers (39%) told us that they got information about this offer during local meetings with the farming organizations. Less often they found information through the media, farm shows etc.

The main reason for inviting the advisor to the farm was a farm safety evaluation (36%), other reasons were previous injuries, the need for rehabilitation or the need for child accident prevention.

An important question was if they had taken any accident prevention measures on their farms after the visit of the safety engineer. The farmers themselves reported that 88% of them had taken preventive measures. The most common of these were technical improvements or solutions (43%), followed by improved use of personal protective equipment (PPE) (28%), followed by new routines for health and safety plans (24%).

Almost 81% told us that they had not asked for further services from the advisors. The main reason for this, according to the majority, was that they judged themselves to be able to handle the health and safety work on their own after this initial free service. 65% felt confident about handling the up-coming health and safety issues by themselves due to the positive support from the advisors. They also noted that in general the right amount of extension service would be the provision of the 2-hour service. About 17% said that they would buy further services in the future. A small minority told us that they it was for economical reasons that they would not ask for further services.

Another question was related to what kind of extension service, relating to health and safety, they would prefer. The majority answered farm visits (56%), followed by practical training (such as animal handling) (16%), group based extension service (12%), farm walks (11%), telephone service (3%) and web-based service (2%).

Most of the farmers were of the opinion that a farm with safe and healthy working conditions would benefit their economy as well; only 25% thought this was true to a lesser extent, while fewer than 2% did not agree at all.

84% told us that they now had a greater interest for health and safety issues compared to the situation before the visit of the advisor. In another question the farmers were asked if they would consider the need of a visit from an advisor in the future; 68% said that they thought so, while 32% were quite sure that they would not. To the question why not, we got answers such as:

- I have already got good advice
- Too expensive – have other needs which are more important
- Well, might be needed after 3 years, but only if it will be without charge
- The only reason would be for a follow –up
- I am cutting down on my farming so it is not needed
- Only if the authorities require it
- Small farm – I can handle it on my own

- We have a safety and health plan which we follow

Ideas for improvement of this service were also brought up such as:

- Use real injuries as examples
- A yearly follow-up visit
- Nice to be up-dated about latest news
- Important with help providing safety and health

Discussion

This study has shown that an on-farm safety advice service, free of charge, is one way of improving the safety standard among farmers. The matter of motivating farmers is still a key issue, but the experience of an injury or the presence of children on the farm changes the impression of resistance.

The evaluation of this small-scale farm safety extension service has both positive and negative parts. The number of advisors seems to have too small, not covering certain areas of the country. It also seems that the advisors had different motivation needs for their efforts to reach and motivate the farmers.

It was also quite clear that it was possible to motivate farmers to buy further services besides the free 2-hours which were sponsored by the farming organizations. Solutions might be needed both for the individuals, such as further education in marketing, communication and motivation as well as organizational support through their networks all over the country to better communicate and motivate the farming population (LAMK, 2010).

From a farmer's point of view it seems to be an attractive concept to get a free 2-hour extension service. The challenge is to form this concept so it keeps its positive concept, but also motivates the farmer to continue to use this service even when they need to pay for it.

This kind of on-farm extension service is in line with the other concept which is now provided for Swedish farmers – Säkert Bondförnuft (2010) (Common Safety Sense for Farmers).

It is, however, also important to understand that not all farmers like extension persons on their farms, which has been discussed by Thelin et al (2010).

From the answers from the farmers it is concluded that own experiences of injuries and risks for children are important motivation factors when it comes to health and safety. This has also been shown very clearly in studies by Sorensen (2009).

The evaluation study also shows that it has effect when it comes to preventive measures. Almost 90% tell us that they have carried out preventive solutions on their farms, which shows us that extension service makes a difference. Studies in New Zealand report similar results (Morgaine et al 2006). It is, however, much harder to show if there has been a positive effect on the number of actual injuries.

Relating back to the goals set up by the farm organizations it can be concluded that:

- Many farmers now know how and where they can reach farm safety advisors
- It is still too early to run this service for farmers without financial and organizational support from the farming organizations
- A final comment is that this concept has a future importance in Swedish agriculture, but it needs further development and still, at least for a limited time, financial and organizational support.

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