



Making work meaningful

PROMOTING PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING



R-644



AUTHORS

Estelle M. Morin, HEC Montréal
and Charles Gagné, IRSST
with assistance from Benoît Cherré

For work to be meaningful, it must procure satisfaction for those who perform it, reflect their interests, draw on their skills, develop their potential and allow them to reach their objectives.

When labour is scarce, providing meaningful work in a stimulating environment is a major advantage in attracting and holding on to a competent workforce.



prevention: All actions taken to reduce or eliminate the health and safety risks facing employees.

promotion: All activities designed to enable employees to increase control over, and to improve, their health.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the following for their help:
the Association paritaire pour la santé et la sécurité du travail, secteur Affaires municipales (APSAM),
the Association paritaire pour la santé et la sécurité du travail, secteur Administration provinciale (APSSAP),
the Association paritaire pour la santé et la sécurité du travail du secteur Affaires sociales (ASSTSAS),
the Centre patronal de santé et sécurité du travail du Québec (CPSSTQ),
the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN),
the Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec (FTQ),
and the Ordre des conseillers en ressources humaines agréés (CRHA).

meaning

Forward

The present document is intended for managers and others involved in workplace health in its broad sense, including psychological well-being. It is also a tool for heads of human resource departments, health & safety committees, and union and employer representatives. It is based on the study, *The Meaning of Work, Mental Health and Organizational Commitment*, which discusses six characteristics giving meaning to work, as well as analyzing the links between work characteristics, mental health and an employee's commitment to his or her employer.

The document provides a positive and proactive approach to workplace health, and has four premises:

- The meaning that people ascribe to their work can have either positive or negative effects on their mental health and their commitment to their organization.
- Some indicators of psychological distress may be observed in organizations as well as workers. Psychological balance has a direct impact on employees' commitment to their organization.
- According to the study, six characteristics make work meaningful: social purpose/utility, autonomy, learning/development opportunities, moral correctness, the quality of relationships, and recognition.
- There are ways of preventing psychological distress (protective effects); there are also ways of promoting psychological well-being, and these may have beneficial effects.

We deal with all of these topics in the present document, which is designed to promote psychological well-being. Anyone interested in preventing psychological distress should also consult the complementary document, *Guide pour une démarche stratégique de prévention des problèmes de santé psychologique au travail (Guide for a strategic approach to the prevention of occupational mental health problems)* published by the IRSST and available at its Web site (www.irsst.qc.ca).

The present document discusses how employees can enhance the meaning they ascribe to their work, since this meaning has a significant impact on their mental health, attitude and performance.



Meaningfulness of work and meaningfulness at work

A subjective experience...

When employees view their work positively, they tend to get more emotionally involved in the organization providing them with employment. They tend to be more conscientious, cooperate more with others, and are more likely to provide the expected performance.

Managers who wish to increase employee commitment must consider the importance of job design, and try to create tasks, and the conditions in which these tasks are carried out, that will make the work more meaningful.

Employees place great importance on work they perceive as meaningful, and consequently make every effort to perform it well.

In psychology, a meaningful phenomenon is associated with an experience characterized by coherence, consistency, balance and completeness. It is also associated with a person's reason for living or *raison d'être*. From this standpoint, the meaningfulness of work is dependent on the coherence between the individual in question and the work he or she performs; his or her expectations; the values they convey and the actions they perform on a daily basis in their environments.



The meaningfulness of work is based on the relationship a person develops with the activities defining his or her role. Although the meaning a person ascribes to his work is highly subjective, and shaped by a variety of factors, it is subject to common stimuli shared implicitly by everyone working in an organization.

During the surveys conducted for the study, *The Meaning of Work, Mental Health and Organizational Commitment*, the authors noted that the employees made a distinction between “meaningfulness of work” and “meaningfulness at work”.

Meaningfulness of work related to the tasks or activities forming part of a role or function.

Meaningfulness at work applied to the person’s relationships in the workplace with superiors, colleagues and clients.

Other authors, notably Pratt and Ashforth, have also made this distinction. They advance the idea that the meaning a person ascribes to his work and workplace is intimately tied to his identity.

In their view, work and the workplace are meaningful for an individual when she or he sees a connection or affinity between their identity, their work and their workplace. The result is a “markedly coherent experience”. Stated differently, an employee feels good because, in his or her view, the work and work environment are meaningful.

Meaninglessness (“Non-sense”)

Work that is lacking in “sense” or meaning is something of an absurdity.

When individuals feel their work has no meaning, their psychological well-being is threatened. This results in a feeling of alienation characterized by emptiness and apathy; they also experience emotional dissonance, powerlessness and the feeling that their work lacks authenticity. This state of anxiety is not necessarily pathological.

To promote the mental health of employees, it is important that the work and the workplace are meaningful to them.



It is possible to...

- perform meaningful work in an environment that is not meaningful;
- perform non-meaningful work in an environment that is meaningful;
- the ideal, however, is to perform meaningful work in a meaningful environment.

The meaning people ascribe to their work is subjective. It is therefore partially dependent on their perceptions, be they positive or negative.

Tasks and working conditions can be a source of stress, iniquity or risk for employee health, and this can affect their perceptions.

Perceptions...

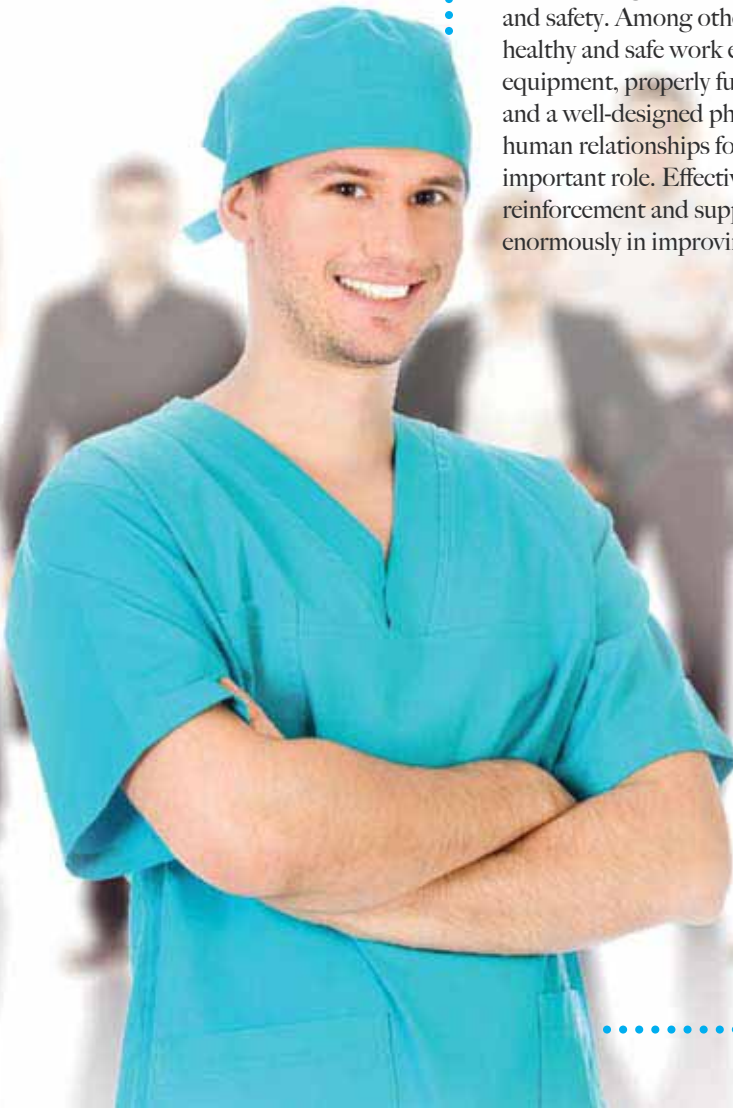
Positive perceptions

When employees see their work in a positive way, it means they find meaningful. They tend to feel good, both physically and psychologically, and this is revealed in their behaviour and attitude. They tend to be on time, and concentrate on the tasks at hand to minimize errors and accidents; they help their colleagues when needed, meet expected performance requirements and cooperate to reach the objectives set by their work team or organization. They have an emotional attachment to their work that can be strengthened by their relationships with their colleagues, superiors or clients.

Their perceptions are based on:

- concrete daily activities
- the conditions in which they perform them

The activities, as well as the working conditions, must be designed to support worker health and safety. Among other things, this includes a healthy and safe work environment, appropriate equipment, properly functioning work procedures and a well-designed physical environment. The human relationships formed at work also play an important role. Effective communication, positive reinforcement and support from one's peers can help enormously in improving work relationships.



Negative perceptions

Employees who perceive their work in a negative way tend to feel that neither it nor their work environment is meaningful. They also tend to show symptoms of stress, or even distress, as well as physical disorders.

Their focus and commitment to their work are inadequate. They put in a token appearance, though in a manner that prevents them from doing their best work. Their concentration is affected by stress, which increases the risk of errors, oversight and accidents, as well as affecting their performance. Under stress, these individuals may eventually develop attitudinal problems resulting in tension and conflict with their colleagues.

In such cases, the individuals adopt defensive strategies: they change their aspirations, modify their values and place greater importance on their salary. In other words, if they are unable to resolve the tensions and difficulties they face, they seek ways to protect themselves from the harmful effects.

When these defensive strategies prove to be ineffective, symptoms of burnout appear and performance at work deteriorates. These two phenomena may result in absenteeism, loss of interest in the work and the organization, distraction, conflict, counter-productive behaviour or the desire to change one's job or profession.

It is now generally acknowledged that psychological and negative behavioural disorders in the workplace do not derive solely from an individual's frame of mind. They may also be due to work, work environments or working conditions described as "poisonous" or "toxic".

In 1950, Eric Trist, of the Tavistock Institute in London, showed that worker dissatisfaction in Britain's mining sector was caused less by working conditions, such as wages and employee benefits, than by work organization.

positive
negative

yes
no



Psychological well-being

A variety of factors linked to meaningful work can have an impact on mental health in the workplace and “organizational commitment”.

Promoting meaningful work forms part of the positive approach to workplace health that aims to promote psychological well-being, rather than to detect psychological distress.



The combination of an aging population, an increase in the number of retirements and an increase in the rate of long-term absenteeism weaken and even threaten the stability of work teams. This can lead to serious problems. Whenever labour is in short supply, providing meaningful work in a stimulating environment constitutes a major advantage in attracting and keeping competent personnel.

Indicators of a person's psychological state

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as a state of psychological well-being enabling a person to:

- be fulfilled and cope with the normal stresses of life
- work effectively and productively
- contribute to her or his community

Thus, the definition combines two states: (1) the absence of psychological distress and (2) the feeling of well-being and psychological balance, referred to as “psychological well-being”.

Psychological distress

Psychological distress refers to a state of tension and stress characterized by anxiety or depression, irritability, self-depreciation and social disengagement. In this regard, the *Guide pour une démarche stratégique de prévention des problèmes de santé psychologique au travail* describes the principal risk factors to be considered in the area of prevention: recognition for one's work and the esteem of one's colleagues; support from one's supervisor and peers; changes: workload; autonomy and control.



Psychological well-being

Psychological well-being refers to a state of balance and comfort – in body and mind – characterized by self-esteem, psychological balance, self-control and control of events, sociability and happiness.

Organizational commitment

With his colleagues, Eric Trist tried to understand the conditions favouring commitment of employees to their work, and advanced an approach known as Socio-technical System Design. His model attempts to organize work in ways corresponding to employees' intrinsic motivations (demonstrating one's skills and autonomy, self-improvement, etc.) and extrinsic needs (salary, benefits, health and safety, etc.) – all with a view to improving organizational performance.

Organizational commitment is a concept employed to convey the nature and strength of the bond between an individual and his or her work. In addition, it is a key criterion of organizational effectiveness since it has an impact on the mobilization of personnel.

Organizational commitment is correlated with workforce stability (low voluntary departure rate), employee diligence (low absenteeism rate), job performance, quality of client service and “corporate” behaviours, that is, behaviours that go beyond the expectations and precepts of assigned roles.

Organizational commitment is central to a very topical problem concerning organizations of every size: keeping one's employees.

Three forms of commitment

Affective commitment refers to the employee's attachment, identification and involvement in the organization. Here, the employee keeps his job because he or she really wants to.

1.

2.

Normative commitment reflects the employee's feeling of duty or responsibility to the organization. An employee expressing a strong normative commitment holds on to his job because he feels he has a moral obligation to the organization.

Continuance commitment indicates the extent to which the employee is aware of the costs associated with his possible departure. An employee displaying strong continuance commitment hangs on to his job because he must do so. This type of commitment is associated with two attitudes: the lack of alternatives available to him on the job market or the personal sacrifices the employee would have to make if he quit his job.

3.





The value of leadership is conveyed in the leader's ability to preserve and promote the fundamental values enhancing the value of the work.

An employee will develop a personal and subjective perception of his or her work, but will also react in the same way as his colleagues generally to the incentives concealed in their work environment. These incentives correspond to the six characteristics that make the work meaningful: social purpose (or utility), autonomy, learning and individual development opportunities, moral correctness, quality of relationships and recognition.

It is to the advantage of all managers to reveal the hidden incentives and use them as a vehicle to make the work more meaningful and strengthen the bond between the employee and his work. These incentives also draw attention to avenues of action that may be used by managers and human resource officers, as well as by employees, since promoting psychological well-being is a shared responsibility.

Key characteristics

Social purpose and usefulness

For work to be meaningful, it needs to be perceived as useful to others or to society generally. It must have a purpose motivating individuals to accomplish the tasks with which they have been entrusted. Here are two examples illustrating this characteristic: a fireman recognizes the usefulness of his work when he extinguishes a fire because he is saving human lives; during a power failure, the employees of a hydro-electric company work relentlessly to restore the current and thereby provide essential service to users.

Autonomy

For work to be meaningful, it must allow the individual performing it to use his or her skills and judgement, demonstrate their creativity in problem solving and express their views on decisions affecting them. Good examples of autonomy would include: a supervisor entrusted with the responsibility of developing effective work teams, or a consultative body with the power to coordinate their work so as to obtain the results expected of them.

Learning and self-development opportunities

Meaningful work is not simply work that is compatible with the occupational interests of employees. Meaningful work must also allow them to develop their skills, improve themselves and, indeed, find fulfilment in their work. For example, a computer analyst seeking a technical solution for processing data utilizes his knowledge and, in so doing, consolidates his reputation; a labour relations consultant providing training on how to resolve a contentious case of psychological harassment takes advantage of the situation to broaden his skills.

Moral correctness

Work is meaningful when it is guided by considerations of morality and responsibility, both in the way it is executed and in terms of results. An accountant who takes the interests of his clients seriously while adhering to the generally accepted principles of his profession is acting responsibly.

The quality of relationships

For work to be meaningful, it must be performed in an environment that encourages the development of positive professional relationships, constructive contacts and good interpersonal relationships facilitating complicity and mutual support among colleagues, allowing them to exercise their influence within a team or organization.

Recognition

Winning the respect and esteem of one's superiors and colleagues, and being satisfied with one's support system, salary and prospects for promotion also constitute aspects of recognition in the workplace. A member of a team who points out the contribution of his or her colleagues in preparing the presentation of his project is obviously according them recognition.

Avenues of actions

According to the World Health Organization, promoting mental health in the workplace means empowering employees to take responsibility for and improve their health. This assumes that the employees:

- are capable of determining the state of their health
- are able to detect early signs of disease and risk factors in their work
- are encouraged to take the necessary steps to protect themselves
- recognize their interests, skills and aspirations
- are aware of the various ways of improving their physical and mental health
- are encouraged to develop healthy lifestyle and work habits.

Viewed in this way, promoting psychological well-being constitutes a challenge to both employees and employers, yet one that needs to be brought to the fore since the advantages to all concerned are high, both in terms of performance and in human and social terms.

Now that we have delineated the characteristics that give work meaning, we need to link them to avenues for taking action.

Highlighting the social utility of the work

Managers have an important role in highlighting the social utility or purpose of the work. They must have the skill and integrity required to clarify expectations, and provide explicit guidelines to their employees that are consistent with the mission of the organization.

Giving autonomy to employees

Giving autonomy to employees indicates they have the skills, information, resources and authority needed to perform the work. In addition, management practices must promote a climate of trust within the organization, and respect human dignity.

Providing opportunities for learning and self-development

Opportunities for learning and self-development include monitoring the quality of promotion and hiring decisions, the effectiveness of training programs and programs involving the participation of employees in decisions concerning the organization of their work.

Improving moral correctness in the workplace

It is the task of managers to ensure that employees are given due respect, which includes respect for their well-being and the judicious use of their time. They must have the courage to make strategic decisions fostering employee health and safety, and ensure they receive just and equitable treatment. It is their responsibility to ensure that the work and organizational practices reflect a concern for human dignity. They must also support employee initiatives and encourage them to help one another.

Promoting good work relations

Transparency in decision making and in the forums available to employees, and a climate of trust, are also factors promoting good work relations.

Acknowledging employees' qualities

Managers set an example through their own attitudes and behaviour. They must be proactive in establishing rules of good conduct, which will help them determine the individual qualities of their employees and provide positive reinforcement.



Strategies

One can think of psychological well-being in the workplace as existing on three levels.

THE TERTIARY LEVEL

applies to employees who are not stimulated by their work yet find it tolerable. These employees are not necessarily under psychological distress, though they may be staying with their jobs for a variety of reasons, such as employee benefits, or because they simply have no alternative.

THE SECONDARY LEVEL

applies to employees who show no symptoms of psychological distress and generally have a positive outlook. They are interested in their work and emotionally committed to their organization, though their loyalty is tenuous.

THE PRIMARY LEVEL

applies to employees who feel comfortable with their work, and with their lives as a whole, and who are attached to their employer.

Managers have a role to play in fostering psychological well-being in the workplace. However, they must not forget their own well-being ... they, too, are workers.





A company's human resources department can advise and support it in implementing a strategy. For further information, refer to the Internet portal of the *Ordre des conseillers en ressources humaines agréés* (www.portailrh.org), and Volume 11, Number 5, of the magazine, *Effectif*, entitled, *Le professionnel RH : complice du gestionnaire* (The HR professional: a manager's partner).

Tertiary strategies

In many organizations, there are employees who have little attachment to their employer, and who never consider changing jobs since it would be too costly or because they have no alternative. These employees are not necessarily under stress, though they do not find their work or work environment stimulating. The strategies that apply to employees with a tertiary level profile are designed to stimulate their psychological well-being and affective commitment.

What the manager can do:

Improving supervisory skills

Know how to solicit employee collaboration, and do so humanely and effectively.

- Facilitate the completion of projects: clarify objectives, find the needed resources, provide the appropriate equipment, support people's efforts, provide feed-back, encourage employees to take the initiative in solving problems and share their views on important issues.
- Provide training and learning opportunities.
- Manage tensions and conflict by acting as mediator.
- Demonstrate an interest in the well-being, health and safety of employees that goes beyond good organizational practices; make sure that equipment is safe, and that the preventive health program is being followed properly.

Social, emotional and instrumental support practices

Organize private meetings with individuals trying to deal with their problems, listen to their problems empathetically; provide the appropriate referrals and follow-up, etc.

Recognition

Take the time to get to know one's colleagues and subordinates, their fields of interest and aspirations; show appreciation; personally convey your best wishes, etc.

Job enrichment

- Define the tasks that mobilize an employee's cognitive faculties, skills and sense of responsibility.
- Periodically review work methods, procedures and practices with the employees to eliminate pointless tasks; improve the utility of the work; improve the effectiveness of all undertakings.

Empowering personnel

- Set up simple and effective procedures, making sure all personnel concerned understand them, and are able to diagnose and resolve related problems.
- Regularly bring the team up to date on the progress of activities with a view to making adjustments.
- Determine beforehand the resources needed to accomplish tasks more effectively.
- Lead meetings intended for the sharing of information, ideas and solutions proposed by team members.

Monitoring absences and resignations

Examine the reasons for absences and resignations with a view to understanding their causes.

Career counselling

Assist employees in their choice of career path, especially when this is associated with a promotion or organizational change.

What the worker can do:

Career orientation and management

Identify interests, skills and occupational objectives, and communicate them to the manager. Learn how to assert oneself while respecting others; learn how to say no to unrealistic demands; educate oneself and develop skills.

Developing authenticity

Set aside time to think, plan or have meetings with colleagues; express gratitude for their help.

Secondary strategies

Some employees are not stressed by their work and it does not make them feel miserable, but neither are they particularly happy with it. For these individuals, life is a long quiet river. They are more or less attached to their job, but would not hesitate to change it if the opportunity arose. At this level, too, the challenge is to promote their psychological well-being and to reinforce their level of emotional commitment.

What the manager can do:

Develop skills

- With help from the head of human resources, provide a variety of training programs to support knowledge transfer.
- Encourage versatility by providing the training and coaching needed to accomplish a variety of tasks, thereby promoting staff mobility and team stability. If employees have higher aspirations, give them greater responsibility on specific projects.

Ways of participating

- Invite individuals affected by a decision to express their views; entrust employees with new responsibilities if they need a challenge or stimulation.
- Support employee initiatives when they involve work groups or team projects.
- Work with the team to ensure that everyone has the chance to express himself or herself, take on responsibilities consistent with their skills and obtain the requisite acknowledgement in an appropriate and equitable way.



Team building

Team building has a variety of objectives. It may have operational goals, such as clarifying the team's mission and objectives, reinforcing team cohesion by giving its members the opportunity to perfect their skills in communication, conflict management and expressing their creativity. Lastly, it may facilitate the integration of new members.

Health programs

Provide and promote health programs. Encourage the creation of parity committees dedicated to workplace health. Publicize and announce the outcomes of activities and programs that have already been implemented.

What the worker can do:

Developing healthy work habits

Avoid work overload by adopting good work habits; reserve the period of the day when you are most attentive for your most important tasks and dossiers, and use the remaining periods for dealing with calls, mail and e-mail. Give greater importance to making human contact than to electronic communication: nothing is more effective than face-to-face contact for answering questions, settling a problem or making progress on a file.



Ressources

Primary strategies

A growing number of employers are introducing conditions that make their company renowned for the quality of working life (QWL) they provide to their employees. In these companies, employees are exposed to lower levels of stress (except perhaps stress associated with performance or further extending their own abilities) and claim to be happy with their job and attached to their organization. The challenge at this level is to support the physical, psychological and social development of employees to protect their health and foster their commitment.

What the manager can do:

Enhance the quality of the post by increasing responsibilities and validating experience.

Managing practices to deal with up-and-coming personnel

Plan labour needs for the next few years; identify up-and-coming personnel; set up training programs to prepare the candidates; encourage personnel who are close to retirement age to remain active in their organization, train their replacements, transfer their knowledge and make sure this expertise is recognized.

Personnel selection and staffing

Recruit individuals whose fields of interest and skills match the nature and requirements of the job. When assigning posts, make sure the candidate is familiar with and accepts the actual conditions of the job.

Ergonomics of workstations

Detect and correct ergonomic problems relating to posture. Improve the quality and effectiveness of workstation layouts.

Promoting positive relationships among employees

- Organize social activities
- Provide staff lounges and common rooms

Flexible hours

Respect all negotiated parameters: start time and finish time, number of days worked. Flexible hours can promote a better equilibrium between work and private life and a better use of rest periods, and allow employees more freedom to pursue individual improvement and development activities.

Electronic outwork programs

Electronic outwork ("teleworking") programs allow employees to work, partially or entirely, outside the organization itself. Several factors should be taken into account when one is considering introducing teleworking:

- Preparatory stages, training and "instruction manuals"
- Infrastructure (technical, logistic and ergonomic support)
- Each person's availability and work schedule
- Communication, networks and self-help groups
- Job design and deadline planning
- Planning trips and meetings
- Developing skills and careers
- Managing performance
- Managing personal expenses (equipment, vehicle, services)

Intelligent use of communication technology

This technology is placed at our disposal so that we will be efficient in our work. However, this efficiency requires sound and cooperative relations.

What the worker can do:

Strengthen his or her network
Form ties with colleagues.

Professional development

Create a project; pursue important goals inspired by one's own values.

Develop resilience

Maintain integrity in crises; face up to situations, recognizing what is at stake, making sense of events, and improvising solutions to cope as best as possible.

Be optimistic

Nurture positive thoughts and expectations.

Bring influence to bear

Mobilize colleagues to reach common goals.

Be thoughtful and show concerns

Make the first move in supporting their team's performance.

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ISBN: 978-2-89631-428-7 (printed version)

ISBN: 978-2-89631-429-4 (PDF)

ISSN: 0820-8345

IRSST – Communications Division
505, De Maisonneuve Blvd. West
Montréal (Québec) H3A 3C2
Telephone: 514 288-1551
Fax: 514 288-7636
publications@irsst.qc.ca

www.irsst.qc.ca





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