



Working on stress

– Is Workplace Health Promotion (WHP) an effective remedy for dealing with the new challenges in working life today?

Pressure and tempo in the workplace have increased in recent decades, together with the number of working days missed owing to psychological complaints. One of the central topics at the Three-Country Workplace Health Promotion (WHP) Conference, which was held in Bregenz on Lake Constance at the end of March 2015, was how WHP can be used most effectively to overcome this new challenge. Attended by some 200 experts from Germany, Austria and Switzerland, this conference was organised by Austrian health promotion foundation Fonds Gesundes Österreich (FGÖ) with partner organisations from Switzerland and Germany. A number of key statements and findings are outlined in the following article.

“Through Workplace Health Promotion, organisations are systematically structured along healthier lines overall. In the future, we must pay particular attention to psychosocial health. This is because psychosocial stress in the workplace has been on the rise in recent decades and at the same time more and more people at work are being affected by psychological complaints”, said *Klaus Ropin*, head of Fonds Gesundes Österreich (FGÖ), at a Three-Country Workplace Health Promotion (WHP) Conference. The first day of the conference was moderated by *Gert Lang*, spokesman for WHP at FGÖ and FGÖ funding manager *Jürgen Tomanek-Unfried*. The second day was moderated by *Chantale Merz Wagenaar*, Switzerland Health Promotion foundation and *Jens Hupfeld*, substitute fund interest group VDEK. Some 200 experts from Germany, Austria and Switzerland discussed how Workplace Health Promotion can be used most effectively to overcome the challenges posed by changes in today’s working environment.

The fact is that the working environment has been experiencing fast and fundamental change since the 1980s. Competition has intensified: not only between companies but also between employees. Many people no longer have the work and income security that they had before and there is an increasing trend away from work structures defined by time and place. At the same time, great importance has been attributed to new technologies such as fully automated production systems and new digital media. “The megatrends in today’s working environment are flexibility, mobility and acceleration”, said *Thomas Mattig*, Managing Director of Swiss health foundation Stiftung Gesundheitsförderung Schweiz, summing up the current developments. All of these, he added, have led to a marked increase in work-related psychosocial stress in all Western countries.

Fast pace and time pressure

This is confirmed by the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), conducted in 34 European countries and published in 2012. No fewer than 62 per cent of employees surveyed indicate that they work against the clock for at least a quarter of their working time, while 59 per cent have to work at a fast pace. In Germany, an extensive initiative is geared specifically towards promoting psychosocial health at work: the “psyGA” project, which is being overseen by *Reinhold Sochert* of the Federal Association of Company Health Insurance Funds (BKK Bundesverband). “We bundled the existing know-how and prepared it for the various areas in the working world and are now publicising it with the help of 20 experienced institutional cooperation partners”, reported Gregor Breucker, Head of the Health Promotion department at BKK Dachverband, at the conference. Further information on this can be found at psyga.info

Antje Ducki, Professor of Work and Organisational Psychology at Beuth University of Applied Sciences in Berlin, agrees: “We are in the throes of a far-reaching shift in our working environment, which harbours new risks but also presents new opportunities. Because of this, we must shape these changes positively in the interests of people in the workplace – and we will ultimately succeed in doing so.” Above all, this should also involve using Workplace Health Promotion measures to target those steadily growing groups of workers who have not yet been reached to a sufficient degree to date. Ducki remarked: “The number of target groups that are hard to reach for reasons relating to outlook, geography, time, culture or language is high and ranges from very small companies, highly mobile employees, freelancers and migrants to people with minimal qualifications. But this is precisely why we have to gear our concepts to the specific starting scenario of the individual groups in question.”

Factors in the workplace that can cause psychological stress

The German “Stress Report” from 2012 lists the Top 4 forms of psychosocial stress. Top of the list is “time and performance pressure”, a frequent occurrence among 52 per cent of respondents which is also felt to be stressful by 34 per cent. Work interruptions are seen by 26 per cent as contributing to stress while the need to work at a fast pace and to multitask is cited by just under 20 per cent.

Of course, work organisation is just one area in which negative stress can arise. Emotional requirements, such as the need to suppress fear or annoyance, lack of autonomy at work, lack of meaningfulness or purpose in one’s own work and lack of social support in the workplace are among the other most important risk factors for psychosocial health. This was ascertained by the European Working Conditions Survey by the European Union.

An international forum for Workplace Health Promotion

The Three-Country Workplace Health Promotion Conference, which took place in Bregenz on Lake Constance at the end of March 2015 with experts from Germany, Austria and Switzerland, was the second event of its kind to be held for the purpose of international networking and the sharing of know-how and best practice examples. The first was held in St. Gallen in March 2011. The third Three-Country Conference is scheduled to take place in Konstanz, Germany, in March 2018. Of the Austrian delegation, Klaus Ropin, Jürgen Tomanek-Unfried and Ina Rossmann-Freisling from FGÖ were responsible for content planning together with Christoph Heigl, coordinator of the Austrian WHP Network and Anita Häfele, managing director of the health foundation Fonds Gesundes Vorarlberg. On the planning committee Germany was represented by Gregor Breucker and Michael Blum from BKK Dachverband, Jens Hupfeld from substitute fund interest group VDEK, Fritz Bindzius from social accident insurance association DGUV and Patricia Lück from the AOK Federal Association. On behalf of Switzerland, Chantale Merz Wagenaar from the Switzerland Health Promotion foundation, Annette Hitz from the Switzerland Mental Health Network and Andreas Krause from the Northwestern Switzerland University of Applied Sciences and Arts were involved in planning content for the event. In addition to Klaus Ropin, Jürgen Tomanek-Unfried and Ina Rossmann-Freisling from FGÖ, the key persons involved in organising the successful event were Gabriele Ordo from FGÖ and Silvia Moser Luthiger from Moser Luthiger Consulting. The Austria health promotion foundation Fonds Gesundes Österreich would like to thank all who contributed to the success of the Three-Country WHP Conference in Bregenz.

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