



Work.
Adapted for all.
Move Europe.

The Brussels Declaration on Workplace Health Practices for Employees with Chronic Illness



The European Network for Workplace Health Promotion
www.enwhp.org

The burden of chronic diseases

Chronic diseases pose a major challenge to people's health in Europe and worldwide. They are the leading cause of mortality and morbidity in Europe, and have a major impact on the expectancy of life lived in good health. In addition, there is evidence of the impact of chronic diseases on the labour market, showing that chronic illness affects wages, earnings, workforce participation, job turnover and disability. A 2010 OECD study⁽¹⁾ concluded that:

“Too many workers leave the labour market permanently due to health problems or disability and too few people with reduced work capacity manage to remain in employment... Economic and labour market changes are increasingly proving an obstacle for people with health problems to return to work or stay in their job.”

The current economic downturn is worsening this situation (see the Santiago Declaration)⁽²⁾, and the focus on institutional and policy reform in the last decade has left day-to-day practice in companies and on the shop floor underdeveloped.

The rapidly changing world of work calls for renewed attention to be paid to the work and health of workers with chronic conditions. We need to focus not only on their current employability but, above all, on prolonging their employability. A paradigm shift is needed that emphasises the sustainable employability of workers with chronic illnesses and disabilities.

The PH Work campaign

The Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (COM(2010)2020)⁽³⁾ sets the target of “achieving a 75% employment rate for 20–64 year olds throughout the EU”. However, 23.5% of the working population in the 27 European member countries reported to suffer from a chronic illness and 19% stated they have long-standing health issues.

The “Promoting Healthy Work for Employees with Chronic Illness - Public Health and Work (PH Work)” campaign, initiated by the European Network for Workplace Health Promotion (ENWHP), contributes to achieving the sustainable employment element of the overall strategy. Under the slogan “Work. Adapted for all. Move Europe”, it enhances the coordination, communication, and collaboration between healthcare professionals and the workplace, and puts more focus on work-related issues (including adaptation of the workplace, reorganisation of tasks, matching jobs to abilities, supportive management). It establishes public health – private sector partnerships and strengthens the general case for investing in workplace health (promotion).

The role of Workplace Health Promotion

Comprehensive Workplace Health Promotion (WHP) offers an effective approach combining improvements in the organisation and working environment with active participation of employees with chronic health conditions. It also involves:

- an organisational commitment to improving the health of the workforce;
- providing workers with appropriate information and establishing comprehensive communication strategies;
- involving workers in the decision-making process;
- developing a working culture based on employer and staff working together in partnership;
- organising work tasks and processes so that they enhance health, rather than damage it;
- making healthy choices the easy choice by putting them at the heart of the policies and practices of the organisation; and
- recognising that organisations have an impact on people and that this is not always conducive to their health and well-being.

Benefits for employers, workers and society

There is much evidence to support the use of health promotion activities in the workplace and there are potential benefits to be gained by employers, workers and society.

Employers

- Creates a positive environment, where people enjoy working.
- Fewer sickness absences, fewer lost workdays.
- Retains the experience and knowledge of workers with a chronic illness
- Gains competitive advantage through a boost in productivity.
- Reduces healthcare costs and avoids the cost of redundancy, hiring and training a replacement.
- Avoids potential litigation costs resulting from statutory protection.

Workers

- Job retention or return-to-work boosts the mental health of chronically ill workers. A return-to-work can aid full recovery.
- Earning a full income, leading to a better quality of life.

Society

- Job retention and return-to-work represent an investment in the nation's economic productivity and social cohesion.

Linking public health and workplace health

A systematic approach to coordinate interventions across all levels is needed for effective job retention and return-to-work. The costs and duration of work disability are significantly reduced by contact between health-care providers and the workplace, and by providing workplace accommodations such as job matching, ergonomic adaptations and flexitime.

Linking occupational safety and health (OSH) and human resources management (HRM)

Company policy should be directed towards preventing the impact of ill health (absenteeism, unemployment, disability benefits), and towards promoting employment opportunities and occupational skills and competences. This stresses the interrelatedness of OSH and HRM with respect to sustainable employability and should apply to all employees. For workers with disabilities in particular, the adaptation of the environment to their individual circumstances, including their home situation, is extremely important. This calls for interventions such as customised work redesign, "job carving", training facilities and career counselling.

Self-management

Reduced risks and improved outcomes cannot depend solely on the actions of health or other professionals but are also contingent on the individual's actions. Self-management support includes the education and training of people with a chronic illness to manage their own condition, the collaborative use of a range of behavioural-change techniques to foster lifestyle change, the adoption of health-promoting behaviours and skill development across a range of chronic conditions.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the “Work. Adapted for All. Move Europe” campaign, the European Network for Workplace Health Promotion makes the following recommendations for politicians, employer organisations and unions at EU and national level:

1. Focus on the prevention of chronic diseases at the workplace.
2. Detect chronic diseases at an early stage.
3. The paradigm should shift from reduced performance to retaining current and future working ability.
4. Focus on the abilities and resources of the individual and not only on limitations or restrictions.
5. Address discrimination against people with chronic diseases.
6. Raise the importance and priority of return-to-work (RTW) on the policy agenda.
7. Increase the opportunities for employment of persons with chronic illness.
8. Work must reward – work must include a positive cost-benefit ratio.
9. Close and systematic cooperation of all relevant players and stakeholders involved.
10. Fill the gaps in existing knowledge, and extend and maintain evidence and experience-based Interventions.

Signed



Members of the European Network for Workplace Health Promotion

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References

⁽¹⁾ OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, “Sickness, Disability and Work: Breaking the Barriers”, 2010. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/health/mental_health/eu_compass/reports_studies/disability_synthesis_2010_en.pdf

⁽²⁾ Declaration of the Santiago de Compostela Conference, July 18, 2013; “Economy, stress and health”. Available at: <http://health-gradient.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Santiago-declaration.pdf>

⁽³⁾ Communication from the Commission COM (2010) 2020 final, “Europe 2020: A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth 2010”. Available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:2020:FIN:EN:PDF>

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