

Löwa is a large chain of food stores with a workforce of about 3,500 employees. There are 30 branches of "Magnet" shops (comparable to medium-sized companies) and 297 branches of "Zielpunkt" (comparable to small companies) throughout Austria. The "Good Movement at Work" project was established to reduce the incidence of muscular-skeletal disorders. The project was supported by social and health insurance institutions, trade unions and the Chamber of Economy.

Why the food trade?

Muscular-skeletal disorders are on the increase, particularly in the food trade, the most common complaints being strain to the neck, shoulder and lower back. The food trade is an ideal place to start tackling muscular-skeletal disorders as a large number of people are employed here, including women. A high staff turnover in this industry also suggests a need for action.

Löwa was interested in becoming a pilot company for the research and intervention trials because it wanted to reduce staff turnover and days lost through illness, as well as improve its image and gain competitive advantage.

It was also hoped that relevant information could be passed on to other companies in the same sector and specific intervention programmes developed to improve employee health in small and medium-sized companies in general.

Developing relevant solutions

The Löwa project began at the end of 1998 and lasted for 18 months; it involved 49 employees in "Magnet" and 18 employees in "Zielpunkt" shops. The project began with a comprehensive analysis of working conditions, work processes and ergonomic criteria. Measures were then developed, tried out and evaluated. These measures had to be practical in nature and employees had to see their relevance to their own work activities. The project ran as follows:

n Inspection

A workplace inspection was carried out focusing on elements like the design of the workplace, organisation of work as well as motivation and morale. In-house expectations of the project were also discussed at this point.

n Analysis of the working day

Staff, who were aware of the situation, were watched during their normal working day. Their movements were filmed with a digital camera, after which they had a chance to discuss how lifting etc. could be improved. Safety at work was also discussed.

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n Employee survey and on-the-spot-inspections

A questionnaire looking at topics such as motivation and work-related health complaints was filled in during individual discussions in order to avoid any misunderstanding. An on-the-spot inspection, concentrating on tasks causing particular strain, completed the investigation and led to the development of appropriate solutions with staff help.

n Exercises/instruction sheets

On the basis of the survey, a number of exercises were developed. These were easy to carry out and were relevant to the specific problems encountered by employees.

n Group Training

Training modules were based on knowledge gained during talks with employees and inspection of the workplace. Harmful methods of carrying out work tasks were identified and alternatives suggested, along with relaxation methods and exercises for short breaks.

Results and conclusions

The project results show that even brief interventionary measures can result in an improvement in the way people carry out their tasks.

Actively including employees is important if measures are to have a lasting impact. Measures implemented must be relevant to their experience. It was also found that training sessions are more successful if superiors join in. Feedback is important, as are posters reminding people of correct procedures. An illustrated leaflet containing tips on how to deal with tiredness and economical ways of working is being put together. Löwa intends to implement the measures step by step in further branches.

The project proved to be of great interest to both employees and management, but a detailed evaluation of the effectiveness of the measures is not yet available. Interim results show, however, that employees carry out their tasks in a way less likely to cause muscular-skeletal problems. Other lifestyle issues such as regular sports activities and nutrition were also looked at.

The pilot project showed that a third of employees experiencing aches and pains do nothing about them, a further third cope by taking painkillers. Although no representative study was carried out, it can be presumed that this trend is spread over the whole of society. On a broader scale such problems could be avoided from the outset if schools and training institutes could pass on relevant information to students.

Staff involved in preventive activities also need to have access to information brochures, training modules and the handbook "Movement ergonomics in the food trade". The project shows that finding effective solutions depends to a large extent on the level of in-company knowledge.