

Workplace Health Management in SMEs Germany



Conducted by the Institute for Ergonomics and Technology Management (IAT) at Stuttgart University and backed by GEK, the aim of the project was to improve health and safety and health promotion in SMEs via health management tailored to companies' individual needs.

GEK is one of Germany's largest health insurance funds looking after 120,000 companies, many of which are SMEs. It has considerable experience in workplace health management and offers a variety of services including preparation of workplace health reports and establishing health circles. Assistance from the relevant statutory accident and health insurance, guilds and crafts associations, helped the project gain widespread acceptance.

Selecting participants

14 enterprises employing between 3 - 20 people were chosen from a number of professions including dentists and opticians. These businesses already had a keen interest in workplace health plus a positive attitude towards investing time and energy in the project and actively implementing improvement measures. Each enterprise voluntarily appointed a health co-ordinator to oversee the project and act as a "mouthpiece" for employees.

Clear objectives

The purpose of the project was to implement workplace health promotion measures in conjunction with improving occupational health and safety. Companies were supported in their efforts to meet

statutory requirements and information was provided on health and safety, improving the work environment and promoting well-being. Ultimately, the information gained during the course of the project should be communicated to a wide range of businesses.

The project was based on the concept of health management. This goes beyond basic occupational health and safety and aims to achieve holistic health promotion by improving well-being (taking in social and psychological issues) and preventing work-related health risks.

Developing a relevant approach

The crucial factor in the success of the health management system is the creation of appropriate programmes. Therefore, at the start of the project, employees contributed to a comprehensive written survey, followed by staff interviews. These were designed to be as open as possible so that staff felt able to broach difficult subjects. Their observations on the company and suggestions for improvement were noted. A tour of the workplace was also conducted.

Health co-ordinators

Health co-ordinators are fundamental to a project such as this, providing a vital contact point. They re-

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ceived ongoing training on health promotion as well as on risk assessment, dealing with hazardous substances, correct posture, noise, stress prevention and using the internet. The “train the trainer” principle is essential if the health management system is to be integrated into the organisation permanently.

Improving working conditions

In order to create better ergonomic conditions, office equipment – desks, chairs, lights etc – made by different manufacturers were installed in some companies as “sample workplaces”.

Changing behaviour patterns

Training courses and campaigns on lifestyle issues – healthy food, sun safety, exercise and relaxation – were organised at the workplace.

Enterprise workshops (“health circles”)

These are pivotal in reducing mental stresses in small businesses. The workshops were flexible and adapted to suit specific company needs and were mediated by an IAT employee using a special facilitating technique. Individual problems were collated and prioritised in line with employees’ requests and an action plan compiled. The employer only became involved in the latter stages to prevent staff feeling inhibited.

Regular meetings were set up, creating a forum where sensitive and

difficult issues could be discussed. The enterprise workshops also revealed very clearly that a large proportion of stresses could be reduced by a staff-oriented change in organisational procedures and better communication.

Employers’ seminar

This was another key element in the project. At this seminar it was made clear that by enhancing occupational health and safety measures, company costs could be reduced. Further benefits of people-oriented, health-promoting working conditions included greater staff motivation and better performance.

Improved communication

One special feature of the model project was the teaching of media skills adapted especially for SMEs. Training was also given on using information technology for dealing with health issues and using the internet. The project set up its own WWW server which was available to the model enterprises as a common information platform.

Evaluation and results

A final staff survey was carried out to discover what changes staff felt had taken place within the company as well as changes in their personal attitudes and behaviour. A number of factors were noted:

n *Better health at the workplace*

The vast majority of employees said that they found the sample workplaces and the information on ergonomics very useful. A better working atmosphere was also reported. Most of the companies felt that improving employee health was worthwhile and that continuing to do so was beneficial.

n *Success of health co-ordinators*

Although a successful concept, a problem did arise – should that individual leave the company, their knowledge and expertise would go with them. However, it was hoped that the company would be sufficiently motivated to continue its good work and that the new organisation would benefit from the health co-ordinator’s expertise.

n *The “health building set”*

The experiences gained from this project have been collated in the “health building set”, a publication outlining the essential tools for promoting employee health in SMEs according to individual requirements.

It is clear that SMEs are reluctant to accept generalised solutions as they are far too varied for such a broad-based approach to be effective. SMEs need the kind of support that enables them to organise health promotion in a way that suits their particular organisation.