Investment in work health promotion in small and medium-sized enterprises in Germany

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Abstract

Economic success of companies is related to the rate of absenteeism and the rate of fluctuation, but also to the subjective experience of the employees. During economic difficult situations, enterprises wanted and had to motivate their employees to maintain their productivity and motivation to work. Investments in work health promotion-measures resulted to be a good way to do this. Workplace health promotion turned out to be a suitable way to boost and/or maintain the motivation of employees. Authors of the article give an overview of work health promotion (WHP) in Germany (especially in small and medium enterprises) and analyze implementation strategies, costs, key-success-factors and obstacles before or during the implementation of WHP-measures.

Key words: investment in work health promotion, work health management, workplace health promotion

Introduction

In the last five years a straight increase of mental health problems, like burnout, depressions and even suicide are documented, several of them related to the financial and economic crisis, which started in 2007 [1–4]. The common trend of rising numbers of chronic diseases like coronary heart disease or diabetes [5, 6], also provoke high costs due to absenteeism and shortfall in production. A changing working environment, globalization and the increasing use of technology (automation and information technology) are raising the pressure on enterprises to be as competitive as possible, to maintain in the market [7]. This pressure is also felt by the employees, especially during times of crisis. Enterprises have therefore two big challenges to manage during crisis: to maintain in the market and at the same time, preserve their trained staff.

More and more companies and service providers have recognized these challenges and the changes in working requirements and started innovative human resource (HR) management systems. They are combined with a systematic health and generation management to face the new requirements: demographic change and shortages in skilled workers [7]. Several works illustrate examples of successfully implemented worksite health management (WHM) programs. Just mere rare are the works concerning the financial issue of WHM.

This paper aims to give an overview of the current status of work health promotion measures in Germany, possible implementation strategies and costs related to the implementation. The terms of Workplace Health Promotion (WHP), worksite health promotion and work health promotion do all refer to the same issue: health-promoting activities at the workplace and will be used mutually.

1. Work Health Promotion

The Ottawa Charter defines health promotion as “the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve their health. […] Therefore, health promotion is not just the responsibility of the health sector, but goes beyond healthy life-styles to well-being” [8]. Health should therefore be considered where people spend a lot of time, like in schools and universities, in the environment and urban planning and of course in the working environment. Behavioral prevention, on the one side, deals with the modification of people’s behavior or habits, to enhance them to act positively up on their health
(for example to stop smoking or do more physical activity). Setting-based prevention, on the other side, modifies the conditions, having an impact on people’s health (for example leadership interventions, participative approaches or ergonomic design or correction of workplaces) [9].

The working environment is one of the most important areas of life where people spend a lot of time; that’s why it is a crucial topic in the everyday life of employers and employees. In the Luxembourg Declaration of 1997, WHP is named as “the combined efforts of employers, employees and society to improve the health and well-being of people at work” [10]. They figured out that this can just be achieved through a combination of improvements in the organizational and working environment, the promotion of active participation and the encouragement of personal development of the employees. These three issues include the situational prevention and setting-based prevention approach and emphasize the WHO approach to have an integral view on health [10]. So WHP can be seen, as the application of the health promotion term of the Ottawa Charter on the working sector and the people working in it. Understood in this way, “health promotion generates living and working conditions that are safe, stimulating, satisfying and enjoyable” [8]. As a normal working person spends at least eight hours per day at work, the working environment should be beneficial for health. That’s exactly the aim of work health promotion: to make an impact on peoples behavior in making healthy choices, but also in changing the setting to be favoring health instead of burdening it.

In many enterprises health issues are still equalized with occupational safety (OS). But occupational safety is characterized by the relationship of work and illness, and therefore (still) mainly determined by occupational medicine [11]. Occupational safety and worksite health promotion are overlapping areas, but it has slightly different aims than WHP. Main goals of OS is to prevent work-related illnesses, illness-related absence from the workplace and workplace accidents. It should preserve the work ability of the employees (especially of the older ones), reduce noise, the exposure to hazardous substances and psychological stress at the workplace [12]. OS is therefore mainly oriented at illnesses and diseases. WHP on the contrary is mainly oriented in maintaining and improving health and enhancing health-favoring conditions. Issues like globalization, unemployment, increasing use of technology (automation and information technology) or the changes in employment practices (e.g. part-time, tele-work or loan-workers) are affecting in one way or another everybody and makes it necessary to act [13]. Working persons are affected in a special way: longer working hours or shorter deadlines to deliver products or services to clients on time; global readiness to travel, to collaborate or supervise colleagues in subsidiaries around the globe and the need to multitask. Uncertainty about the job, short-term contracts vs. permanent contracts, double-burden for working parents or people with family members in need of care, organizing job and family; etc. are social requirements or challenges an individual has to cope with. At the same time, values as personal development, appreciation, communication and participation got more important [13]. It’s clear, that “work can cause ill-health if employees have to work within health-damaging working conditions, the available skills are inadequate, or the mutual support from colleagues is lacking. At the same time work can be a resource for personal development and enhancement of personal skills” [10].

In the future, successful organizations will have to have well-qualified, motivated and healthy employees. This includes a shift in the attitude of owners, in recognizing employees as more than a mere cost factor, but as a necessary success factor for the organization. Work health promotion can play an important role to equip people and organizations with the necessary skills to face all these challenges. The organizations can benefit with reduced sickness related costs, increased productivity, better motivated employees and improved working relationships to be ready for future challenges [10, 14, 15]. But its not an utopia: Degner could already show, that in successful companies employees have more extensive possibilities for participation, higher demands in quality and responsibility, intrinsic values as well as higher motivation, higher disposition for mobility and better team orientation, professional efficiency and a lower emotional exhaustion [16].

2. Work health promotion measures

There are several activities in the working environment, which may have an impact on the health of the employees. Any activity is just successful, if it is implemented in a way, that the employees (can) accept it. It has to be taken into account different preferences, accessibility, the form of (co-)payment and the estimated time (duration and execution during working hours or in leisure time).

Physical activity

The positive impact of physical activity is well known, but in Europe most of the people (60%) say about themselves, that they are never or very seldom physically active. In Germany the situation is just marginally better: 51% are not at all or seldom physically active [17]. But a lack of physical activity is one of the reasons for obesity, cardiovascular diseases, high blood pressure or diabetes. These are the most common diseases in developed countries [5]. This is the reason, why several programs of work health promotion try to activate employees to more physical activity and make an impact on their health behavior. Typical activities realized through WHP are Yoga, back therapy training, running groups or “activity breaks” of 10–15 minutes, during working sessions [18]. Bigger enterprises often have their own sports club.¹ WHP programs can cooperate with those clubs or make a membership with incentives more attractive to employees.