

Promotion of Mental Health and Well-being in Workplaces

Key Facts

The case for action

- One in four EU citizens can expect to experience a mental health problem during their lifetimes; a Eurobarometer EU-wide survey in 2010 found that 15% of adults seek help every year from mental health professionals, while 7% are prescribed antidepressants [1].
- Stress, depression and anxiety related disorders are one of the top three causes of illness in European workplaces[2]. They can be the principal cause of work related illness in some sectors, e.g. education and financial sectors in England in 2007 [3].
- A poor working environment can increase the risk of psychosocial stress, which is itself a predictor of future depression and anxiety. There has been a continued decrease over 20 years in the number of employees who are very satisfied with their working conditions. Jobs increasingly involve working to tight deadlines[4]. Boundaries between home and work are also blurred.
- Workplaces are constantly changing and being restructured: at least 20%, and in some countries (Sweden & Finland) more than 50% of employees have experienced substantial restructuring or reorganisation at work in the last 3 years[4]. If managed badly, restructuring can increase the risk of stress and poor mental health [5].
- The total costs of depression alone in the European Economic Area were estimated to be €136.3 billion (2007 prices). The majority of these costs, €99.3 billion have an impact on productivity [6, 7]. In contrast cardiovascular disease was estimated to cost the EU economy €36.1 billion in lost productivity (2007 prices) [8].
- Poor mental health and stress at work can lead to poor performance, increased sick leave, early retirement and/or exclusion from work. If a business is perceived to have high levels of absenteeism; it can also have a detrimental impact on morale, staff loyalty and recruitment.
- There are also major costs to health and social welfare systems. The Organisation of Austrian Social Insurance Funds reported that 29% of all early retirement was due to mental health problems in 2007 [9]. Poor mental health is the leading or second reason for long term disability benefits in most EU countries: 40% of disability benefits in Great Britain(€3.9 billion) in 2007 [10].
- Rates of employment for people with long term mental health problems can be as low as 10% compared with 60% -70% of the general EU population [11]. Individuals with mental health problems can experience multiple barriers to both obtaining and maintaining employment

What are the benefits of promoting mental health and well-being at work?

- Employment in a good working environment is beneficial to physical and mental health. It can have positive economic impacts for business, as well as for health and social security systems. It can help facilitate the implementation of the EU's "Europe 2020" agenda for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.
- For people who have experienced poor mental health, maintaining or returning to employment can be a vital element in the recovery process, helping self esteem, confidence and social inclusion.
- A healthy working environment can mean less staff absenteeism, staff turnover, interpersonal conflicts and causes for complaint. A healthier working environment can help governments avoid some of the costs associated with absenteeism and withdrawal from the labour market. The

workplace is also an important setting for the early identification of non-work related poor mental health.

- A survey of 29,000 employees in 15 countries worldwide found that organisations where health and well-being were perceived by employees to be well managed had a level of performance more than 2.5 times greater than in organisations where health and well-being were poorly managed. Companies where health and well-being were poorly managed were also four times less likely to retain staff talent within a 12 month period compared to companies with a good approach to health and well-being. [12, 13].
- Early actions to promote a healthy working environment and culture can have economic benefits. Productivity losses to employers could be reduced by 30%; in one study for a 1,000 employee company this might mean be a net reduction in costs in excess of €300,000 per annum [14]
- The UK Foresight study on Mental Capital and Well-being reported substantial economic benefits that could arise from investment in stress and well-being audits, better integration of occupational and primary health care systems and an extension in flexible working hours arrangements which in turn can help individuals maintain a balance between work and family life. These savings would equate to almost €900 million per annum[15].

What can be done?

- There is an economic rationale for improved partnership working between health and social security systems, the social partners, occupational health services, individuals with lived experience of poor mental health, employers and employees to facilitate investment mental health and well-being in the workplace.
- A holistic approach is required. Systematic reviews and international guidelines support actions at both an organisational and individual level[16-19]. E.g. the UK Health and Safety Executive Management Standards for stress provide information to workplaces on the characteristics and culture of workplaces where work-related stress can be effectively managed[20].
- At an organisational level measures include identifying risks to health, promoting improved workplace culture, improved communication and opportunities for feedback between employees/ employers, better line management and leadership style, manageable workloads, flexible working arrangements and opportunities for career development.
- Measures targeted at individual employees can help build resilience and ability to cope with stressful situations when they arise. Programmes to promote health and wellness can also be protective. Employees also need to take some responsibility for maintaining health; they may work in partnership with employers to develop a mentally health workplace environment.
- Active labour market strategies can help support individuals with long standing mental health problems return to work[21].
- Social welfare systems need to be flexible so that individuals do not worry about not being able to regain social welfare benefits if a job does not work out. Tax systems need to be flexible to provide individuals with a financial incentive to engage in part time work. [22].

Key challenges

- While many positive initiatives in both public and private sector workplaces can be seen, actual implementation is most often found in large enterprises.

- Non-binding agreements, such as the 2004 Framework Agreement on prevention of work-related stress may take time to make a difference. Only 17.3% of EU occupational safety and health experts surveyed felt that the Agreement had been implemented effectively; only 29% believed it had any impact on actions to tackle work-related stress [23].
- The 'European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks' (ESENER) found that 79% of European managers are voicing concern about stress at work, and 40% about violence and harassment at work [24]. For larger enterprises (250+) 40-50% have procedures in place, but for smaller workplaces it stays at around 20% (10-19 employees) or 25-30% (20-49 employees). Lack of expertise and lack of technical support or guidance on how to manage psychosocial risks have been reported especially by smaller enterprises.
- Support from government is needed to stimulate actions in small and medium sized enterprises, but input from health and social security systems for workplace health promotion and occupational health services remains limited in many European countries, especially those with tax funded health care systems.

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