



Towards Healthy Organisations in Europe – From Utopia to Real Practice

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Introduction

Originally initiated by WHO's health promotion policy approach, which also emphasized the setting approach as an instrument to disseminate good practice in response to individual needs of specific sectors, the world of work has also been addressed from a public health perspective. Under this influence, a number of health promotion programmes addressing workplaces started in a few European countries in the late 70ties. They started with a traditional lifestyle focus in the spirit of health education programmes. Today, more than 3 decades have passed by, and workplace health promotion has many different faces.¹ We can identify a broad range of new topics, stakeholders, coalitions, policy and programme developments. WHP very clearly is a multi-professional endeavour involving many enterprise-based disciplines such as HR, plant and line managers, employees and their representatives, occupational health professionals, safety specialists and supra-enterprise players such as umbrella organisations of businesses and industries, social partner organisations and social security institutions – to name just a few. Core priorities in our times include issues like: work-life balance, demographic change and the ageing workforce, precarious work and health inequalities, innovation and life-long learning; organisational re-structuring and health impacts as well as social responsibility.

Principles of WHP have been widened to address all types of organisations including schools, health care and welfare institutions, labour market institutions and public administrations.

The most significant driver of this change have been the manifold changes to our societies which are based on deep socio-economic changes to the way we work and live.² Work intensification, for example, is one of the most important trends in working life with dramatic impacts on the quality of community and family life. Work intensification captures a number of trends which converged in the 90s in all industrialised countries. It is more than just an increase in long hours, the shift away from the „standard job“ (Monday to Friday 9 until 5) and inflexible schedules; it means increase-in-performance expectations, which result in an implicit redefinition of the

¹ Chu, C.; G. Breucker; N. Harris, and A. Stizel. 2000. „Health-Promoting Workplaces – International Settings Development.“ *Health Promotion International* 15(2): 2000.

² Lowe, G. 2000. *The Quality of Work. A People-Centred Agenda*. Toronto, ON: Oxford University Press.



employment contract. ‚Work-life balance‘ simply reflects this still ongoing change.³ On the other hand we are facing a substantial increase in precarious employment (such as low wage employment, employment opportunities for semi- and non-skilled workers, part-time employment). These trends cause new risks to social inclusion and generally to the quality of life.

The quality of working life and our welfare systems, which in turn form the basis for economic development and prosperity in our societies, are strongly interdependent.⁴ Therefore, it is essential today and tomorrow that our labour markets provide high-quality jobs *especially* for women; the quality of female employment is a very critical factor since on the one hand it is one of the most effective means of combating social exclusion and child poverty and on the other it helps create quality childcare, which in turn will impact positively on the next generation - our future human capital ! The current transition to a knowledge-based economy model is already changing the requirements for the workforces and the strong focus is on cognitive capabilities and skills – the basis for innovation.

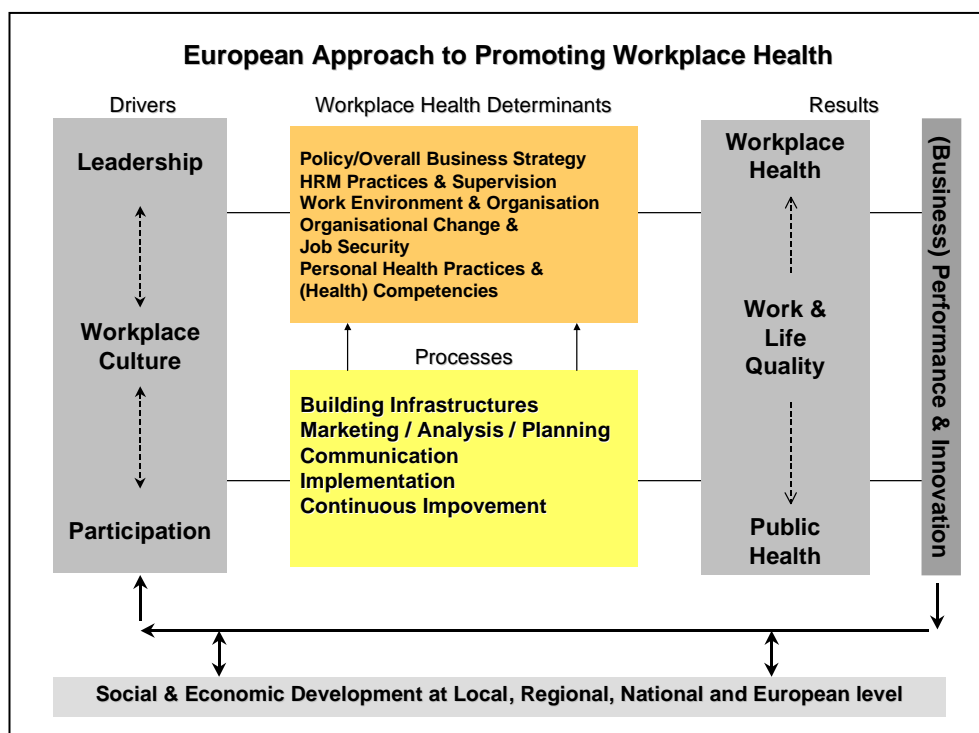
The Future Role of Promoting Workplace Health

Against this background, the understanding of workplace health and its contribution to the quality of life and economic development has also changed. We are now talking about the ‚healthy organisation‘ which takes health and embeds it in how the entire organisation operates. This understanding goes a leap beyond health promotion and links health to performance, to learning and to innovation. The notion of the ‚healthy organisation‘ combines individual health practices and organisational conditions, which in turn includes organisational culture, leadership principles and values.⁵ The graph below shows the Model of the European Approach to promoting workplace health developed in pursuance of the project „European Network for Workplace Health Promotion“.

³ Duxbury, L. and C. Higgins. 2001. Work-Life Balance in the New Millennium: Where Are We? Where Do We Need to Go? Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks, Discussion Paper No. W-12 [www.cprn.org].

⁴ Esping-Andersen, G. et al. 2002. Why We Need a New Welfare State. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁵ Sauter, S., S. Lim, and L. Murphy. 1996. „Organizational Health: a New Paradigm for Occupational Stress Research at NIOSH.“ Japanese Journal of Occupational Mental Health 4:248-54.



This new understanding which reflects the changes to community and working life also broadens the role of public health: the level and quality of health protection in our communities becomes a fundamental ingredient for social and economic development at local, regional, national and European level.

WHP in Practice: Where are we now in Europe?

The current state of dissemination and implementation of good workplace health promotion practice in Europe can be characterized by the following observations:

- Despite the emergence of a new concept of workplace health promotion the understanding and practical approaches highly differ in Europe due to a high level of diversity in terms of professional orientation of the different disciplines, different cultures and different values guiding the relationship between the various stakeholders etc.
- The knowledge base on how to organise working life in a health-conducive manner is established even if the different knowledge sources still lack sufficient interdisciplinary integration (disciplines like work organisation, job design and



organisational change management have significantly contributed to a broader perspective).

- There is a deep gap between available knowledge and the current level of implementation. WHP still dominates in specific types of organisations - mostly larger, private sector companies - which place a strong emphasis on people management. Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) who form the backbone of most economies and represent the vast majority of enterprises have not been reached by workplace health promotion campaigns. SMEs are also the achilles heel of job creation and innovation in all economies of the European Union.
- Only a very few decision-makers in politics, social security institutions and business are convinced that investment in workplace health (could be substituted by community health) can contribute to core objectives whether they are of social, health-related or economic nature.
- Correspondingly, the quality of infrastructures which could support the dissemination and implementation of good practice is very limited characterized by a high level of fragmentation. On the other hand, the huge diversity of the European region provides an endless reservoir of knowledge and innovation.

The Way Forward: The Strategy of the European Network for Workplace Health Promotion

The European Network for WHP (ENWHP) - an informal association of public health institutions and health and safety institutes from all European Union countries, the Economic Area countries and a number of accession and candidate countries - has been working on the dissemination of good practice since the mid 90s, supported by the European Commission under the Public Health Programmes. The network regards itself as a facilitator for the dissemination of good workplace health practice at European level. In its current strategy ENWHP promotes the development of networks or forums at national level in order to bridge the gap between action at European and national level. These networks/forums will provide a platform for knowledge transfer within and between countries overcoming the fragmented infrastructures in Europe and will act as a lever to develop and strengthen the case for investing in good workplace health practice.



European Network
for Workplace Health
Promotion (ENWHP)
www.enwhp.org

In France, the network initiative is organised by ANACT/Lyon, the French national contact office of the ENWHP. For further information please refer to the website of the ENWHP www.enwhp.org or contact the secretariat in Essen/Germany, email: enwhp@bkk-bv.de.