



The project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 847386



## Selecting interventions based on workers' needs: Why and how to ensure participation

December 2022



# Selecting interventions based on workers' needs

## Why and how of participation

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## Executive Summary

This policy brief is intended for Human Resources and Occupational Health professionals, managers, and union representatives.

The brief introduces the importance of promoting and protecting mental health in the workplace through workplace Interventions. A participatory approach is suggested as a way of Identifying needs and to subsequently select Interventions that fit the needs. The H-Work needs analysis is Introduced as one method to identify which interventions are needed to promote and protect mental health in the workplace.

## Introduction

### Why are workplace Interventions needed?

According to the World Health Organization (2020), 25% of the population in Europe suffer from depression or anxiety each year, and 50% of chronic sick leave can be attributed to depression and anxiety. Poor mental health and well-being thus has severe costs for individuals, organisations but also society as a whole. Workplaces are an ideal arena for implementing interventions to promote and protect good worker mental health and well-being.

### What is participation?

To ensure interventions successfully improve employee mental health and wellbeing, interventions need to fit the needs of workers in an organization. To ensure this fit, it is important that the process by which interventions are selected use a participatory approach (De Angelis et al., 2021). Participation in relation to interventions means that employees, managers, and other key stakeholders work together to identify what the key issues are that need to be addressed, for example, whether communication needs to improve, or workers need to make changes to the way they work. Once they have agreed what key issues need to be addressed, the task is to identify which interventions may successfully address these key issues (Nielsen & Christensen, 2021).

### Why is participation important?

In Europe, European Union (EU) legislation [Council Directive 89/391/EEC of June 12, 1989](#) requires employers to assess and manage all types of risks to workers' health and safety associated with all types of hazards in the work environment, including adverse working conditions. The focus is thus on prevention; however, research has shown that interventions sometimes work, and sometimes not. A possible explanation is that interventions implemented do not address the needs of workers in the organization.

### Key issues:

- Poor mental health is a major challenge in the European countries
- Workplace interventions may promote and protect mental health
- Involving employees, managers and other key stakeholders is key to identifying appropriate interventions

## What are the benefits of participation?

Many benefits have been identified of designing interventions using a participatory approach (Nielsen & Christensen, 2021):

- Participation ensures that key issues as experienced by workers are identified which provide a good basis for selecting appropriate interventions
- Participation ensures that workers are involved in selecting which interventions may effectively address the key issues identified.
- Workers are more likely to feel ownership and engage with intervention activities when they have had a say in which interventions are needed.
- Participation ensures that workers, managers and other key stakeholders engage in a dialogue. Such a dialogue facilitates a shared understanding of what the key issues are and what interventions are needed.

In the following we outline a concrete example of how to involve workers, managers and other key stakeholders who have a responsibility for managing mental health and well-being in the workplace. We describe the H-Work process for designing interventions in small and medium-sized and public sector organizations.

### Participation ensures:

- Identification of key areas that need addressing
- Appropriate interventions are selected
- Ownership of and engagement in intervention activities
- Dialogue among employees, managers, and other key stakeholders

## The H-Work needs analysis

### The objective of the needs analysis

The objective of the needs analysis is to inform an action plan and choice of interventions at multiple levels of the organization (De Angelis et al., 2020). The conceptual background of the needs analyses follows a bottom-up and participatory approach where the workers themselves have an active part. The needs analyses as a tool have a multilevel perspective which is first ensured by interviewing stakeholders at different levels of the organization (middle managers, senior managers, HR, and workers) and second by asking questions related to needs at different levels of the organisation.

The needs analysis consists of:

- A focus group interview including a cognitive mapping exercise,
- Semi-structured interviews with middle and senior managers,
- Context measure of programmes, policies, and practices for mental health
- A plan for a stakeholder meeting including a cognitive mapping exercise
- An action plan providing suggestions for how to progress

### The focus group interview for workers

The purpose of the focus group interview with the workers is to gain mutual knowledge of psychosocial factors that affect mental health and well-being at work in general and to identify any actions and interventions needed to improve mental health and wellbeing in the workplace.

The interview guide is built around a “cognitive mapping exercise” to make it easier to talk about stigmatised issues as mental health and thereby investigating the needs for interventions. The cognitive mapping exercise is used to gather participant reflections on how job demands and resources relate to the mental health of workers in their organisation. The respondents are asked to individually reflect on the question: *What are the current key issues for mental health and wellbeing in your workplace?* The facilitator presents and describes the map (Figure 1). The circles show the IGLO levels of the work environment. The square shape in the middle shows how all these parts in the work environment interact with each other. Each circle (or level) has some work-related categories attached that the facilitator should explain for the participants. On the individual level, the categories are work-life balance, work content, and work context and characteristics. The group level refers to interpersonal relationships with

### Needs analyses:

- The interventions should be aligned with the employees' needs using a participatory approach
- All stakeholders should be included in the Intervention process
- The needs should be identified using the IGLO-model including all levels of the organisation

co-workers. The leader level refers to relationships with the leader and leadership behavior. The organization level refers to culture of support, respect and fairness, stigma, policies and practices, interpersonal relationship clients, and employee involvement and development. The P reflects an area where the participants can park the Post It notes they are not sure about which level belongs to.

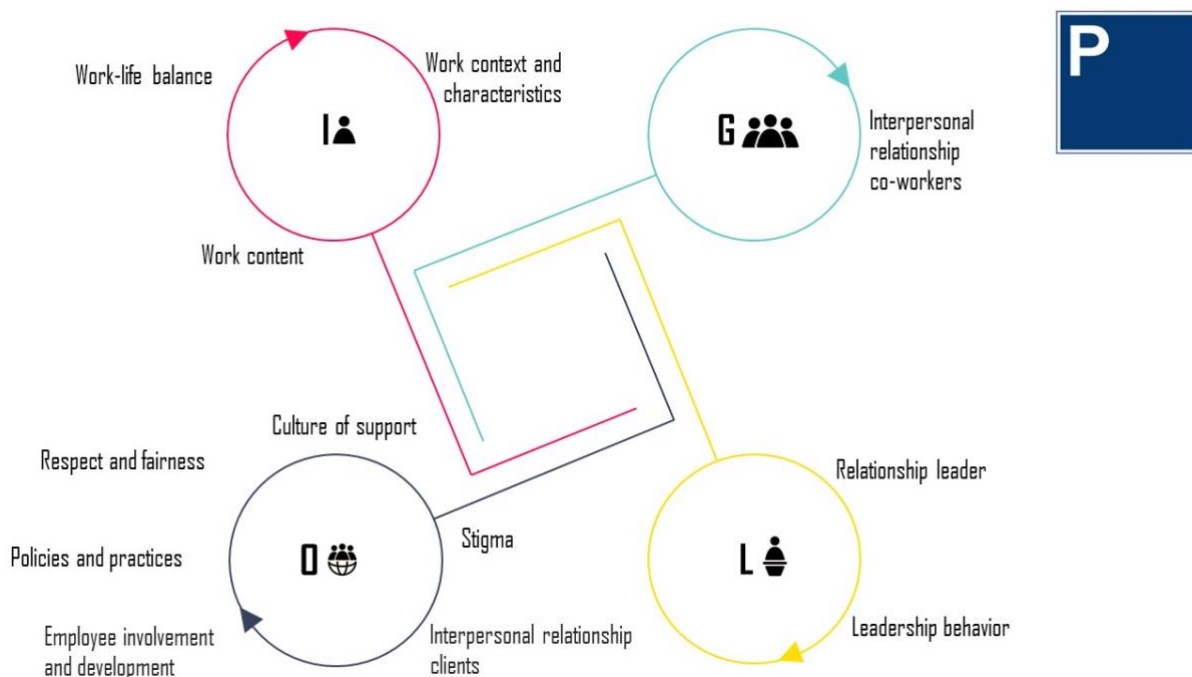


Figure 1: Cognitive map for FG interview

Based on the results from the mapping exercise, it is identified what are the main things that should be improved and/or preserved to ensure the intervention site is a mentally healthy place to be and work

In addition to focus group, the needs analyses also include interviews with middle managers and senior managers where the purpose is to understand the middle manager and senior manager experiences, ideas, and perspectives around the needs for multi-level interventions to improve mental health and well-being for their workers and results from the context measure where the purpose is to capture the extent to which management is committed to dealing with mental health issues, what sort of policies, practices and programs are in place and how they are perceived. A summary of the needs from all the included stakeholders will be presented in a stakeholder meeting consisting of two parts. The purpose of the stakeholder meeting is to, by a participatory process including all stakeholders (middle managers, senior managers, HR, and workers), develop and decide upon an action plan and choice of multi-level interventions for improving mental health and well-being in the workplace.



## Why a participatory approach in the needs analysis?

- To ensure understanding of the rationale behind the interventions and ownership of the interventions that are chosen across the organization.
- To give the workers a better understanding of why the interventions are needed.
- To enable the use of the workers' own expertise on which demands and resources needs to be changed.
- To optimize intervention fit to the organizational context and facilitates the process.
- To create a dialogue between workers and leaders about the changes that must be done.

## Reference

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The project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 847386

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