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Mental Health and Wellbeing in Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs)

The Role of the Social Partners

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Mental Health and Wellbeing in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

Executive Summary

The Social Partners have played and continue to play a key role in influencing and developing policy on mental health in the workplace. The costs associated with mental health problems are high and constitute as much as 4% of GDP. The actions of the Social Partners can play a significant role in improving the practice of mental health interventions in the workplace to the benefit of all involved.

At EU level, the Social Partners can redouble their efforts to support, develop and implement workplace targeted policy measures on mental health. At national level they can support policy development and also a wide range of implementation measures that can help promote mental health in the workplace.

The role of the Social Partners

The H-WORK project has carried out multiple interventions to promote mental health and wellbeing in real life workplace settings in multiple EU member States over the past three years. These field trials of diverse mental health promotion methods provide a rich basis of experience to inform the policy recommendations made here.

The Social Partners (Employer Organisations, Trade Unions) have played a major role in the development of workplace health policy over the years, especially in relation to Health and Safety in the workplace. Though the level of cooperation between them varies in each Member State (more formal cooperation arrangements are more widespread in Northern Europe), the potential contribution of the Social Partners to the further development of workplace health policy remains substantial and large.

Regardless of whether there are formal Social Partner Agreements already in place, both Employers and Trade Unions can still play a major role in the further development of workplace health policy, especially in relation to the emerging issue of mental health.

The policy levers available to them such as advocacy to develop social partner agreements, supporting or providing training, researching and others can all be used either separately or in concert to achieve the aim of improving workplace conditions that promote the mental health and wellbeing of the workforce.

Key issues

- Policy recommendations are informed by extensive H-WORK field trials
- Social partners can use their influence constructively and consistently

Why should the Social Partners become involved?

The Social Partners have both separate and shared interests in promoting the cause of mental health promotion in the workplace. For Employers, improved mental health and wellbeing offers the prospect of reduced absence from work, improved workforce morale and the costs savings and productivity benefits associated with these. In addition, engaging in good mental wellbeing practice in the workplace can enhance the reputation and branding of employers.

For Trade Unions, their interests are also served by improving health and wellbeing of their members – it helps improve working conditions, improve their membership offer and improve the employability of their members.

In addition to these sectional interests, the Social Partners can (individually or collectively) contribute to improvement in the public health of the working population.

The costs of mental health problems are high – these costs were estimated by the OECD to be more than 4% of GDP or over €600bn in the EU 28 (OECD 2018). The biggest single contributor to these costs related to productivity loss (1.6%), which is a bigger cost than either health care costs or social welfare costs.

Dealing with mental health issues in the workplace falls within the remit of OSH policy and practice. The preventive approach, the promotion of good working conditions and the provision of appropriate measures in relation to Return to Work following illness are all tools that are used to protect and promote good mental wellbeing among employees (Nielsen et al, 2018; Wynne et al., 2015). In addition, the 2023 EU Communication on a Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health reiterates the importance of workplace as a setting for undertaking action on mental health and wellbeing.

Key issues

- Improvement of services to their members
- Health and economic benefits

What should they do?

The recommendations below are informed by the need identified in the project to address and improve mental health at work and that specific policy action will support this aim.

The Social Partners can act at EU level through the various consultative means available to them liaison with the Parliament, advocacy with DG-Employment and DG Sante, interaction with EU Agencies such as EU-OSHA and Eurofound). Such support has been provided in the past, but there is a need to step up EU level activities so that they are more sustainable and effective in the long term. Instruments such as guidelines, awareness campaigns, training and research initiatives are all needed here, and the support of the Social Partners is central, if the EU is to step up and strengthen its response.

At EU level, the Social Partners through their representation on the Boards of relevant EU agencies and through their (joint or separate) advocacy activities should:

- ensure that the issue of the mental health remains high on the agenda of DG Sante and DG Employment, in particular, supporting the aims and programmes of the recent 2023 Communication on a Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health is a useful starting point;
- continue to seek to improve the monitoring and regulation of OSH legislation in relation to all aspects of mental health at work;
- advocate to improve the practice of Return to Work, following mental health related absence from work;
- support the implementation of public health promotion measures in the workplace.

There is a range of actions that may be taken by the Social Partners at national level. These are outlined below:

- include provisions for promoting mental health and wellbeing in Social Partnership Agreements;
- jointly – or separately - develop policy statements and guidelines on the improvement of mental health in the workforce;
- promote research in the area;
- support the development and implementation of training on improving/addressing mental health in the workplace;
- jointly lobby Governments to develop policy in the area;
- launch information campaigns targeted at their memberships and the wider public;
- support the development of expertise in their own employees;
- support implementation of mental health and wellbeing initiatives amongst their members – provide expertise where needed.

Where there is a tradition of Social Partner Agreements at national level, these actions can be jointly undertaken.

Key issues

- Collaborate at national and EU level to promote mental wellbeing initiatives

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