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TRAINING FOR WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION

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Training for workplace mental health promotion

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Executive Summary

This briefing is part of a series prepared as part of the EU-funded H-WORK project. It builds on the outcomes of the project and provides concrete recommendations addressing groups responsible for training workplace actors on mental health and wellbeing issues at EU and national levels in order to ensure that appropriate training is provided to all relevant stakeholders. In particular, it draws on the general experience of the H-WORK field trials in identifying issues that are of importance for training, as well as on external evidence in this regard.

These targeted and specific recommendations are informed by the statutory requirements in relation to health and safety as well as best practice in managing mental wellbeing in the workplace from the areas of Workplace Health Promotion and Return to Work practice. It therefore addresses a comprehensive approach to mental health issues in the workplace, in line with the European Commission's recent Communication in this regard (Commission, 2023).

This policy is aimed at organisations, human resources staff, leaders or managers and people who manage other people or teams, specialists in prevention and occupational health, workers and their representatives and European and national policy makers, with the intention of strengthening competences aimed at recognising mental health problems at work and taking action.

Why is training for mental health promotion important?

There is an increasing awareness of mental health and well-being problems in society at large and the impact that they have on the workplace. These include mental well-being issues (e.g., negative emotional tone), minor mental health illnesses (e.g., depression, anxiety), to major mental health problems (e.g., schizophrenia). Health services at large need a range of responses to address these problems, as do workplaces, even though the responsibility of the workplace is limited in comparison to society-based services.

Employees in workplaces may develop any of these negative mental health and wellbeing conditions during their working lives, and employers need to know how to deal with them as they arise. Moreover, the workplace may actively contribute to the development of mental health problems through the mechanism of occupational stress. In addition, the workplace also offers the opportunity to promote and protect good mental health through the appropriate structuring of work and work practices as well as the funding/provision of some support services.

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. In this context, it is essential that adequate training is provided to all staff (specialist and non-specialist) who carry responsibility for dealing with mental health issues in the workplace. Taking advantage of the opportunities to promote mental health wellbeing requires staff within workplaces to understand the possibilities as well as the limitations that the workplace can play in the approach to mental health. The main objective of a mental health policy in the workplace should be to raise awareness of mental health issues and to promote good mental wellbeing and prevent problems arising with appropriate actions and interventions. The European Commission's 2023 Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health (Commission, 2023) reinforces its commitment to the role of training and the importance of the workplace as a setting for promoting mental health.

Key issues:

- The costs of mental ill health to the workplace and society are high.
- There is a greater awareness of mental health issues in society at large and in the workplace.
- Workplaces need a coherent response to mental health and wellbeing – training is needed for this.
- The recent Commission Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health underlines the importance of the workplace and training.

What should be done?

A comprehensive approach to mental health and wellbeing at work requires information, skills and an approach that on the one hand meets the legal requirements of health and safety legislation while also adopting best practice in relation to managing mental health problems and mental health promotion (MHP).

Health and safety legislation obliges employers to undertake risk assessments in relation to workplace-based threats to mental health (e.g., occupational stressors, bullying) and to take preventive and protective measures to reduce the impact of them. Recognised psychosocial risk factors include:

- Pace or workload
- Role conflict
- Emotional demands
- Work content and/or working time
- Lack of autonomy and low levels of participation in decision making
- Interpersonal relationships (internal/external)
- Social support
- Job insecurity
- Harassment in any of its forms.

Employees may develop mental health problems that are not related to the workplace and when this occurs best practice indicates that workplaces may provide access to confidential counselling services while also implementing structured Return To Work practices where employees are absent from work due to a mental health issue.

MHP best practice may involve identifying the areas where the workplace and work practices can contribute to better mental health and wellbeing (e.g., work scheduling, social interaction at work) while also using the workplace to improve employees' skills in relation to managing their own mental health (e.g., by providing training in coping skills). Interventions should especially be focused on two aspects - preventive organizational measures aimed mainly at eliminating risk and secondly on coping measures aimed at increasing the skills of workers to manage threats to mental wellbeing through training and information. Each of these areas of activity requires an information and skill set for which training is needed.

Key issues:

- Mental Health Promotion addresses one of the biggest workplace health problems of today.
- Actions on mental health in the workplace need to be comprehensive and use methods that are consistent with H&S regulations as well as best practices in MHP.

Who should be trained?

The potential trainees for workplace MHP can come from many different backgrounds, e.g., occupational medicine and nursing, health safety practitioners, public health professionals, human resource management and many more. In addition, it is important that the Social Partners have a clear understanding of the issues, knowledge and skills involved on workplace mental health management.

These groups have disparate needs for training, given the difference in their backgrounds and therefore it is important to conduct a training needs analysis prior to the design and implementation of training. There is no consensus regarding who should take on the responsibility for managing mental health in the workplace – there are differences in relation to workplace size, the availability and role of professionals specialised in occupational medicine or nursing, health and safety or human resource management and the degree to which services in these areas are actually available in the Member States. In addition, the issue of who should be responsible for the mental health role in SMEs and micro-enterprises is difficult to resolve, but it is clear that external services should be available to support this large sector of the workforce.

Addressing these issues begins to define the content of training for these disparate groups. Undertaking a training needs analysis is a necessary starting point. For non-professionals such as HRM or general management in SMEs, awareness raising of the issues is important, as is information on the availability of relevant services. For professionals, it is important to raise awareness of the areas in which they have not received training – this is likely to focus on health promotion issues and approaches as well as return to work practices.

Some examples:

- There are many examples of training programmes that address the needs of the disparate groups who can make a difference. There is a growing evidence base that training programmes can work for both professional and non-professional training.
- For example, e-learning was used in multiple projects on mental health promotion. One programme - the Healthy Together project - addressed the needs of SMEs in rural areas in Ireland and Iceland (Hodgins et al., 2010). Another addressed the experience of training employers and employees over a 7-year period in Bulgaria (Georgieva 2021). In the US, the CDC Work@Health® Program trained employers in workplace health promotion.

Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1.** Training content needs to include statutory responsibilities for managing stress risks in the workplace. This is especially important for non-health and safety professionals, through many involved in occupational health and safety could benefit from training in this area also.
- **Recommendation 2.** Effectively managing workplace mental health requires knowledge and skills in relation to health and safety, return to work as well as mental health promotion. Knowledge and skills in these areas is required by all workplace actors in order for a comprehensive approach to be developed.
- **Recommendation 3.** Ensure that multiple target groups are trained in MHP. These should include actors from within the workplace as well as external MHP service suppliers and the Social Partners.
- **Recommendation 4.** Consider the issue of certification of training in MHP. This is important in order to promote its take-up by relevant groups as well as ensuring the quality of the training provided.
- **Recommendation 5.** Address the needs of SMEs and micro-enterprises in relation to awareness raising and training.
- **Recommendation 6.** Extend the availability of current training approaches throughout the EU and the Member States.

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