

“Fit for the Future” – the Austrian Programme to Maintain Work Ability

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Abstract

In 2008 the Austrian Social Insurance for Occupational Risks and the Social Security Administration jointly started to develop a prevention programme to reduce illness-related early retirement and maintain work ability.

On the whole, 20 companies in highly demanding industries¹ with about 12,500 employees are participating. By using standardised processes and methods, the employees' work ability status is analysed. The analysis is primarily based on the *Work Ability Index Plus*TM, an extended version and further development of the Work Ability Index approved by Prof. Juhani Ilmarinen

Key terms: maintaining work ability; analysis with the *Work Ability Index Plus*TM

Fit for the Future – Maintaining Work Ability

Introduction

Maintaining work ability and reducing illness-related early retirement are goals we need to achieve quickly in Austria as in many other European countries. Even more so given the demographic changes taking place in Austria and the country's ensuing efforts to raise economic performance and finance social and health services.

Economic objectives might have given rise to this programme but increasing work ability itself is a win-win situation for everyone involved, as economic interests go hand in hand with the workers' interest in their health and quality of life. Maintaining work ability also means better health, greater well-being, positive challenges and good life quality and thus has a direct influence on work and private life. Each additional year that people are able to work is both a personal and a macroeconomic gain.

Since the “Finnage” of the nineties, we have known that work ability can be improved by a set of carefully targeted measures and that most people can stay productive until an advanced age. All this provided the working conditions are designed such that they meet the varying requirements and reflect the varying strengths of the worker at the different stages of his life.

In the beginning of 2008 the AUVA, the Austrian Social Insurance for Occupational Risks, and the PVA, the Social Security Administration, were instructed by the Austrian state to jointly develop and sponsor a prevention programme that focused on the reduction of disability retirements and the maintenance and promotion of work ability and have it implemented nationwide by 2012.

A steering committee has been set up consisting of representatives of the AUVA, PVA, Chamber of Labour, Federal Economic Chamber, Federation of Austrian Industries and the Austrian Trade Union Federation as well as the project leaders. This committee takes the most important decisions regarding implementation of the programme.

Objectives

The “Fit for the Future – Maintaining Work Ability” programme is meant to support the maintenance and promotion of work ability of workers and employees in industries where demands on health are high.

The programme's targets are to:

¹ Construction, health sector, trade, iron and steel, cleaning and waste, transport, hotels

- prove that work ability can be maintained or even enhanced,
- develop a tool kit with successful measures and methods,
- publish the results as encouragement to other companies.

Target companies for the programme

Twenty companies from such highly demanding industries have agreed to participate in the programme:

1. Construction: Strabag, Habau including Held & Francke, Hentschläger, Staudinger (the latter two are part of the Austria Bau Group)
2. Trade: H&M
3. Iron and metal industry: Schinnerl, Liebherr, ABO, Julius Blum GmbH
4. Hotels and restaurants: Sana GmbH
5. Cleaning and waste disposal: Saubermacher
6. Transport: Blaguss Reise GmbH
7. Health: PremiamedGroup, Haus der Barmherzigkeit Group, Krankenhaus der Barmherzigen Schwestern (Vinzengroup, hospital), UKH Salzburg (accident hospital), Rehabzentrum Großmain (rehabilitation centre), Caritas Socialis, KAGES Stmk
8. Österreichische Post AG / Paketlogistik Österreich (PLÖ) Eastern Region (Austria Post, parcel & logistics)

These companies have committed to participate in the programme for approximately four years.

They have widely differing staff numbers and structures (e.g., H&M has a staff of 2,500 and shops all over Austria, whereas Schinnerl GmbH has a staff of 100 and one site at the small town Tulln).

Methods

By using standardised processes and tools, the work ability status of these companies is analysed, how much work ability is hampered or promoted is assessed, and, measures are implemented to improve work ability aiming at corporate culture, structures and process as well as staff behaviour. The efficiency of these measures is evaluated twice during the project and, if necessary, the measures are adjusted accordingly.

The support and consulting process adheres to the following two principles: involving staff as experts of their world of work, and creating a learning organisation, i.e., binding know-how to the company and spreading it throughout the company via multipliers.

The analysis was started only after an awareness-building phase had taken place, in which the concept of work ability was discussed so as to agree and settle on one common concept of the term.

The following analysis methods are used:

- semi-structured interviews discussing aspects of work ability and ageing,
- workshops with managers, workers' representatives and multipliers,
- focus groups with staff members,
- analysis of the companies' age structure – status-quo and forecasts for five and ten years to come,
- collection of further structural data of the companies,
- analyses of workplaces and work processes and their ergonomic design,

- survey among the entire staff with the *Work Ability Index Plus™*, an extended version of the Work Ability Index. The core of the analysis is this *Work Ability Index Plus™* (WAI Plus).

The key part of the questionnaire is the unchanged WAI (2nd edition; Tuomi K, Ilmarinen J, Jahkola A, et al; 1998) (1), the Freiburg Complaints List (Fahrenberg; 1975) and additional tested questions covering various new dimensions of work ability along the model “house of work ability”. We designed the questions covering the various dimensions of the work ability house along the same guidelines as for the WAI (people subjectively assess how they cope with demands). Specific aspects or items were chosen that had been tested in practice for many years, for which we had benchmark figures from the WAI and where therefore retest reliability was high (evaluation by IBG, 2008).

After the final data evaluation in 2012, we will first of all ascertain whether the WAI is at all applicable to the Austrian German-speaking area and to the Austrian culture.

Presently, scores for these dimensions health, competences, values, interest in work, co-operation, work conditions, management role are being developed.

Covering all work areas, the companies are fully evaluated three times with the WAI Plus; a maximum of 12,500 data points can be collected per run. In order to guarantee the anonymity of the questionnaire, the staff member is asked to create a unique code according to instructions provided. Only he will know his code and he will have to use it again for the second and third survey. This allows us to compare data and thus recognise how work ability has developed.

Results

The workers evaluated showed on the whole rather good average WAI scores of 40.84 (f: 40.52; m: 41.23). WAI scores decreased with age, low qualification, amount of night work, length of working hours, lack of support by superiors and negative social relationships.

Roughly on eight of the employees show critical WAI Scores. In many companies, especially in the health sector, emotional and psychical stressors influence work ability more negative than physical impacts.

8% of the population is decided to quit job, among them people of age under 30.

20% of workers between 55 and 59 years and 8% from 50- 54 years are decided to retire in the coming next years.

Life long learning and perspectives to develop until retirement are not achieved until now.

Based on the analysis, work ability experts and the project managers jointly develop measures to recover, maintain and promote work ability.

The intervention and support measures taken within a company are targeted at work culture, structures, processes and behaviours. They need be so well tailored that staff members can successfully maintain or recover their work ability in their work environment (whatever their job and activity).

In the pilot projects the companies’ workers and employees learn how they themselves can contribute to maintaining or improving their health and work ability – for example, by work ability coaching or ergonomic training.

All in all, the aims are the maintenance and promotion of work ability through active and holistic health and work ability management.

This implies, above all, that health, healthy ageing and work ability become strategic management tasks.

The following measures have eventually become standard, thus were obligatory, for all companies:

- Awareness building throughout the staff
- training for managers and leaders in age management and work ability (considering especially appreciation at work) and
- training for occupational health experts, i.e., particularly the company doctor and work psychologist, in work ability (work ability coaching).

All other modules are optional and also depend on the findings of the analyses; they range from the development of healthy work-time schedules that take account of the varying needs of the different age groups to the ergonomic redesign of the workplace, night shift training, concepts for regeneration and so on. Two thirds of the measures should aim at working conditions and one third, at most, at behaviour; they should also be divided into short-, medium- and long-term projects.

After the second analysis with the WAI Plus a second run of interventions and measures will take place.

Discussion and Conclusion

The programme was introduced in the companies by the end of 2008. Final results, including the Work Ability Index Plus™, will be published in 2012 and incorporated into a programme that will eventually become standard.

The 20 pilot companies serve as models of good practice for other companies in their industry sectors. They are supposed to encourage the others and demonstrate that investing in the maintenance of work ability pays off. Beginning in autumn 2009, regular industry-specific events to publish and present the results and findings are organised in co-operation with the ÖPWZ (Österreichischen Produktivitäts- und Wirtschaftlichkeits-Zentrum, the Austrian Centre for the Improvement of Productivity). Yearly a large-scale conference on this topic takes place in Vienna.

The Work Ability Index Plus and its reliability in predicting worker retention was also presented at the European Forum Alpbach in 2009.

All public presentations and publications can be read on www.wai-netzwerk.at.

More detailed information on the programme can be achieved at Irene Kloimüller i.kloimueller@wertarbeit.at

References

1. Tuomi K, Ilmarinen J, Jahkola A, et al; Work Ability Index. 2nd edition. 1998