

The Austrian Employee Health Monitor:

**High pressure of time, monotonous work, insecure future:
approx. 40 percent of employees are
under high mental stress**

The current evaluation of the Austrian Employee Health Monitor has revealed that the persons most badly affected by psychological stress in the job are not - as quite frequently assumed - the executives ("manager phenomenon") or teaching staff. In fact, it's rather construction workers and factory employees as well as check-out staff and cleaning personnel who suffer from an increasing pressure of time, monotonous workflows, and insecure future prospects.

What's also wrong is the belief that the growing number of sick leaves for psychological reasons has been caused by higher sensitivity or is even just a "whim of fashion". From 2010 onward, the Austrian Employee Health Monitor has shown a clearly increasing share of employees with three or more psychological stress factors. This tendency is still on the rise at the moment, but its roots go back for years in the past.

Almost 30 percent of all employees suffer from high mental stress

The ever increasing pressure to perform combined with the continuing economic crisis has resulted in a growing number of mentally stressed employees. Meanwhile, more than one million people are concerned.

Almost 29 percent of all employees in Austria have to be categorized as mentally stressed to a higher extent, ten percent of which to a very high extent. During the last two years, the share of employees with multiple mental stress has grown from nine to 13 percent.

The psychological stress factors defined in the Austrian Employee Health Monitor are as follows: experience of stress/pressure, demotivation, inability to switch off, depressiveness, a feeling of exhaustion and oversteering, petulance and a feeling of loss of meaning. More than 20 questions are asked regarding these aspects.

Blue-collar workers most badly affected

39 percent of the blue-collar workers suffer from heavy psychological stress, compared to 28 percent of employees in the public service, and 27 percent of white-collar workers.

Building workers, in particular, are among those most badly affected. 41 percent of them suffer from high or very high mental stress, followed by factory employees (39 percent), check-out staff (38 percent), plumbers (36 percent), and cleaning personnel (34 percent). Department managers rank only behind these groups, with 33 percent of them suffering from stress.

The growing time pressure plays an important role: 40 percent of the employees pressed for time are under multiple psychological stress. Blue-collar workers perceive their jobs more and more as monotonous and devoid of meaning. A growing number of employees perceive the economic development as inscrutable, their professional future as insecure. Symptoms of exhaustion and depression (often referred to as "burnout syndrome") are constantly on the rise. Since 1994, the number of sick days because of psychological illness has almost tripled.

Causes of mental stress in the job

Pressure of time in the job is the main cause for mental stress of employees: for 21 percent it has already resulted in high levels of mental stress, for 19 percent it is the high concentration required in the job, for 17 percent high responsibility. Permanent supervision and the lacking possibility to retreat are the cause of stress for 14 percent, each. Problems with the boss have a psychological impact on 13 percent, and noise causes problems at the workplace for the same percentage.

The physical consequences of psychological stress are dramatic: 75 percent suffer from muscle tenseness and/or backache, 67 percent feel exhausted. 62 percent suffer from headaches, 58 percent from sleep disorder, and 53 percent are troubled with nervousness.

AK welcomes a sensible amendment of the Employee Protection Act

The Employee Protection Act (ArbeitnehmerInnenschutzgesetz, referred to as ASchG) commits the employers to systematically establish, assess and document in writing all hazards and health implications existing for all employees. On the basis of the results suitable measures for the prevention of hazards shall be determined and implemented.

An amendment of the ASchG stipulates that enterprises have to evaluate psychological stress at the workplace, in addition to physical stress.

Moreover, hazards that may lead to mental stress have to be established and assessed in the company. Factors leading to psychological illness should be avoided, and appropriate measures should be taken to avoid work-related psychological stress. Such measures may include changes of workflows or clarifying responsibilities, for example.

Requirements and suggested solutions

Evaluation of psychological stress

The evaluation of psychological stress is to be pushed, and suggestions for improvement resulting therefrom have to be implemented on an obligatory basis.

Bonus-penalty scheme

Quick introduction of a bonus-penalty scheme: only if enterprises offer suitable jobs for the elderly, taking care for their health in these jobs, it is possible for this group to escape unemployment. To this end, too, comprehensive workplace evaluations are required, making the participation of industrial psychologists and occupational physicians mandatory.

Workplace health promotion

Other than the evaluation of stress factors, workplace health promotion is a voluntary option. It mainly addresses employees individually encouraging them to take up a healthier lifestyle.

What is even more important, however, is the implementation of specific improvements concerning the specific workplace and working conditions following a comprehensive analysis of the circumstances at the workplace (employee attitude survey, health projects). In this regard, the influence of managerial behaviour also plays an important role.

Occupational medicine

- Increased and better utilization of alternative resting periods as provided by law, especially in cases of psychological stress;
- More accurate statements on this issue in the safety and health protection documents;
- More emphasis on prevention in occupational health education (e.g. evaluation of psychological stress, implementation via suitable measures, workplace health promotion).

Workplace incorporation management

People in companies often don't know how to deal with employees suffering from psychological stress after their sick leaves (which are often quite long, i.e. 36.8 days on average). In most cases only so-called "return-to-work interviews" are conducted in more and more companies, which put even more pressure on the employees and result in the collection of highly disputable health data. Such interviews are unacceptable.

Instead, workplace incorporation management should ensure that employees returning from sick leave are not exposed to the same wearing and sickening conditions, and that they are allowed to return to their work step by step and without being put under pressure.