

BACKING HEALTHY BACKS

1. Organisations involved

Fa. Fußboden Brandenburg

IKK Nordrhein

2. Description of the case

2.1. Introduction

Klaus Brandenburg is a master craftsman for parquet reclining and runs a business with six employees. Laying carpet, laminate or flooring is heavy work: especially manual lifting and moving of carpets and of furniture is strenuous for the backs of the workers but often underestimated by them as not being a health risk.

On the contrary, for the artisan workers it is still a professional honour to be strong and fit even when the going gets tough. "Carrying, lifting and moving of heavy loads was long time considered to be a perfect work-out for the tough guys," remembers Klaus Brandenburg. "And it was used to command respect from newcomers and youngsters."

In his business things changed when one of his workers became seriously ill: A slipped vertebral disk in the lower back sent the colleague first to sick leave, then to rehabilitation measures. Instead of lifting carpet rolls he was told to take long walks with his dog and doing back exercises.

A situation like this can easily turn into a struggle for survival of small trades: deadlines can not be met anymore, contractors threaten with penalty clauses and unsatisfied clients turn away and look for alternatives. And beside this, an incident like the one described can also mean the end of the professional career of the worker.

2.2. Aims

Klaus Brandenburg was not willing to run the risk of facing more long term absences in his company and looked for professional partners who could help him to realise his plan of avoiding back pain among his employees. The aim was to prevent musculoskeletal disorders and to cut down sick leave by organisational and technical measures on the one hand and on the other hand to train the workers and to improve their fitness.



2.3. What was done, and how?

In collaboration with IKK Nordrhein which is the health insurance of many trade businesses by tradition, Klaus Brandenburg started a project for healthy backs for his workers. The project combined health promotion and technical prevention measures. A special financial incentives programme of IKK Nordrhein also allowed employer and workers to gain a bonus on their health insurance premiums at IKK.

Specialists of IKK Nordrhein helped to develop a plan to re-organise the business and to optimise the workflow: The weight of the carpet rolls could certainly not be reduced but with the help of some technical improvements manual lifting as such could be avoided:

- A high rack warehouse system was installed for better storage of the heavy carpet rolls and further equipment.
- A customised fork lift truck with a metal pole for carpet lifting was bought from second-hand. The workers can now move the carpet rolls by the help of the fork lifter from the high rack onto the lorry.
- Also a furniture-jack was bought which can be taken to the clients and be used by the workers to remove cupboards, wardrobes and book shelves before starting their flooring work.
- All workers were trained in using the furniture-jack and the fork-lifter in order to avoid manual handling of loads whenever possible.

The specialists also trained the workers in better manual handling of loads. They learned that it is crucial to use the strongest muscles of the human body in the thighs and to keep the back straight. Workers were also encouraged to respect their individual limits and they were reminded that helping each other is always a smart way to avoid overstrain.

A fitness test done in a nearby RehAktiv rehabilitation and training centre revealed that all workers had strong abdominal muscles but weak back muscles. In order to redress the balance, a professional trainer showed exercises to strengthen the backs of the workers and drafted a training programme. After twelve weeks of training a second fitness test revealed the first success.

The exercises the workers had learned during the course can be done by everybody and everywhere: the inaugural training is easy to understand and it only takes some minutes a day and a yoga mat to do the work-out at home or in the company. A further fitness test was done after one year to control the progress.

Klaus Brandenburg supported the back pain prevention programme actively: Not only that all workers could participate to the training lessons during the working hours. He also thought about measures to keep the project running:

- Stickers on the tool boxes and work equipment remind everybody every day of how to lift loads correctly. Additionally, one worker is nominated each month for being “back commissioner” and to give advice to the colleagues.
- The “donkey of the week” has been introduced as bad practice award in the company: If anybody is caught red-handed not using the equipment for the lifting of heavy loads he becomes sentenced to glue a donkey sticker on his lorry door.
- The “donkey” must also stand the colleagues a brunch: “A late breakfast in the company does not only contribute to be in good terms with each other but also helps to remember the training lessons and to support your co-workers,” explains the boss.
- Klaus Brandenburg still keeps the back exercises running: He considers it to be important that they are done jointly and frequently. Every year he organises a re-training of the work-out for the company which is also important for integrating new colleagues.

2.4. What was achieved?

- A before / after comparison in the guided intervention showed positive training results of all workers.
- Since the start of the interventions and the training five years ago, the workers at Fußboden Brandenburg have not missed a single day because of back ache or muscular complaints.
- Doing back exercises has become routine in the company. “But when I am off for some days, the workers tend to be more lazy”, says Klaus Brandenburg and laughs. “It is essential that the boss guides and supervises the activities.”



2.5. Success factors

In first place, the success of the example can be seen in the consequent involvement of the company owner: It was Klaus Brandenburg who initiated the activities, who turned them into ongoing practice and who supervises them until today.

Secondly, the project could not have been realised without the team spirit of the workers of the company. Working together and co-operate instead of working alone is very important in order support and to motivate each other and to ensure long-term effects. Without the acceptance and the training of the staff safety and health measures will easily fail.

Finally, the expertise of the specialists of IKK and the nearby rehabilitation and training centre helped to find out some easy-to-implement measures which have nonetheless proven to be effective.

Being persistent sounds simple but is in fact one core success factor: Many projects do not manage to be transformed into everyday's practice. After five years of activities in Klaus Brandenburg's business, guidance is needed in order to keep activities alive.

Especially for small businesses costs can be an obstacle to improve working conditions if they have to invest in new equipment. In the present case costs could be reduced by buying second-hand equipment and by joining a bonus system offered by the health insurance company. But in any case successful prevention will pay off:

- Conservative estimates calculate direct sick leave costs for a trade company in Germany with 200€ per day plus so called indirect costs caused by eventual not fulfilment of contracts etc.
- A reduction of sick leave days in the company and the improvement of workers' health and motivation directly contribute to better productivity of the business.

2.6. Further information

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2.7. Transferability

In Germany and the European Union, 99% of all companies are small or medium companies. They employ around 60% of all workers and 80% of all apprentices: These workers and especially the youngsters will profit their whole life if they are once shown how to work safely and how to keep well at work.

The example also shows that a good support of safety and health at work in small enterprises can be conducted easily. You neither need a catalogue of company conduct or business ethics. All you need as an employer is being convinced and to convince and support your workers. Carrying out a risk assessment may reveal weak spots in the business. Specialists can help to improve working conditions and to train the staff also in micro-enterprises. Some relatively simple measures can have positive long term effects on the health of the workers and the productivity of the company.

In 2009, Klaus Brandenburg said good-bye to his long year companion Manfred Mühlfeld who worked for 25 years in the company. During these years Manfred laid more than 18,000 square metres of parquet and uncounted PVC or carpet floorings by the help of 25 tons of filling and 5,400 buckets of adhesives. All the equipment needed to be carried upstairs to the clients' apartments where the furniture needed to be moved. It would also a great success if the shown measures would contribute to that at least some workers like Manfred could enjoy their retirement with less joint or back ache.

3. References, resources:

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CASE STUDIES

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