

## ‘OFF THE BACK’: RETAINING OLDER WORKERS IN A SMALL ROOFING COMPANY – GERMANY

### 1. Organisations involved

- Anton Plenkers, Germany
- University of Applied Science Lower Rhine
- Fraunhofer Institute for Work Organisation

### 2. Description of the case

#### 2.1. Introduction

Plenkers is a roofing microenterprise employing four workers, with an average age of 40. The heavy physical nature of the work places high demands on physical health, with backs at particular risk of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs). Other significant risks include falls and weather-related impacts.

The University of Applied Science Lower Rhine, together with the Fraunhofer Institute for Work Organisation, is conducting a 10-year project on the retention of ageing workers in the handcraft sector, following discussions of raising the pension age from 65 to 67 for men. Project researchers observed Plenkers' workers for 6 months to identify measures to prevent MSDs and retain ageing workers.

#### 2.2. Aims

The long-term goal was to retain experienced older workers by reducing the risk of MSDs. This was to be done by adapting their physical work and upskilling them for office work.

#### 2.3. What was done, and how?

Employees and university and institute researchers conducted an activity analysis to determine the measures which could reduce heavy loads carried by the workers.

The following technical measures were identified:

- use of mobile lifting aids;
- using a sack barrow to transport heavy items even for short distances;
- using kneepads for activities that need to be carried out kneeling.

In addition, Plenkers upskilled workers by training them in office administration tasks such as email correspondence, ordering and account management. This modification of work organisation served two purposes:

- The acquisition of new skills means that workers can adapt to lighter office work if they no longer have the capacity to perform physical roofing work.
- Although succession planning was not a factor, per se, the increased skill levels provided for support and replacement cover for the company owner.

#### 2.4. What was achieved?

The reduction of physical loads significantly improved the working conditions of the employees. Challenges were experienced in changing patterns of behaviour, with employees reluctant to rely on mechanical aids. They required repeated reminders to adhere to the new lifting techniques.

The development of a new administrative skillset was a benefit for both employer and employees. However, some employees expressed reservations about doing office work, particularly tasks using information technology.

## 2.5. Success factors

Key success factors were identified as:

- *Use of external experts:* Collaboration with the University of Applied Science Lower Rhine and the Fraunhofer Institute for Work Organisation allowed expert analysis of work practices and adjustments.
- *Employer and employee engagement:* The owner and employees were joint partners in the project, working together to identify appropriate solutions.
- *Close supervision:* The small size of the company allowed close supervision of the workers to ensure that they adopted the new ways of working.

## 2.6. Transferability

The approach and measures described here can be transferred to any work environment that is characterised by heavy physical work. The upskilling of workers in office skills may be more difficult in larger, more structured organisations, where such staff are already in place.

## 2.7. Further information

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## 3. References and resources

- Interview and email correspondence with Mr Anton Plenkens
- Web page of INQA, case study on Anton Plenkens, retrieved 07/02/2014 from: <http://www.inqa.de/DE/Lernen-Gute-Praxis/Top-100-Gute-Unternehmenspraxis/Chancengleichheit-Diversity/Anton-Plenkens-Vom-Dach-herunter-ins-Buero.html> (The document is no longer accessible online).