

FIT2WORK: AUSTRIA

1. Organisations involved

- Public Employment Service (AMS)
- Austrian Pension Insurance Fund (PVA)
- Austrian Workers' Compensation Board (AUVA)
- Federal Social Office (BSB)
- Ministry for Social Affairs and Consumer Protection (BMASK)
- Regional health insurance funds (GKK)

2. Description of Fit2Work

2.1. Introduction

The fit2work programme is based on the Austrian 'Work and Health Law' (Federal Act on Providing Information, Advisory and Support Services in the Areas of Health and Work, AGG). This law specifically states that a prevention and information tool should be developed to foster the work ability of the Austrian workforce. The Ministry for Social Affairs and Consumer Protection (BMASK), supported by a number of partner organisations, developed the fit2work tool in line with this requirement.

The Work and Health Law was adopted following a successful pilot programme, 'Fit for the Future' (*Fit für die Zukunft*, 2008–2012). 'Fit for the Future' was aimed at primary prevention, developing resources for companies to maintain the work ability of their workers and promoting conditions to foster work ability. Although the programme is now completed, resources such as the guidance document for the assessment of work ability (Kloimüller and Czeskleba, 2013) are still available ⁽¹⁾.

Fit2work programme has been in place since 2012. It focusses on secondary and tertiary prevention, providing services to help employees with mental and physical health problems to maintain their employability and avoid job loss. It also supports the reintegration of workers who have left or lost their job because of health problems. As of mid-2014, approximately 200 companies, covering about 30,000 workers, were involved in fit2work.

The programme is funded by those entities that will derive financial benefits from it in the medium and long term. The BMASK and the insurance institutions (the Austrian Workers' Compensation Board, AUVA, the Austrian Pension Insurance Fund, PVA, and the health insurance funds) provide 80 % of the funding, with the remaining 20 % provided by the Federal Social Office (BSB). It is also supported by the Austrian Public Employment Service (AMS).

Fit2work services are coordinated nationally by the BSB's central unit, regional coordination provided by the BSB's regional offices (funding units). The counselling services are provided by contracted entities in the regions, based on uniform standards. A special steering group has been established at the BMASK, composed of members from several federal ministries, social pension insurance, work accident insurance (AUVA) and health insurance institutions, and the Federation of Austrian Social Insurance Institutions (advisory function), with the remit of controlling the implementation and guiding the programme. In addition, and to ensure involvement and representation of relevant stakeholders, an advisory board was also established, composed of representatives of the social partners, labour inspectorates and the Austrian umbrella organisation for rehabilitation. This provides a platform for these stakeholders to be consulted on issues related to fit2work.

Fit2work targets workers who have been on sick leave several times, or for a long period of time, or who have problems at work due to their illness, or already having been dismissed because of their illness. Fit2work aims at early intervention, before health problems become serious or chronic or

⁽¹⁾ For more information about the 'Fit for the Future' programme, please refer to the relevant case study in the project 'Safer and Healthier Work at Any Age'.

invalidity becomes an acute problem. Companies may apply for fit2work services where they have a general problem with their employees' health and wish to use a preventative tool. They can ask for support when only one worker is concerned, although as part of the analysis company-wide issues may also be identified. Companies contacting fit2work through its phone line or website are directed to the AUVA fit2work counsellors. Individual workers may also access fit2work services directly by website or phone, which directs them to the regional fit2work counselling units.

Whether contacted by an individual or a company, a fit2work case manager is assigned to identify and implement tailored individual measures which will help workers to enhance and maintain fitness at work, to maintain their employment in their company or to discover new types of occupations and re-enter the workforce in a different company. Fit2work is a programme for providing prevention, treatment and vocational rehabilitation services. It covers all persons employed, self-employed or unemployed, including non-Austrian citizens.

2.2. Aims

The fit2work programme has the following objectives:

- to prevent job loss for health reasons;
- to enhance and maintain fitness to work through early intervention in problem cases;
- to maintain individuals in employment;
- to reintegrate workers after long illnesses;
- to identify alternative suitable occupations for individuals;
- to provide information and raise awareness.

2.3. What was done, and how?

Fit2work is a free-of-charge service available to all workers and companies in Austria. The funding institutions, led by AUVA, fund a certain number of consulting and coaching sessions for each case. The number of consulting sessions covered depends on the size of the company ⁽²⁾:

- 15–50 employees: 8 days of consultancy;
- 51–250 employees: 11 days of consultancy;
- more than 250 employees: 14 days of consultancy.

The company pays for additional counselling and coaching. The costs of the working hours lost during counselling cannot be claimed from AUVA.

2.3.1. Implementation steps

Stage 0: Within two weeks of receiving a request for support/advice from an employee or an employer, fit2work makes initial contact by phone (hotline), by email or in writing. This first contact is crucial, as the advice provided by phone is often sufficient. A request from a company (and not an individual employee) may lead to the establishment of a steering group (composed of staff from management, human resources, occupational medicine, safety representatives, etc.) to coordinate the activities related to fit2work.

Stage 1: The individual problem-solving process (case management) starts with a basis check (check4start). This can also be done for a company, with workshops organised among the steering group and fit2work counsellors.

Stage 2: Following the basic check, fit2work determines whether or not it needs to provide support over a longer period of time (counselling). The problem and situation of the worker are assessed by experts, and the assessment includes:

- a detailed discussion about the worker's life situation;
- an examination by a specialist in occupational medicine (if necessary);
- an examination by an occupational psychologist (if necessary).

⁽²⁾ Fit2Work information leaflets and material. Retrieved 04/11/2015 from: http://www.fit2work.at/home/Service/Materialien_Downloads/?lang=DE

If further support is deemed necessary, fit2work will organise and combine the services of a number of partner organisations in order to find a solution that fits the needs of the person(s) concerned. If medical or professional rehabilitation is necessary, the person(s) concerned will be transferred to appropriate counselling facilities (for example the PVA for invalidity pension).

At this stage, a plan is developed, which may include health-promotion measures, rehabilitation programmes, life coaching, psychotherapy, psychological counselling, (further) training and education, vocational orientation, retraining, possible workplace adaptation and other relevant measures in the workplace, financial support (for employers) and support to employees and employers during the implementation of these measures.

Fit2work will provide assistance during the entire process, maintaining contact with partner organisations and supporting the person when he/she returns to the former workplace or starts a new job. The goal is to ensure long-term, sustainable employment, in line with the health needs of the worker concerned.

2.3.2. Tools

In order to support workers and employers, fit2work, like 'Fit for the Future' before it, uses assessment tools, such as the **ABI Plus™** index. The ABI Plus™ index is based on the work ability index (WAI), as developed at the end of the 1990s in Finland. It is an online questionnaire which measures workload management according to employee resources. The use of the ABI Plus™ index is obligatory for every company participating in the fit2work programme.

2.4. Success factors and challenges

The following success factors have been identified:

- *Early interventions:* Early interventions have received particularly positive feedback, as they allow for the rehabilitation process to start as soon as a problem appears and before it develops into a chronic or long-term condition. Early intervention findings can also be preventative, by helping companies to identify common health problems among their employees. Prior to fit2work, the rehabilitation process began only when there was already a case for an invalidity pension.
- *Integrated approach:* Fit2work works with both the employee and the employer to find the best possible solution for the two parties.
- *Use of external experts:* Engaging professionals to provide counselling shows a clear commitment to addressing health problems in the workplace.
- *Free and anonymous:* Besides being free of charge, fit2work allows a certain level of anonymity and impartiality for the workers, since the counselling is offered by someone who is not part of the company.
- *Coordination of stakeholders:* Coordination meetings take place between the different stakeholders involved in the fit2work programme (beneficiaries, counsellors, steering group members, etc.). This cooperative approach is very successful for discussion, information and networking, as well as development of the programme.

The following challenges have been identified:

- *Unclear role of labour inspectors:* The role of the labour inspectorate in the fit2work process has not been made clear within the regional departments. This may be because the labour inspectorate is perceived as an enforcement authority rather than a partner in the prevention of health problems.
- *Lack of standardisation:* The documents recording the individual interventions and the evaluation of the interventions should be standardised, for example by a monitoring database, to ease analysis and comparability.

- *Limited follow-up:* No funding is provided to evaluate the success of the rehabilitation of the worker after he/she has left the programme.
- *Limits for small companies:* ABI Plus™ is not suited to companies with fewer than 20 employees, as the work organisation in these organisations is usually more flexible, making much of the ABI Plus™ tool unsuitable. Work ability consulting may be a better fit for such companies, as it can be tailored to the situation and needs of the company.

2.5. Fit2work: the experience of a company

2.5.1. Context

The private company operates in the sector of rust-, acid- and heat-proof steel, high-yield and abrasion-resistant steel and tube fittings. The company employs 65 people, all of whom are entitled to participate in the fit2work programme.

The company was experiencing a high rate of sick leave and labour turnover in its warehouse department, in addition to which an employee with long service had been on sick leave for more than a year and was deemed to be at risk of burnout. The management was motivated to improve conditions within the company and acknowledge the value of employees, particularly those in its critical warehouse department. It therefore initiated the fit2work programme in September 2013.

2.5.2. Costs and staff involved

Although funding is limited to a certain number of consulting and coaching sessions, the company reports that, at 75 % of the duration of the programme, it has not yet reached the limit of funding available, and has incurred few costs (other than working hours).

The staff involved in the implementation of the programme included the managing director, the assistant to the director and staff from various departments (sales, warehouse and warehouse office), chosen by the director. With a diversified age structure within the company, there is no direct relation between age and sick leave.

2.5.3. What was done?

An initial talk was held between management and the AUVA, following which a consultant was assigned to the company to help with the implementation of the programme. An information event was organised and the ABI Plus™ was distributed to all employees. Efforts were made to ensure that the questionnaire was accessible to all workers; despite being an online tool, it was also made available on paper for those workers who did not work with computers, and it was provided in Turkish as well as German, allowing workers who did not read German well, but who did read Turkish, to take part.

The results of the survey were communicated to all employees. Two main findings emerged:

- Staff from the warehouse department suffered from stress and work pressure. In working on this issue together with the consultant, a workshop was organised to determine employee needs and areas for improvement. Implementation of the follow-up actions and the ongoing process for improvement should take place over 3–6 months following the workshop. A formal evaluation ⁽³⁾ will be carried out in approximately 3 years.
- Overall, the employees (especially in the warehouse department) are very satisfied and show a high level of company identification ⁽⁴⁾.

The survey was found to be a valuable means of promoting open communication and employee participation.

⁽³⁾ Although described as formal, the evaluation will not be a scientific evaluation.

⁽⁴⁾ This was tested by the question 'Do you want to leave the company within the next X months?' and the response rate was 'No' at 100 %. There might be a bias towards low-skilled workers, which, considering the very tense labour market situation, means that the wish to stay in the company may not be related to the good working conditions in the company.

2.5.4. Success factors and challenges

A number of factors contribute to the successful implementation of the programme:

- *Integrated approach:* Measures and counselling had been provided before in several departments but, with fit2work, the company is looked at as a single entity, with issues addressed in an integrated and continuous way.
- *Integration of all staff in the process:* All staff at all levels and across all departments have been included in the programme. This diversified group ensures wider participation and communicates the commitment of the company to the process. This helps to change cultural perceptions that the management does not include employees in its decision-making process.
- *Company open to problems and practical solutions:* The company was prepared to accept weaknesses within the organisation fully and address those problems in a practical way.
- *Non-bureaucratic and practical approach:* Throughout the programme, the management adopted a non-bureaucratic approach and ensured that the actions would be easy and accessible for workers. At the same time, the questionnaire was perceived positively by workers, offering them an opportunity to consider their working lives.
- *Sufficient time, information and consultation:* The persons in charge of implementing the programme worked on two fronts: minimising resistance and fear towards the process and showing appreciation of their colleagues (in particular between blue-collar and white-collar workers). The company ensured that enough time was dedicated to communicating the programme at the very start, both by email and in person.

One suggested area for improvement would be to carry out a formal evaluation of the programme. Few negative aspects were experienced, although, for a relatively small company (65 employees in this case), the preparation time for the implementation of the various tools (survey, counselling, etc.) can be a little burdensome. The company believes the programme to be transferable to other sectors or types of workers.

2.6. Fit2work: the experience of an employee

2.6.1. Context

Mr M, employee of the company above, became involved in the fit2work programme following a mental health incident at the workplace.

The breakdown did not have any apparent physical or neurological causes according to doctors, although it was accompanied by sleeping disorders, but it resulted in his absence from work for 1 year.

‘It was never a problem before. Then you start coming home later and later.’

According to the worker, the reasons for his breakdown included a combination of factors:

- For 3 months before the incident, he had been taking on part of the workload of an absent colleague, resulting in a higher workload for himself and his other colleagues.
- Although such a situation had arisen before without causing any difficulties, the worker found it difficult to adapt to the new workload and the extra working hours it entailed. He was demotivated, an effect that carried through to his home life.

‘Already before the incident, sleeping disorders were a problem for me. I woke up at night, sweating, for no reason. Only when I had the breakdown did I go to see the doctor.’

2.6.2. What was done?

The worker remained at home for a year following his breakdown but, after 1 year, was not allowed to prolong his sick leave without losing his job. He therefore needed to decide if he could go back to work. As he was a valuable employee, the company was keen to retain him at work. He registered for

individual counselling and was sent from expert to expert. Finally, the company asked him if he wanted to participate in the fit2work programme, which he accepted. The aim for him with fit2work was to return to the same position in the same company.

The worker reported that communication was, largely, good. Some shortcomings in communicating the objectives of the programme were experienced as a result of the innovative nature of the programme and the company's lack of experience with it. Fit2work identified the possibility of 'slow rehab' whereby the worker would work flexible working hours, with the option of not coming to work if his condition had deteriorated. From a practical perspective, the funding insurer required a defined number of hours to be worked per week. A middle ground was found: the company offered him an arrangement whereby he could work only 6 hours one day and 8 hours the next day.

2.6.3. Success factors and difficulties

In terms of difficulties, the worker does not feel confident discussing the issue of working hours with his hierarchy. Age, however, is not a problem. He feels appreciated within the company, although he is more than 50 years old (more than half of the employees are over 50).

Through the fit2work programme and the accompanied professional rehabilitation, the worker decided to stay within the company (although he still sometimes feels like leaving his job). He remains involved in the programme and feels very positive about it.

2.7. Transferability

Transferability of the fit2work approach to similar programmes/organisations is relatively high. Tools for such transfer, such as handbooks and an online information platform, exist to facilitate this.

Successful transfer to other Member States requires agreement by the government, social partners and the relevant stakeholders. In Austria, the programme was a national prevention programme, driven by legislative requirements.

Finally, for small companies with fewer than 20 employees, work ability consultation would be better than the use of the ABI Plus™ index.

2.8. Further information

Fit2work website: <http://www.fit2work.at/home/>

Contact person: Irene Kloimuller, Wert:Arbeit, fit2work project manager

3. References and resources

- Interview with Irene Kloimuller
- Interviews with Ms F, assistant to the director, supporting the implementation of the fit2work programme in her company, and with Mr M, employee in the same company, who benefitted from fit2work
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