

## PILOT PROJECT IN THE YOUTH WELFARE AGENCY: REINTEGRATION OF EMPLOYEES AFTER SICK LEAVE – BELGIUM

### 1. Organisation involved

- Youth Welfare Agency of the Ministry of Welfare, Public Health and Family of the Flemish Government

### 2. Description of the case

#### 2.1. Introduction

Within the Ministry of Welfare, Public Health and Family of the Flemish Government, the Youth Welfare Agency is responsible for social services for young people. The agency organises assistance for children and young people in difficult living conditions, and young people who have committed a crime, in order to maximise their chances in life and stimulate their personal development.

The agency is committed to improving the wellbeing of its own employees, as part of which it wants to implement concrete measures to stimulate an agreeable work environment.

In this context, the pilot project 'Reintegration of Employees after Sick Leave' was developed, with the objective to offer employees, who are older than 50 and regularly absent or experience long-term absenteeism, a different position at the agency in order to facilitate their reintegration.

Working with young people in difficult living conditions, and young people who have committed a crime, can be physically and mentally challenging, which can cause long-term absence. Employees with physical or psychological health problems are not always able to return to their former position after a long period of sickness absence, and the agency therefore aims to find a suitable alternative position for them, in line with their abilities, competences and health status.

#### 2.2. Aims

The pilot project aimed to develop employee-tailored reintegration pathways in order to facilitate reintegration, motivation and work engagement of older employees.

Individual and targeted reintegration pathways were developed for each participant, in order to find a position that matched his/her skills and competences, while also taking into account his/her health status.

The project focused on employees who were older than 50 years of age, and who were absent regularly or for a long time.

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

The pilot project was launched in 2011 and followed a five-step approach:

1. identifying the problem;
2. clarifying the problem;
3. establishing the reintegration pathway;
4. implementation and monitoring;
5. evaluation.

### **2.3.1. Step 1: identification of candidates**

Supervisors were asked to identify potential candidates for the pilot project. There were two selection criteria: the employees had to be older than 50 and absent either regularly or for a long time.

In most cases, supervisors approached employees who had already indicated on previous occasions that they experienced health problems or that they felt that their position was no longer suited to their abilities. Despite their acknowledgement of having work-related health problems, not all of the identified employees were initially willing to participate in the project. Supervisors encouraged them to take part, but it was never an absolute requirement. The employee's voluntary participation and his/her motivation for participating were considered essential to the success of the project.

Whenever a potential candidate was identified, the supervisor informed the human resources (HR) manager.

### **2.3.2. Step 2: scoping meeting**

Next, the supervisor met each candidate. The purpose of this meeting was to clarify the problems the employee was experiencing. Templates were used to discover potential hazards in the fields of work environment, work organisation and working arrangements, working time, tasks, health problems (physical, mental) and social problems. By using these templates during the conversation, causes of work strain and potential causes of long-term sickness absence were brought up and discussed in an appropriate way.

### **2.3.3. Step 3: individual reintegration plan**

The employee, the supervisor and the HR manager collaborated on the development of a suitable reintegration pathway tailored to the individual employee. The employees identified those changes and improvements they would like to see within their current jobs, and the supervisor and HR manager assessed whether or not these changes were feasible. No work ability assessment tools were used in this process, nor was an occupational physician involved.

During this assessment, the templates used in step 2 were reused to aid clear communication between the three stakeholders. The reintegration pathway and measures that had been identified were documented, as well as the person responsible for implementing each measure.

The outcome of the assessment process was a new job description. All participants in the pilot project worked in a residential community centre. Following the process, they still work in the same centre, but they have different functions.

Some participants worked as youth workers, which meant that they guided and supported young people in a living group. As a result of the project, one of these youth workers is now working as a security expert. He is responsible for detecting problems or shortcomings in safety and security matters at the agency and for proposing solutions to these issues. Another youth worker became a student supervisor. In his new position, he is responsible for communicating and working with the schools of the young people living in the residential community centre, and he supports the youngsters individually with their school work, etc.

### **2.3.4. Step 4: measures**

The measures to be taken for the reintegration of the worker were very diverse, as they were tailored to the specific situation of the individual worker and depended on the type of changes to the job description. Most of the participants received on-the-job-training. Only one participant, who became a security expert, followed a specific external training course.

In most cases, the new job description moved away from shift work, itself a significant cause of physical and mental stress. The new job descriptions also typically required less contact with young people. Some of the new jobs required almost no contact with the youngsters (for example security expert); some involved contacts with young people only on an individual basis (for example student supervisor).

### 2.3.5. Step 5: evaluations

After the employee returned to work in his/her new position, evaluations were planned with the supervisor or HR manager at the end of the first, third and sixth months of his/her reintegration.

Following a positive evaluation in 2012, the programme was integrated into the overall HR management strategy of the agency.

## 2.4. What was achieved?

Six employees were included in the pilot project. Five of them returned to work in different jobs from their original ones.

### 2.4.1. Added value for the organisation

By creating these new jobs, the agency provided additional support and competencies to its overall workforce. For example, youth workers who became individual counsellors could, in turn, ease the pressure on the other youth workers. Additionally, this led to better assistance and support to the young people under their care.

### 2.4.2. Added value for the employee

The employees involved in the pilot project agreed that their work ability had improved. They felt more respected and appreciated, and believed that their new roles were both meaningful and adapted to their abilities and competencies. Combined with age-friendly work arrangements (adapted working time, tasks, etc.), this could also lead to a gradual transition to retirement.

### 2.4.3. Positive return on investment

The total sickness absence (in days) of the six employees decreased by 48 % after the project had started. As a consequence, disability costs were reduced substantially.

### 2.4.4. Added value for the team

This pilot project had two main benefits for the team: it decreased the workload of co-workers and it contributed to a better work atmosphere, as the employees who returned to work in a different job position showed more enthusiasm.

#### ***From the annual report 2012 of the Youth Welfare Agency, testimony of Liliane J.***

*'What now? I still want to work!'* This is what Liliane thought after a long absence due to severe illness. Liliane had a job as a youth worker in a residential community centre called De Zande, but could not return to work in a shift system for psychological as well as physical reasons. Nevertheless, she still felt enthusiastic about her former job: she was committed to the organisation she had worked for and wanted to contribute to its functioning. To quit working was not an option for her. Then, the reintegration project was launched around the same time of her expected return. Liliane met both the requirements (older than 50 years of age, a long period of sick leave) and grabbed the opportunity with both hands.

The experience made it clear to Liliane what her needs and priorities were. *'For instance, I believe that teamwork and having people around me is important'*, says Liliane. *'Thanks to the good support and various discussions, I got involved in the development of a new time-out living group. The job evolved in a function which is adapted to my strengths and capacities. My colleagues appreciate my input and I am very grateful for their understanding and their openness. It is not easy to accept and acknowledge your limits because you are not the same person as how you were before your illness. But the responses were very open and understanding. To return to work after a long illness is like starting a new life from scratch, it is about discovering a new you and finding out who you are. Thanks to this project I got the chance to continue to contribute to society.'*

## 2.5. Success factors

The following success factors have been identified:

- *Voluntary employee participation:* Employees chose to become part of the programme, and they actively participated in the development of a reintegration pathway leading to a new job description. This cooperation between employer and employee was an important success factor. The shared responsibility made it easier (for both parties) to implement the necessary measures.
- *Tailoring:* Every reintegration pathway was tailored to the capabilities and needs of the employee, which led to new job descriptions that were well adapted to the employee's abilities. This increased his/her productivity as well as wellbeing.
- *Clear communication:* During the process, templates were used. These templates played an important role in clarifying and mapping of all factors relevant to the return to work, they were a useful communication tool between the stakeholders, and they helped supervisors have appropriate discussions with the employees involved.
- *Evaluation:* Following their reintegration to a different position, the employees involved in the project, and their supervisors, were interviewed (by HR) in order to evaluate the project. During this evaluation, needs and challenges were identified and taken into consideration.
- *Peer support:* In most cases, the co-workers of the employees involved in the project were very understanding and supportive towards their colleagues returning to work. The employees involved in the project pointed out that this helped overcome the barriers to their return. Feeling appreciation and consideration from co-workers contributed to sustainable reintegration.

## 2.6. Challenges

The following challenges have been identified, some of which directly relate to the success factors identified above:

- *Restrictive criteria for participation:* Both employees and management felt that the criteria for inclusion in the pilot project were too strict. The age criterion in particular was questioned. It was not always clear who could participate in the project and who could not.
- *Negative attitudes from co-workers:* In a few cases the colleagues of the employee returning to work made some negative remarks to their colleague. Clear communication with colleagues about the aims of the project and whom it is meant for is essential. Nevertheless, this communication is delicate and cannot be taken for granted.
- *Difficulty in assessing employee's ability:* The management emphasised that it could be very difficult to assess an employee's ability to participate in the project. The impact of physical and mental problems is hard to predict and therefore managers did not always feel capable of assessing employees' work ability and needs for change. They felt it would be helpful to involve the occupational physician or occupational psychologist in this process.
- *Need for more systematic follow-up:* The employees expressed a need for a more systematic follow-up and evaluation of the implemented measures.

## 2.7. Transferability

Enterprises that are willing to involve their employees in reintegration and job design could find this a useful example of how to initiate measures to enhance motivation and work engagement of older workers.

The five-step approach that was used by the Youth Welfare Agency can be applied in other organisations. The templates that were developed to structure the discussions between the different stakeholders are very useful tools and easy to implement.

## 2.8. Further information

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## 3. References and resources

- Interviews with two employees involved in the project
- Interview with the HR manager
- Report to the management committee, dated 18 April 2012