

'CARE FOR A HEALTHY WORKER' PROGRAMME AT THE VELENJE COAL MINE: SLOVENIA

1. Organisations involved

- Premogovnik Velenje d.d.

2. Description of the case

2.1. Introduction

Premogovnik Velenje, d.d. (the Velenje coal mine) has a 140-year tradition of lignite mining and is firmly rooted in the Slovenian energy industry. In 2013, it had 1,333 employees. Safety and health at work and humanisation of work are embedded in the company's strategy and regulated in the company's safety and health at work management system certificate (18001:2007). 'Care for a Healthy Worker' is a long-running company initiative, which began in 1998.

Most health promotion activities within the 'Care for a Healthy Worker' programme target all workers (both miners and administrative staff), with older employees given priority. Benefits are offered to men over 46 years of age and women over 45 years of age. These include specific health examinations (urological and osteoporosis examinations) and other activities related to working life. In 2013, 334 older workers participated, of whom 263 were men over 46 and the remaining 71 were women older than 45.

2.2. Aims

The programme 'Care for a Healthy Worker' aims to reduce sickness absence and reduce the incidence of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) by detecting and preventing illness. It also aims to improve workers' health by awareness-raising and health promotion activities.

2.3. What was done, and how?

'Care for a Healthy Worker' combines workplace health promotion activities such as ergonomic and psychological workplace interventions, training, coaching and supervision, as well as preventative medical examinations, preventative vacations, short breaks and sports activities.

2.3.1. Setting up the project

The project was initiated in 1998 by the management and the company's health and safety department. External medical doctors and physiotherapists worked with the initiators and human resources representatives to establish and design the activities within the project. These external consultants continued to support the project, carrying out medical examinations at a later stage.

Programme measures were identified using analyses such as work ability and age structure analysis, as well as statistics from the Institute of Public Health (IVZ) on the most common causes of work-related absence, and a company analysis regarding MSDs (Analysis MKB-10). These analyses also formed the basis for the annual evaluation of the programme (company report on the medicine of work – see 'Evaluation' below).

2.3.2. Implementation of the activities

An occupational therapist and a psychologist from the company's health and safety department provided ergonomic and psychological workplace interventions as well as training, coaching and supervision. More specifically, they introduced and designed tools and activities that were adapted to the needs of older workers and those with MSDs, and which enabled them to continue working. Such tools and activities included instructions on workstation design, use of technical aids, prevention of

repetitive work, dealing with stress-related problems, etc. A specific prevention programme was developed for workers in the mine, which aimed to reduce the number of MSDs.

Another element that was introduced was a consultation/discussion with the employee after he/she returned to work after sickness absence. This discussion aimed to better understand why the worker was sick, his/her opinion on working conditions and relations with colleagues, and improvements that would make him/her feel better and safer at the workplace.

2.3.3. Activities

As part of the project, the company organises various preventative activities for health promotion at work, with a focus on older people. These include the following:

▪ Preventative medical examinations and programmes

- Men above 46 years of age have an annual preventative urological examination.
- Women above 45 years of age have an annual preventative osteoporosis examination.
- Preventative orthopaedic examinations are conducted to identify potential MSDs, with physiotherapy provided for men and women above 25 years on a monthly basis. Around 100 employees are included annually in this activity, with priority given to older workers.
- Workers in the mine are entitled to a medical preventative programme to reduce MSDs. This is organised every year in the Dobrna and Olimje spas in May, September and October. Priority is given to older people and those with long service. Participants are entitled to complete physiotherapy care, courses about health and working under physical and psychological pressure, consultations about physical and mental health, Nordic walking, etc. Employees cannot apply for this prevention programme; the company draws lots, so it takes 5–7 years before all workers in the mine have participated. Every year, around 110 employees are invited and 90–100 employees decide to join this activity.

▪ Preventative vacations, short breaks and sports activities

- Medical preventative ‘active vacations’ in the seaside resort Fiesa are organised by the company sports club in June and September. Active vacations are holidays that combine sports activities with health promotion activities. They are offered as a 10-day package including different awareness-raising and illness-prevention activities (education on healthy lifestyle, health risk factors, first aid and sports activities). These activities are available for all employees, with priority given to older people. More than 90 employees apply annually for this activity.
- Preventative short breaks (a few days off) in Spa Šmarješke Toplice are organised every year in June as a health promotion initiative which includes physiotherapy. Employees can apply every 2 years, but priority is given to those who have already been diagnosed with MSDs. In 2013, 15 employees participated in this activity.
- Sporting activities in winter and summer time are available to all employees. Twice a year (in May and October), the company sports club organises a ‘walk test’ to examine the health condition of employees through walking. The test is attended by around 30–50 employees.

2.3.4. Evaluation

The programme is evaluated every year by the company’s health and safety department, with the results published in the company’s report on health at work. In the 2013 report, the health and safety department recommended that the illness prevention and health promotion courses and training aimed at workers in the mine should be made available to all employees in the company, regardless of their role.

2.4. What was achieved?

- Improved prevention and early detection of diseases, especially MSDs;
- reduced levels of absenteeism, to between 5% and 6%, which constitutes a success considering the main activity of the company (coal mining);
- reduced numbers of accidents in recent years;
- reduced absence due to other issues such as occupational diseases (MSDs) and health problems;
- greater awareness of workers about their health and safety at work.

The company will continue to improve existing health and safety activities by organising new illness-prevention courses (for example concerning urinary incontinence) and by being involved in the first European research project on how the climate in the mine influences organisms in a real environment. This will be a 2-year project in cooperation with the Clinic for Pulmonary Diseases (Klinika Golnik) and the Institute for Safety at Work (ZVD).

2.5. Success factors

- *Building on existing occupational safety and health policy:* The activities implemented under the programme built on 20 years of established illness-prevention activities.
- *Analysis of workers' needs:* Through needs analysis and interviews with employees on their return from sick leave, the company could tailor the measures to the workers' needs.
- *Use of experts:* Assistance by internal therapists and psychologists and external assistance helped to implement relevant and targeted measures.
- *Range of assessments:* The use of a diversity of tools, such as age structure analysis, work ability analysis and risk assessment, ensured a systematic approach.
- *Use of a range of measures:* The measures implemented are diverse, from prevention of occupational diseases and the early detection of medical problems to health promotion activities.
- *Evaluation:* The activities in place are regularly evaluated, ensuring their value to the company and employees and allowing continuous improvement.

2.6. Transferability

Although some of the measures described here are more suitable for transfer to large companies, the approach taken is applicable to a variety of companies across different sectors.

2.7. Further information

Premogovnik Velenje d.d.
Partizanska cesta 78
3320 Velenje
Slovenia

Contact person: Jana Žolgar, Head of the Health and Safety at Work Department

3. References and resources

- Interview with Jana Žolgar, Head of the Health and Safety at Work Department
- Website of the company (in English): <http://www.rlv.si/en>
- *Rudar*, internal newsletter, September 2010. Retrieved 07/11/2015 from: http://www.rlv.si/si/files/default/Rudar/2010/rudar08_10.pdf