

## FIT FOR THE FUTURE: AUSTRIA

### 1. Organisations involved

- AUVA (Allgemeine Unfallversicherungsanstalt, the Austrian Workers' Compensation Board)
- PVA (Pensionsversicherungsanstalt, the Austrian Social Security Administration)

### 2. Description of the case

#### 2.1. Introduction

Discussions on old age and invalidity pension reforms have been taking place in Austria for the past 10 years. In 2007, the Ministry for Social Affairs and Consumer Protection (BMASK) launched 'Disability in Transition' (*Invalidität im Wandel*), an initiative which established a working group on issues of disability, work and health, as well as a review of the disability pension system. From this initiative, the Austrian government, in conjunction with the social partners, launched its 'Fit for the Future' (*Fit für die Zukunft*) programme in 2008. 'Fit for the Future' aimed to maintain employability through fostering and preserving work ability, while also reducing the number of invalidity pensions.

Demographic changes in companies have increased concerns regarding the growth of physical and psychological work-related health problems, an increase in the number of invalidity pensions and early exits from professional life. Interventions to foster work ability should start as early as possible, as younger workers can experience reduced work ability from the very early years of their professional lives (Kloimüller and Czeskleba, 2013a: 11). Companies must meet the challenge of fostering the skills and competences of older employees in order to retain as many experienced workers as possible. In addition, they must attract younger workers and safeguard their health, where possible, to ensure they do not leave the company early.

The 'Fit for the Future' programme was developed by the Austrian Workers' Compensation Board (AUVA), the social insurance organisation governing occupational risks, which covers more than 3.3 million employees and 1.4 million students. Its legal duties are the prevention of occupational accidents and diseases, occupational medical care, first aid for occupational accidents, post-traumatic treatment, rehabilitation, financial compensation and research. Setting up 'Fit for the Future' was supported, in the first instance, by the Austrian Social Security Administration (PVA), with additional support from the Federal Chamber of Labour (AK), the Federal Economic Chamber (WKÖ), the Federation of Austrian Industries (IV) and the Trade Union Federation (ÖGB).

#### 2.2. Aims

In line with the government discussions of 2007, a reduction in the number of invalidity pensions was the primary objective.

To achieve this, 'Fit for the Future' (2008–2012) aimed to implement a programme within companies to maintain and improve the work ability of their workers through counselling services, awareness-raising and company interventions. Specifically, the programme sought to:

- prove that work ability can be maintained or even enhanced;
- develop a tool kit with successful measures and methods; and
- publish the results as encouragement to other companies.

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

'Fit for the Future' was set up by the AUVA in 2008, sharing financial and technical responsibility with the PVA. Cooperation between the AUVA, the PVA and social partner organisations was critical in the success of the programme. Twenty companies participated, from eight different sectors (construction,

trade, metal, hotel, cleaning/waste, transport, health and post logistics) (1). Company sizes varied widely, with the largest company having over 2,500 employees, and the smallest fewer than 100. In all, 13,000 workers were involved. One-third of the participating companies were small and medium-sized enterprises. As companies volunteered for the programme, there was no defined strategy to target certain industrial sectors. Certain companies expanded the scope of the programme by integrating their suppliers throughout the supply chain and ensuring that all workers were covered. Most companies that participated in the programme had existing OSH policies and a track record of good practice in OSH and wellbeing at work.

The 'Fit for the Future' interventions were fully funded by the AUVA and PVA for up to 4 years for each participating company. The AUVA also provided one-third financing, with the PVA providing the remaining two-thirds, for the development of a records database and use of the ABI Plus™ (*Arbeitsbewältigungs-Index*, work ability index) tool (see under 'Counselling sessions' below) used during the company interventions. This enabled participating companies to get access to the ABI Plus™ tool online for a relatively low price (EUR 1,000).

The programme consisted of the following distinct elements:

- awareness-raising workshops;
- interventions in companies;
- dissemination of results.

### 2.3.1. Awareness-raising workshops

The first step in the programme was a workshop for management (e.g. employers, human resources services and managers) to raise awareness of work ability. Often, company management views age as a restriction or constraint on work ability, and these workshops showed that, while some aspects of a worker's ability, such as physical strength, may decrease with age, other areas, such as technical and social abilities, can improve with experience. Companies should therefore work towards adapting to their workers' abilities and preserving their work ability.

### 2.3.2. Company interventions

At the conclusion of the workshops, company interventions began. These were carried out by a team of 15 external work ability experts and were based on the results of an age and work ability analysis on organisational (company) and individual (worker) levels. The standard interventions were aimed at raising awareness of the concept of work ability among managers, workers and workers' representatives, in order to identify tailored interventions.

A company intervention included a counselling process, with the following steps:

- setting up a project steering group;
- counselling sessions and internal focus groups:
  - assessment of work ability;
  - preparation of tailor-made interventions;
- implementation of tailor-made interventions (with the use of tools).

#### ▪ Setting up a project steering group

'Fit for the Future' contracts required each participating company to set up a project steering group composed of top managers, human resources staff, occupational medicine specialists, safety representatives and trade union representatives. This group also needed a dedicated project leader, and its purpose was to coordinate the activities related to 'Fit for the Future', as well as allocating time and resources to the project. Representation from each of the different parties in the steering group (management, worker representatives, health and safety representatives) was very important for the

(1) Companies that participated in 2008–2012 were: Strabag, Habau inkl. Held und Francke, Hentschläger, Staudinger, H&M, Schinnerl, Liebherr, ABO, Julius Blum GmbH, Böhler Edelstahl GmbH & Co KG, Sana GmbH, Saubermacher, Blaguss Reise GmbH, Humanomed Gruppe, Haus der Barmherzigkeit, Krankenhaus der Barmherzigen Schwestern, UKH Salzburg, Rehabilitationszentrum Großgmain, Caritas Socialis, KAGES Steiermark and Österreichische Post AG/Paketlogistik Österreich Region Ost.

success of the intervention. The project leader, whose role was key, received training from the 'Fit for the Future' consultant (see 'Counselling sessions' below) and acted as an interface between management and workers. The steering group met several times a year.

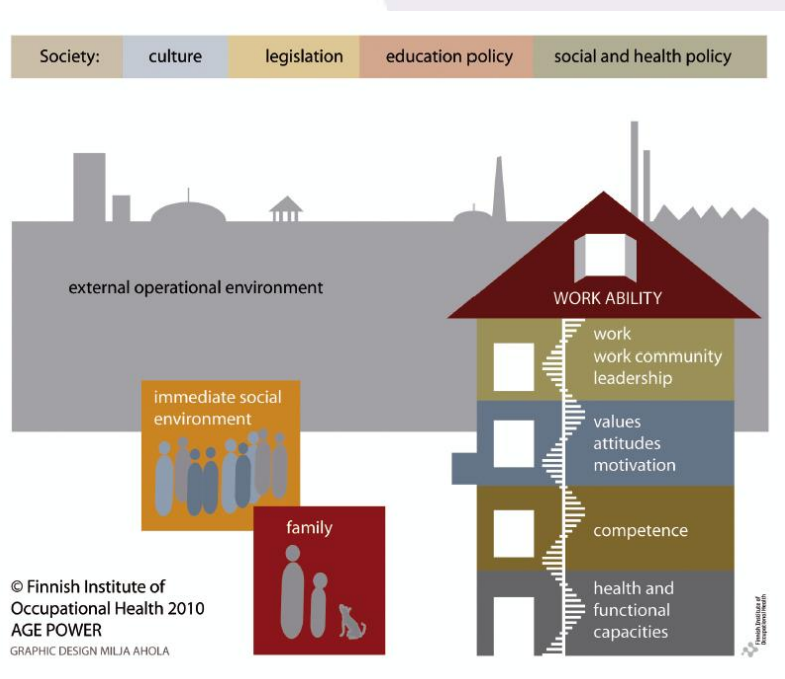
#### ▪ Counselling sessions

Within each company the counselling sessions were led by a dedicated *fit2work* consultant, who is usually a work ability expert. Where necessary, the consultant was supported by area experts (ergonomics, training, coaches, technicians) and AUVA experts. As well as the counselling sessions, the consultant met the project leader each month.

The counselling sessions started with a questionnaire-based **assessment of work ability** within the company. This questionnaire was completed by a focus group which included people from all occupations, levels, age groups and genders in the company. As part of its work, the focus group checked ergonomic conditions in all parts of the company. One of the tools developed to carry out this analysis of work ability was the ABI Plus™.

The ABI Plus™ was developed under the supervision of Professor Ilmarinen from Finland, together with national experts, and in cooperation with the AUVA and PVA. It is based on the Finnish Work Ability Index, enlarged to include aspects related to individual values, professional competencies and skills and working conditions. These elements make up the Work Ability House (Kloimüller and Czeskleba, 2013a). Figure 1 indicates the factors that are important for work ability and how they influence each other. It consists of four 'floors': health, qualifications, values and work. The higher the work ability, the better the coordination between the floors, and the better the external demands fit with the individual's resources (health, qualification and values).

Figure 1: The Work Ability House



The Work Ability House shows the manifold aspects of work ability. Work ability is believed to be 60% influenced by workplace design, leadership and working environment (fourth floor) and 40% by the employees themselves (first to third floors) (Kloimüller and Czeskleba, 2013a). The ABI Plus™ tool clearly indicates at which level measures should be taken to improve work ability.

The work ability analysis, using ABI Plus™, is conducted by asking company leadership the following questions:

- Can your employees carry out their work until their retirement considering their health condition?
- Do your employees possess enough knowledge and skills to execute their work?

- How satisfied are your employees? Are they convinced that their work is valuable and is meaningful?
- Do company leaders have the knowledge and skills to assess the needs of their workers and strengthen their work ability?

The work ability status of the company is complemented by an age-structure analysis of staff, which is intended to show the distribution of age within the company.

Following this first assessment, **tailor-made interventions** were designed. These took into account company culture, existing structures and processes, and individual behaviours. A number of interventions were based on existing programmes developed by the AUVA for certain sectors and occupations.

Examples of interventions include:

- the BAUfit programme (AUVA ergonomics programme for the construction sector) (AUVA, n.d.);
- work ability coaching;
- introduction of life-course-oriented staff appraisals;
- education of multipliers (that is staff, typically foremen and department managers, responsible for passing on their knowledge to other employees);
- training on mental health problems (for example difficult situations in the health sector);
- teaching employees about relaxing techniques (for example ergonomic exercises for the neck, or to relax the eyes);
- workplace health promotion activities (for example information on healthy behaviours).

#### ▪ **Implementation of interventions**

Tailor-made activities to support employability and work ability were implemented in the participating companies. In total, approximately 300 such interventions took place during the 4 years of the programme. The consultants and the steering group prioritised the interventions, targeting those that were most necessary or would provide immediate improvements. These quick-win measures included relaxation rooms, ergonomic measures and adjustment of working devices.

The consultants and the steering group were required to pay particular attention to employee involvement in the development and implementation of the measures, as well as to communicating on short-term and long-term positive outcomes, to promote engagement and ownership of the programme.

### **2.3.3. Dissemination of results**

A handbook of programme results from the 20 pilot companies was published from 2009 onwards (see Kloimüller and Czeskleba, 2013a). Brochures, a film and conference presentations were also used to disseminate the programme information as widely as possible. Many of the associated presentations are still available online (see WAI Netzwerk Austria, n.d.).

## **2.4. What was achieved?**

Results from the 'Fit for the Future' programme were published from 2012 onwards. They are available to other companies, and are highly transferable. The project report (Kloimüller and Czeskleba, 2013a) includes descriptions of the companies that have participated and the measures that have been implemented. Those good practices could be easily transferred to other companies.

During the 4 years of the 'Fit for the Future' programme, approximately 300 interventions were carried out in 20 companies <sup>(2)</sup>. Two-thirds of the interventions focused on work organisation, the working environment and working conditions (the top floor of the Work Ability House).

An evaluation of the impacts of the interventions was conducted by analysing statistical data gathered from questionnaires in the companies. This evaluation found work ability to be strongly related to the following factors: workload, values, capacity to take an active role, health and cooperation. The strongest effects of the programme were observed to be on younger workers (apprentices). Programme

<sup>(2)</sup> Interview with Irene Kloimüller, the project coordinator of 'Fit for the Future' (and head of the consulting company Wert:Arbeit).



results could be improved with greater management involvement, stronger support from the worker representatives and regular repetition of the project (Kloimüller and Czeskleba, 2013a).

Key conclusions from the evaluation are:

- There is a significant relationship between work ability and values, health, cooperation with co-workers, capacity to take an active role and work burdens (dependent on the sector).
- Appreciative leadership has twice as much influence on work ability as intensive fitness exercises.
- Interestingly, where measures were implemented to raise work ability across all age groups, their effect was greatest among apprentices. Without such interventions, young members of the workforce lost three to four points of their work ability within 2 years.

Following 'Fit for the Future', a nationwide network of occupational health counselling centres was established in January 2013. This new initiative, called 'fit2work', aims to maintain and improve work ability and avoid chronic illness. It operates under the 2011 Federal Act on Providing Information, Advisory and Support Services in the Areas of Health and Work (AGG) (see Bundeskanzleramt, 2015, for full text of the law).

## 2.5. Success factors and challenges

Two distinct types of success factors were identified: those relating to the functioning of the programme itself, and those relating to the company interventions.

For programme set-up and functioning

- *Institutional support:* The programme had strong legitimacy, based as it was on the government's and social partners' strategic view of the increasing importance of sustainable work.
- *Holistic approach of the AUVA:* In addition to rehabilitation and compensation, the AUVA has a prevention role, making it a key stakeholder in programme development.
- *Cooperation between stakeholders:* The project was run in cooperation with a number of different Austrian key stakeholders: the AUVA, the PVA and further social partner institutions, as well as participating companies that were interested in knowledge exchange. An important outcome was the network of expertise on work ability and employability that developed in Austria, from which the larger 'fit2work' programme developed.

For company interventions

- *Cooperation between different actors and strong leadership:* In successful cases, the steering group in the company integrated prevention experts, trade unions and representatives of the human resources department and was led by a project leader with the authority and the influence to take an active role.
- *Commitment of dedicated staff:* Contracts were drawn up between the 'Fit for the Future' programme and the participating company to oblige them to set up a steering group and make resources available to the project. In particular, the commitment of top management and relevant decision-makers, as well as middle management, was crucial.
- *Involvement of workers:* Integration of the workers in the various steps of the project, for instance in the work ability assessment, was essential to engage them with the project. It also allowed the exchange of experiences among employees.
- *Communication and dissemination of results:* Strong positive initial outcomes were important to foster a positive and active attitude of the workers towards the programme. Communication of long-term measures was also important to demonstrate that the programme has long-term effects.
- *Integration into the company's objectives:* The topic of work ability was integrated into company objectives and existing systems and processes (such as staff appraisal), ensuring a continued focus.

The following challenges were also identified (Kloimüller and Czeskleba, 2013a) as areas for improvement, should the programme be relaunched in Austria or elsewhere.

#### Challenges for company interventions

- *Lack of evaluation:* Regular evaluation is needed to ensure interventions are successful. Evaluation allows measures to be adjusted or improved where necessary.
- *Different expectations from different actors:*
  - Conflicts were experienced, in some cases, within the steering group, particularly where a conflict of interest arose. This conflict led to a lack of commitment from workers' representatives and trade union representatives in some cases, where they felt that 'Fit for the Future' conflicted with their role responsibilities for wages, working conditions and health and safety.
  - Misunderstandings arose with the external consultant on what the company wanted to do.
  - Top management lacked commitment or refused to address issues important for 'Fit for the Future'.
  - The worker representatives lacked commitment to the programme because they feared loss of income due to measures that could shorten working time and reduce bonus payments.
  - Workers feared that too much emphasis would be put on behaviour change measures.
- *External factors:* External factors, such as the 2009 economic crisis, influenced the success of the programme in some companies.
- *Lack of adaptation to small companies:* The systematic, step-by-step nature of 'Fit to the Future' is a very useful tool for medium-sized and larger organisations. It may, however, be difficult to use for companies with fewer than 20 employees, where health and safety personnel, for example, may not be in place. In these cases, work ability coaching with an individual coach would be a more appropriate approach.

Irene Kloimüller, programme manager of 'Fit for the Future', spoke about the following needs relating to the external context of the programme, which have been incorporated into the follow-up 'fit2work' programme:

- Flexible pension models with more options for part-time pensions.
- Tax incentives for companies that foster employability of their older workforce.
- Systematic implementation in more companies, not only targeting those who already implement good practices, or who are prepared to do it.
- More rigorous evaluation in participating companies. It would be interesting to find out whether or not measures still existed 2 years after the end of 'Fit for the Future'.
- A scientific analysis of the questionnaire database. Such an initiative has not yet been funded but would lead to greater programme improvements.

### 2.5.1. Further ongoing measures

A postgraduate university course on employability and vocational rehabilitation, established by the Institute for Employability, the Institute for Work Medicine and the Medical University of Vienna, will be in place between October 2014 and May 2016. The target group is human resource managers, training and development managers, those working in the area of occupational medicine, leaders with personnel responsibility, and work and organisation psychologists (Medizinische Universität Wien, n.d.).

## 2.6. Transferability

The transferability of the 'Fit for the Future' programme is relatively high, given the counselling approach it takes towards better prevention and increased work ability for companies. Examples of good practices that have been implemented within this programme could be transferred quite easily to other organisations. The outcomes of 'Fit for the Future' (and also of the ongoing programme 'fit2work') are disseminated widely, although most of them only in German-language documents.

A critical success factor of 'Fit for the Future' was the cooperation of the AUVA, the PVA and social partner organisations and the support of the Austrian government. Successful transfer to other Member States would be dependent on a similar level of cooperation between their governments, the social partners and other relevant stakeholders.

Finally, the questionnaire tool (ABI Plus™) is suitable for use by any large or medium-sized company and within other Member States. For smaller companies with fewer than 20 employees, more flexible work ability consultation would be a more suitable approach.

## 2.7. Further information

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