

Sozial-Holding, Germany: redeployment, training and development

Organisational background

Sozial-Holding der Stadt Mönchengladbach GmbH coordinates community care services for the elderly and other care services, integrating them under one umbrella. The organisation is also active in the fields of employment promotion and labour exchange, and in vocational training. It employs approximately 900 people, just under 600 of whom (93.6% women) provide care and nursing services to some 580 residents. Around 25% of the employees are over 50 years of age.

The company is supportive of its employees and encourages communication as well as economically sustainable management practices. In doing so, special importance is attached to long-term human resources development, which also includes the recruitment of older employees if their skills and qualifications fit the job profile. This commitment in employment policy was recognised twice with the awarding of the 'Arbeit Plus' seal of approval.

As part of its human resources policy, the company assumes that an integrated approach, for example employing older workers, will give it a competitive advantage over rival companies. In particular, Sozial-Holding emphasises the importance of health promotion as a way of enhancing staff recruitment and retention, as work continuity is regarded as making an important contribution to the quality of caregiving. In order to gain these competitive advantages and in the light of impending demographic change, the company has developed a number of age-related measures together with the works council.

The original initiative

In 2002, Sozial-Holding introduced a comprehensive health management programme, in response to the fluctuation in sickness rates observable in the field of nursing and also because the workforce as a whole is ageing.

The health situation of all employees was examined. Once the results became available, a steering committee on health (including members of management, the works council and other responsible people) was set up. The task of this committee is to formulate goals and develop appropriate measures in the area of health promotion. The coordination and implementation of these health promotion measures are undertaken by an office that was specifically set up for this purpose.

The measures that were introduced all aim to reduce the health risks associated with the workplace, thus ensuring employees' continued employment and making them aware of their health. Among other things, these measures include:

Case study

Return to Work

- introducing the 'daily apple' as a symbol for health-conscious behaviour and as a sign of the company's willingness to support its employees in this respect;
- establishing 'health circles' aimed at developing concrete measures which are then carried out in consultation with general management and superiors;
- training courses on correct lifting and carrying techniques, as well as special courses for the handling of disoriented residents.

Further elements of this initiative included courses on nutrition and back exercises, as well as the redesign of staff rooms to optimise their facilities.

Overall, the programme is regarded as being successful by the management and the feedback from the staff is very positive.

Good practice today

The importance that is attached to older employees and their career prospects is apparent not only in the field of health promotion, but also in the area of qualifications. Sozial-Holding employs, for example, 17 people who have qualified as certified housekeepers, and more than half of these are aged over 45 years.

In addition, Sozial-Holding organises further education courses for nursing home managers on topics such as health, organisation and nursing. Measures such as these are in response to the increasing demands and responsibilities placed on workers in the administrative field. In addition, the nursing home managers are temporarily assigned more staff to allow them room for the required reorganisation. In this way, Sozial-Holding tries to actively support the work of the nursing home managers and to maintain the health and the employability of the management function.

The health promotion approach in the vocational training of carers of the elderly merits particular mention. A key aim of this project – which is supported by the Federal Ministry for Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth and by the AOK Rhineland – is the development and promotion of apprentices' health awareness and behaviour, as well as encouraging young nursing staff to consider the special needs of their older colleagues and in turn profit from their experience and skills.

The introduction of flexible working time, with annual working time accounts, is another aspect of Sozial-Holding's health and age management policy. The management is convinced that inflexible working hours not only curtail the company's services to its clients, but also constrain the employees, whose changing requirements regarding working times have been insufficiently taken into account.

Case study

Return to Work

Through the development of individual working time models, employees are now involved in planning their working time flexibly and independently. These models take into account parenting and private nursing needs (with annual working time accounts for employees and a computer-assisted roster planner) and are adapted to each working area, as well as being client-oriented. Since the introduction and implementation of flexitime, there has been a lower rate of absence from work.

Of particular importance are the 'return-to-work interviews after absence'. These interviews take place between the employees and their immediate superiors and focus on an analysis of the operational reasons for the unfitness to work. In additional preventive talks that are arranged – either after a six-week illness or in case of absence from work due to illness totalling at least six weeks per calendar year – the staff manager, the works council and, if applicable, the representative for severely disabled persons try to determine operational reasons for these absences from work together with the employee. Subsequently, they develop corresponding measures, which are then implemented in cooperation with the respective supervisor. At all steps in the process, however, Sozial-Holding strives to avoid the impression that employees are no longer allowed to become ill.

Further selected measures which apply to all age groups include the following:

- Training and further education initiatives for all staff, including special vocational training on gerontology and work organisation.
- The introduction of an employee suggestion system, aimed at improving the labour situation and thus at easing employees' workload.
- An annual employee appraisal system to ensure information exchange and feedback about the employee's positive and negative developments, to recognise potentials and to conclude agreements about further training and education. In the course of the interviews, employees are also questioned about their individual work problems and perspectives, after which targets are agreed upon and subsequently monitored.
- Both horizontal and vertical careers have been enabled.

In addition to the health-centred measures that benefit all employees, including the older staff members, there are also specific measures aimed at older employees, such as:

- enabling employees over 50 years of age to obtain qualifying certificates;
- providing alternative job offers for nursing personnel with health problems in the housekeeping division;
- simplified allocation of a nursing place for nursing relatives;

Case study

Return to Work

- promoting the motto, 'we are older than 50 – so what?', as part of a fundamental corporate decision not to categorise employees as being less capable because of their age and not to exclude them from opportunities; this message is actively communicated by the organisation, e.g. in the company journal.

In the future, Sozial-Holding wants to continue focusing on health promotion as a key part of its personnel development policy, most notably by promoting qualification measures. The declared goal is to raise employees' awareness of their responsibility for their own health.

Further information

Contact: Wallrafen-Dreisow, General manager, Sozial-Holding der Stadt Mönchengladbach GmbH, Königstraße 151, 41236 Mönchengladbach, Germany

Company website: www.sozial-holding.de

<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/areas/populationandsociety/cases/de009.htm>