

Mini-review

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# Healthy occupational culture for a worker-friendly workplace

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Work has numerous health and wellbeing benefits, but it also involves physical hazards and psychological exertion. Today the scale has tipped toward psychosocial factors. Workers' mental health affects their intellectual, emotional, and social growth, as well as work ability, productivity, and ultimately organisational productivity and competitiveness on the market. Even though companies may have an internal hierarchy that lowers stress at work, there are other formal and informal social processes that can affect (positively or negatively) the cohesion within the work unit. Safety culture of an organisation is a product of individual and group values, opinions, competences, and behavioural patterns that determine how occupational health and safety are implemented. Organisations that nurture positive safety culture understand the importance of health and safety and believe in prevention rather than dealing with consequences. Jobs that are stable, autonomous, and reasonably physically and psychologically demanding are far more likely to lower work-related stress and boost worker satisfaction. In fact, employee empowerment is one of the best ways to achieve good psychosocial health at the workplace.

**KEY WORDS:** *healthy organisations; mental health; organisational culture; stress; workers wellbeing*

Approximately 58 % of the world population, that is, 4 billion people, spend one third of their adult lives at the workplace. Around 120 million workplace accidents and 2.3 million deaths are reported every year. About 318,000 deaths are related to injuries at work and almost 2 million to exposure to workplace hazards and unsafe working conditions (1, 2). In 2013, Croatia saw 13,796 work-related injuries, of which 1,700 were severe and 17 fatal. In addition, 209 new cases of professional illness were reported (3).

## *Mental health at the workplace*

One out of four people will develop one or more mental or behavioural difficulties during their lifetime. Psychiatric conditions account for 7.4 % of the total disability-adjusted life years (DALYs), with the highest loss in the population between 10 and 29 years. Estimates predict that their share will reach 15 % by the year 2020 (4). Four out of ten leading reasons for disability and premature death worldwide are psychiatric conditions (4, 5). In industrialised countries and the EU mental illnesses are responsible for 4 % and 1 % of

deaths at the workplace, respectively (2). Furthermore, mental health issues are among the leading causes of absenteeism and early retirement everywhere in Europe. These issues are a great and long-lasting economic burden for employing organisations. A UK study (6) showed that mental health illnesses cost employers almost 26 billion pounds a year: 8.4 billion for sick leave payments, 15.1 billion for production losses, and 2.4 billion for replacing the employees who left. In Croatia, mental health illnesses are the second leading cause of disability, neurosis, stress, and somatoform disorder in particular (7).

Due to changes in job tasks and work organisation a relatively low number of jobs are still physically demanding, as the demands have shifted toward mental and emotional, which makes psychosocial risk factors at the workplace even more prominent. Although the strength of evidence about the relationship between psychosocial risk factors at the workplace varies, almost all research confirms that psychosocial health of the employees correlates with occupation in all mortality cases, coronary heart diseases, psychiatric illnesses (especially depression), and chronic bronchitis (8).

## *Organisational culture of health and safety at work*

Ravasi and Schultz (9) define organisational culture as combined mental assumptions that determine the way of

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working within organisations by defining what behavioural patterns are acceptable in different situations.

Organisational culture involves a number of psychosocial factors and mostly relies on informal aspects of work and its organisation. Simply put, it is what people in an organisation find appropriate or not. A colloquial explanation would be: "it is the way we do things here" (10).

Organisations should encourage a "healthy" organisational culture in order to increase productivity, economic growth, and management efficacy, and to discourage behavioural patterns that lower productivity and increase employee turnover (Table 1). Organisations with an adaptive organisational culture have better economic performance than those without it (11).

While the awareness of health risks at the workplace is growing among the worker population, in the managerial structures the lack of awareness is a serious obstacle to developing necessary measures to protect health at work. Additional obstacles may be the fear of high costs, shortage of funds, work fragmentation, and new work forms such as small businesses, distance working, self-employment, and the increasing gap between health care and economy sectors (1).

From the health sector's point of view, poor organisational health and safety culture often leads to stress and adverse health effects in employees. Although none of the EU member states has a specific legislation for stress at the workplace, all legal frameworks do refer to psychosocial factors as those that can cause or aggravate stress at the workplace. According to the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) (12), 80 % of the managers in the EU consider stress to be a problem in their organisations, but only 30 % say that they have implemented some sort of stress management programme or a programme that deals with psychosocial issues at the workplace. Half the respondents claim that psychosocial issues at the workplace are harder to manage than the more "traditional" hazards.

According to the same report by EU-OSHA (12), Croatia is one of the least likely countries to take preventive measures against psychosocial issues; stress management programmes are implemented in only 25 % of the respondent organisations, while only 23 % use psychologist services. In Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands,

and Sweden, legislation goes a step further than the EU legislation and stipulates that employers should actively work to reduce these risk factors. In the United Kingdom stress management programmes are more often recommended than obligatory, although health and safety laws do express concern about stress (13-15).

#### *Formal and informal organisational influences*

The Whitehall II Study (16, 17) showed that civil servants at the bottom of the hierarchy were six times more absent from work than others, which is related to a perception of lower control over job tasks, low social support, and higher incidence of mental health issues. Authors such as Carayon, Hoonakker, and Smith (18, 19) believe that in the centre of organisational design and management (ODAM) is the relationship between management philosophy, satisfaction, and productivity of employees; employees accept managerial decisions more easily if they too hold them necessary, if the decisions have been clearly outlined, and if the lines of responsibility are clearly set. All this lowers stress that would otherwise arise from conflicting roles. Technological innovations and education that help with job tasks also tend to actively involve employees in problem solving, decision making, and encourage them to speak their minds freely (20,21). Research is now shifting focus on issues related to organisational structure and the relationships between superiors and subordinates. Organisational structures that are based on a clear hierarchy are inexpensive, efficient, and easily maintained; this is why they are most common in the world. However, parallel to this formal structure, there is an informal social interaction between employees and the employers. As early as the 1920s, the Hawthorne studies (22) have shown that people do not work for financial gain alone, but also because they want to belong to a collective, and produce something meaningful. In other words, they are equally influenced by intrinsic (psychological and social benefits) and extrinsic (payment and financial benefits) work factors.

Informal social processes greatly affect the efficacy of work organisations and work in teams, even where the formal organisational structure is good. They can affect the cohesion within and between work units and the relationship between workers and the organisation and can undermine

**Table 1** Early signs of poor organisational culture of health and safety at work

Individual	Organisation
Unusual behaviour	Growing backlog, low production, more overtime hours
Poor work results	Lower work quality (more production errors)
Mood swings and changes	Less clients and inadequate service
Problems with co-workers	Increase in sick leave
Increase in absenteeism due to illness	Inefficient cooperation between employees and departments
Cannot keep one job for long	Higher employee turnover

the formal structure and decrease productivity. It is important to know that informal processes have the same, if not even greater power to change beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour of workers and ultimately lead to the establishment of social norms within the work unit. Usually these are mutually set social norms about the quantity of the work that is to be done and the relationship with the superiors. Every deviation from these norms leads to an increase in social pressure and stress, which disrupts productivity. Therefore it is necessary to match formal and informal influences so that the employees can actively participate in improving productivity (23, 24). This can be achieved in different ways that are all based on active communication with workers, such as focus groups and work units that are dedicated to solving a specific problem, then on education and safe working conditions, which all comes down to creating a healthy work organisation. Protecting health and safety at the workplace is much more than just focusing on formal aspects of prevention of harmful effects that result from work processes, work tasks, and workplace environment. At the core of ensuring health and safety at work are people; therefore all organisations who wish to invest in and maintain human capital should pay close attention to behavioural, social, and cultural processes (24).

#### *Healthy work organisation concept: connecting organisational culture and health*

The healthy organisation concept encompasses managerial and business understanding of health in relation to organisational culture. It is built on the simple premise that a happy, content, and calm worker is a healthy and productive worker. Healthy organisations are those whose culture, management, working environment, and business practice create an atmosphere that improves health, efficiency, and quality of employee's work (18, 25). A growing amount of data indicates that the most successful and competitive companies are those that have the highest levels of health and safety and the most physically and mentally healthy and satisfied workers (26). Crimmins and Halberg (27) define "health culture" as a mixture of attitudes and beliefs of employees towards health promotion programmes at the workplace. An optimal social environment is necessary in order to improve psychosocial and physical health of the employees. The World Health Organization (WHO) in its new model of health and safety protection at the workplace includes the "internal working environment" (which encompasses both individual physical health and psychosocial well-being) as well the need for connections between work organisations, communities, and the environment that the workplaces are a part of (26). Such a broad model of understanding health and safety at work makes it necessary that occupational medicine physicians, ergonomics and human factors specialists consider the wider aspects of social policies, economy and the environment (28-30). Peterson and Wilson (31) suggest that

occupational medicine specialists and experts who research organisational development should focus on developing interventions that encompass organisational culture through the perspectives of health of individual workers as well as the whole organisations.

Increasingly important and driven by globalisation is the diversity management at the workplace. Many experiences are common to all minority groups and encompass stereotyping, discrimination, harassment, violence, and exclusion from formal and informal exchanges at the workplace (32). A working environment that is more receptive to diversity attracts better workers and has lower employee turnover. Employee turnover may cost up to 150 % of the regular cost of the employee who has left the position. Therefore, successful organisations regularly monitor employee turnover and report the findings every year as a measure of success (33).

The success of entrepreneurship depends on technology, tolerance, and talent (the "3T"), and developing new technologies and talent depends on tolerance within an organisation (34). Research has shown that non-heterosexual individuals who feel safe enough to come out in the workplace are more efficient, more motivated, and feel better about their relationships with co-workers. Furthermore, hiding one's sexual orientation at the workplace reduces productivity up to 30 %, while organisations that provide their workers with support groups, mentoring programmes, etc. have 7-16 % higher scores in questionnaires about satisfaction and productivity at the workplace in comparison to those that do not (35).

Sense of security is crucial for establishing good interpersonal relationships at the workplace (36). Organisations that value employee diversity and allow free expression of this diversity and those that are culturally heterogenic have better results than those that are culturally homogenous, as they encourage creativity and innovation (35, 36-38).

#### *Work satisfaction and productivity*

In 1975, Katzell et al. (39) showed that increasing worker satisfaction did not necessarily increase productivity. They saw two obstacles to this: resistance to implementing change and focusing on just one approach instead of implementing system-wide changes. Therefore, they suggested seven principles to increase both workers' satisfaction and productivity:

1. Critical-Mass Principle: changes in the organisation need to be sufficiently deep and far reaching in order to have a lasting effect;
2. Motivation Principle: development of a workforce that is dedicated to the concept of high productivity through financial and/or psychological rewards;
3. Shared Benefits Principle: workers need to see that organisational changes that increase productivity benefit them as well;

4. Job Design Principle: changes need to be implemented so that the workers see them and actively participate in their implementation. The implemented changes have to ensure optimal working conditions;

5. Pattern of Control Principle: higher autonomy and self-regulation can be key to increasing work satisfaction; organisations in which all workers have a certain level of control are more productive and motivated;

6. Patterns of Compensation Principle: adequately paid workers generally like their job, are more satisfied, have lower absenteeism levels and more rarely leave their jobs. However, pay needs to be connected with the productivity level;

7. System-Wide Changes Principle: changes need to include the whole organisation and need to create “new” work systems) (40).

Newer studies seem to support the idea of happy and healthy workers as productive workers. Organisations that promote healthy and safe working conditions ensure economic growth through the trust that they build within the community (40, 41). Quick and Quick (42) suggest that creating a happy, healthy, and productive workforce should rely on the principles and knowledge of occupational medicine and public health (42). This in turn calls for preventive health programmes that seek to develop the abilities of the worker population and eliminate conditions that lower this ability. These programmes should also plan and implement healthy practices following the principles listed in Table 2.

#### *Proposed procedures in developing a healthy organisation*

This process requires complete cooperation and consensus between the management and workers. One of the most important ways to protect workers' psychosocial health is to empower the employees and include them in decision making (43).

According to several authors (29, 36, 43), the seven steps listed below are the fundamental building blocks for any healthy organisation:

#### *1. Communication, consultation, and informing*

It is necessary to obtain consent and make sure that all organisational levels are devoted to protecting health of all employees, regardless of their status or position in hierarchy. All organisation units need to actively shape, conduct, supervise, and evaluate adopted programmes. It is recommended to form a group of workers to supervise and implement the adopted programmes in cooperation with outside experts such as union members, psychologists, and occupational medicine physicians. All the employees need to be clearly and regularly informed about the implementation steps and need to be given an active role in implementation. This will increase the perceived importance of the programme and their willingness to participate and

implement the agreed changes and policies. Workers can be informed about the program via internet or monthly bulletins, regular meetings of working groups, or specific, task-oriented meetings. The importance of good communication is paramount.

#### *2. Recognition of needs*

Programmes should be clear about what needs to address, such as promoting healthy attitudes towards health at work, understanding and preventing stress and health risk factors, supporting employees with health problems and including them back into the work environment. It is also necessary to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of a specific health promotion programme. This analysis needs to be done in cooperation with all employees, regardless of their position in hierarchy. This cannot be repeated enough times.

Approaches to determining the needs differ and complement one another (10, 44). They broadly fall into three categories: academic (or anthropological), analytical (or psychological), and pragmatic (10). They also differ in the observed timeline (past, present or future), kind of information that is derived (quantitative or qualitative), form/features of the information (descriptive or normative), and strategies, methods, and instruments used (44).

#### *3. Determining objectives*

The objectives should be “measurable” using appropriate analytical methods; for example, an objective could be to reduce perceived stress caused by a determined stressor by 10 % within a year or to reduce absenteeism due to psychosocial health issues by 5 % within 2 years or to reintegrate or hire a number of individuals who had a longer period of sick leave or had health issues over the last two years.

#### *4. Developing specific plans and measures*

After determining the objectives and the time frame, it is necessary to define the means to achieve these objectives. They usually include informative campaigns that raise awareness about a certain issue within the organisation, education and training for employees and employers, actions aimed at reducing discrimination and violence at the workplace, methods for removing stressors at the workplace, policies aimed at helping people who develop health problems, and discrimination-free employment strategies.

It is necessary to adjust the strategies used in the programme to the culture and needs of the community as well as to different segments of the employee population, as the success of new or already implemented programmes depends on it (24).

**Table 2** Principles of healthy and productive organisations

<b>Importance of human resources</b>	Organisations need to hold human resources at least as important as other resources (capital, structures, equipment, materials, etc.)
<b>Relationship between worker's health and wellbeing and organisational health</b>	Organisations need to be aware that health and wellbeing of their workers directly corresponds to the wellbeing of the organisation
<b>Increasing motivation at the workplace</b>	Workplaces should motivate workers to perform in an efficient and productive way. Work tasks need to be designed in such a way that workers look forward to their time spent at work
<b>The need for continuous monitoring and evaluation</b>	There are many different organisational cultures and ways of management that promote wellbeing and satisfaction in workers. Organisations need to keep track of employee attitudes and make timely changes in order to improve their wellbeing and satisfaction at work
<b>Importance of balancing personal life and work demands</b>	Organisations need to be aware that work influences different aspects of life. Therefore it is important that organisations create policies and programmes that allow workers to establish a good balance between work and personal lives
<b>Relationship between wellbeing and productivity</b>	Workers with good emotional wellbeing will be more productive and less likely to change workplaces. Also workers who are less stressed and more productive are those who: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- are adequately paid for their work and have a degree of financial security and whose pay is linked to the quality of their work and the economic growth of the organisation</li> <li>- have an active role in decision making and control over their work tasks</li> <li>- receive realistic demands, harmonised with their capabilities, needs, and expectations</li> <li>- are given the conditions to succeed</li> <li>- are given social support from co-workers and supervisors</li> <li>- work in conditions that accept diversity</li> </ul>
<b>Importance of trust, respect, and decency</b>	Organisations need to implement activities and programmes that develop trust, respect, and righteousness between co-workers, supervisors, and managers
<b>Adequate work hygiene</b>	Organisations need appropriate supervision, fair benefits, safe employment, and good physical and social working conditions

### 5. Implementation of the programme

It is crucial to make a clearly written document about the implementation of the programme, measures to be taken, and other planned changes within the organisation. This document should be a joint declaration of employers and workers as to what is and what is not acceptable, how to resolve possible disputes or conflicts, and what sort of disciplinary measures workers can expect. All workers should be clearly informed and actively participate with suggestions in the making of such a document. All should sign it and be responsible for its implementation (45-47).

When one considers the efficiency of the prevention programme, special care should be taken to determine programme implementation standards that should be sensitive to cultural norms, financial and research possibilities assuring its reimplementation on the basis of the written documentation.

### 6. Evaluation

Programme evaluation has to clearly and unequivocally show whether the agreed objectives have been reached or

not. Evaluation should take place as previously scheduled during programme implementation. The results should be clearly communicated to everyone in order to increase the interest of the workers for the programme and introduce corrective measures if needed (18, 47, 48).

### 7. Ensuring sustainability

The only way to ensure the sustainable plans and programmes for preserving health at the workplace for long is to include them in the official work policies of the organisation (48).

Programmes that address several issues at the same time, that increase physical, mental, and social aspects of health are cost effective and usually the most appealing to employers. Such programmes can lower the risk of a variety of disorders or illnesses and increase the overall health level of the workers.

The shining examples are the programmes included in the online databases made available to anyone interested by the UK Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre, who developed the Database of

promoting health effectiveness reviews (DoPHER), the EU-OSHA's Case Studies, and the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Prevention through Design programme (49-51).

Of course, the implementation of such programmes needs to be harmonised with national health policies and the level of health services, as these differ between developed, developing, and underdeveloped countries. In order to ensure interest and participation of governmental and non-governmental agencies, experts in health care, education, labour, economy, law, and target populations, these databases need to give information about the costs and benefits of these programmes.

Finally, for the maximal benefit it is necessary to maintain effective and sustainable cooperation between countries and international non-governmental agencies.

## CONCLUSION

Organisations that nurture positive health and safety culture are aware of the importance of safety and preventive measures.

Healthy organisations not only increase productivity, but also preserve it in the long run. Not only do they protect worker's physical and mental health at work, but also teach them to apply their knowledge after they leave the workplace.

With the skyrocketing unemployment rates, employers and managements in Croatia and other transitional countries do not seem to prioritise happiness, satisfaction, or health of their workers, as there are many left to replace them.

The ever increasing health protection costs give prevention a poor starting position, as its results are not immediate to see. However, as the Croatian Institute for Health Protection and Safety at Work has recently joined the European Network for Workplace Health Promotion (ENWHP), which is an advisory body to the European Commission, there is hope that knowledge about the importance of healthy organisations will spread not only in Croatia and EU but worldwide.

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### **Kultura zdravih organizacija – radna mjesta prijatelji radnika**

Radni uvjeti, radni okoliš i sam način rada znatno utječu na zdravlje. Danas je relativno malo poslova definirano tjelesnim zahtjevima, a puno više mentalnima i emocionalnima, pri čemu psihosocijalni rizici postaju značajni. Uz brojne pozitivne utjecaje rada na zdravlje i blagostanje, mnogi su radnici izloženi i opasnostima, štetnostima te ergonomske i psihološke naprežanjima. Stanje mentalnog zdravlja zaposlenog omogućava razvijanje u emocionalnom, intelektualnom i socijalnom pogledu te ima odlučujuće učinke na radnu sposobnost, zahvaćajući ne samo način i ishode njegova rada nego i ishode poslovanja tvrtke ili ustanove, određujući njenu kompetitivnost na tržištu. Unatoč dobroj organiziranosti upravnih tijela tvrtke, što umanjuje stres na radu, neformalni društveni procesi utječu (pozitivno ili negativno) na koheziju unutar radnih jedinica i na osjećaj povezanosti radnika i organizacije. Kultura sigurnosti neke organizacije rezultat je individualnih i grupnih vrijednosti, stavova, kompetencija i oblika ponašanja. To, pak, određuje odlučnost i način vođenja programa za očuvanje zdravlja i za sigurnost u organizaciji. Značajke organizacija koje imaju pozitivnu kulturu sigurnosti su zajednička percepcija važnosti sigurnosti te pouzdanost u preventivne mjere. Rad koji omogućuje autonomiju, kontrolu nad svojim radnim zaduženjima, razumne tjelesne i psihološke zahtjeve te sigurnost od iznenadnih otkaza dovode do većeg zadovoljstva radnika i smanjuju stres na radnom mjestu. Danas se sve više ističe važnost različitosti na radnom mjestu. Potrebno je istaknuti kako je upravo osnaživanje zaposlenika jedan od najvažnijih načina očuvanja psihosocijalnog zdravlja.

**KLJUČNE RIJEČI:** *blagostanje radnika; mentalno zdravlje; organizacijska kultura; stres; zdrave organizacije*