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Good Practices in Social Security

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Hamburg Airport – Occupational health and preventive measures in ground handling: A model project for cooperation between social insurance institutions

A practice of the German Social Accident Insurance Institution for Commercial Transport, Postal Logistics and Telecommunication (BG Verkehr)

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Summary

The statutory social insurance institutions for accident, health and pension insurance carried out a pilot project in cooperation with ground handling managers at Hamburg Airport and the company Lifebonus GmbH, with the aim of reducing sickness absence due to back injuries. The project sought to improve cooperation and consistency in service provision creating synergies for insured persons. In terms of content, the focus of the project was to introduce a training satellite and job simulator for the loading staff at Hamburg Airport. About 180 employees working in aircraft loading and unloading participated in the first phase of the project (2015). In the second project phase (2017–2020), another 800 employees from the commercial sector were given access to the project. Sickness absence due to back problems fell significantly, by around 40 per cent. Developing a sustainable range of services across all statutory social insurers, as well as closer cooperation on advice so as to improve access for insured persons, proved challenging and these areas require further optimization.

The issue or challenge

What was the issue or challenge addressed by your good practice? Please provide a short description.

Can the introduction of an operational health management system, supported by the various social insurance institutions, motivate employees to adopt recommendations to the extent that there would be a demonstrable improvement in the maintenance of musculoskeletal health? Can training recommendations on the correct sequence of movements for handling heavy loads be adopted and maintained over time? Can the knowledge gained from the project be used to develop a better joint range of services across social insurance institutions?

Addressing the challenge

What were the main objectives of the plan or strategy to resolve the issue or challenge? List and briefly describe the main elements of the plan or strategy, focusing especially on their innovative feature(s) and expected or intended effects. If possible, cite at least one of the ISSA Guidelines that helped address the challenge.

The main objective of the project was to improve the health and safety of commercial sector employees at Hamburg Airport by optimizing the alignment of services and through closer coordination of the social insurance institutions. The Social Insurance Institution for Traffic and Technology (*BG Verkehr, Techniker Krankenkasse TK*), German Pension Insurance North (*Deutsche Rentenversicherung Nord DRV*) and Accident Insurance North (*Unfallkasse Nord, UK Nord*) committed to the development and implementation of a targeted health promotion scheme. Initially, the focus was primarily on the activities of luggage handlers at the aircraft and the musculoskeletal stress they experience when handling loads. Another key focus was to demonstrate the economic value of this measure for the employer.

The training was implemented with the help of trainers and disseminators who assisted the employees with the training satellite and job simulator. During periods of lower traffic at Hamburg Airport, employees were able to access supervised, targeted training, even during working hours, and to optimize their working methods using the job simulator. The training was supported by short videos that helped analyse and evaluate the sequences of movements. The trainers also observed, and if necessary corrected, the movements that were learnt and adapted.

In addition, an effort was made to improve occupational safety for all employees through behavioural and situational prevention in the workplace. It is also possible that incapacity/absence from work could be reduced by eliminating the waiting times that can arise due to, for example, application procedures involving different social insurance institutions, and by closer coordination of measures taken. The existing portfolio of the individual social insurance project partners should be supplemented with support from the Joint German Occupational Safety and Health Strategy (*Gemeinsamen Deutschen Arbeitsschutzstrategie* – GDA). The targeted and coordinated support for return to the work should create synergies with pension insurance.

The following ISSA guidelines were consulted: *ISSA Guidelines on Prevention of Occupational Risks*; *ISSA Guidelines on Return to Work and Reintegration*; *ISSA Guidelines on Workplace Health Promotion*, and *ISSA Guidelines on Service Quality*.

Targets to be achieved

What were the quantitative and/or qualitative targets or key performance indicators that were set for the plan or strategy? Please describe briefly.

The most important goal was the prevention and reduction of sickness absence due to back injuries among employees in the commercial sector. In a follow-up, an evaluation of the impact of the job simulator on reducing physical stress and strain was carried out on 45 test subjects.

Another aim of the project was the development of a sustainable range of services across all social insurance institutions in line with the Prevention Act. The details of this project were consolidated in the joint memorandum of understanding. This cooperation was also evaluated.

Evaluating the results

Has there been an evaluation of the good practice? Please provide data on the impact and outcomes of the good practice by comparing targets vs actual performance, before-and-after indicators, and/or other types of statistics or measurements.

The results from the evaluation of the job simulator show that the test subjects were able to recall and act on the knowledge acquired from training on working methods when they took part in the workplace simulation and that this was likely to reduce back and shoulder strain.

During the first observation period in 2015, the number of sick days due to back disorders fell demonstrably, by around 40 per cent. Thereafter, the sickness absence among the participants remained at a low level.

Reflection on the efforts made to improve cooperation between social insurance institutions suggested that the goal of developing a sustainable range of services across all institutions, in line with the Prevention Act, could not be achieved within the scope of this project. The first challenge, for example, was to create a portfolio of services offered to companies. Here it quickly became apparent that, among other things, the term “prevention” is defined differently in the various social law codes (III, V and VII), which leads to discrepancies in the legal framework for preventive measures.

Lessons learned

Based on the organization’s experience, name up to three factors that you consider as indispensable to replicate this good practice. Name up to three risks that arose/could arise in implementing this good practice. Please explain these factors and/or risks briefly.

Important findings:

- The ability to deliver training close to the workplace and during working hours contributed greatly to the success of the project. It is only possible to provide this training during working hours at airports where there are phases with less traffic, between peak times. The training involved a training satellite and job simulator with a simulation room that could be adapted for a wide range of activities, as well as integrated video analysis. This form of training could be provided for ground handling staff close to the workplace and was especially suitable for smaller airports.
- Since it was not certain that the sickness absence due to back disorders would be reduced significantly, investment in this measure was a risk for the employer. The risk was mitigated by the involvement of the social insurance institutions as part of the pilot project. Hamburg Airport was encouraged by the positive results and has now adopted the training concept, investing a further 1 million euros (EUR) in operational health management. Due to the targeted reduction of sick days an ROI (Return on Investment) of 4:1 was achieved.
- Regarding the development of a sustainable joint range of services across all social insurance institutions, common goals need to be defined more clearly in future, sufficient resources must be made available and individual preventive health services must be better coordinated.