



WHITE PAPER

Don't Waste Time! Increase Productivity by Investing in Health and Well-Being of Your Employees

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While accident prevention measures and comprehensive safety systems have been successful in reducing workplace injuries and incidents in many business sectors, there are two areas in which worker health continues to suffer increasingly: Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSD) and stress, depression and anxiety. Discomforts in these areas now account for nearly three quarters of employee illness and absenteeism, ultimately costing companies far more in reduced productivity and lost work days than on-the-job accidents. The success of safety initiatives targeting incident prevention proves that the tools, know-how and technology to tackle these issues are available. What has been missing is a sense of urgency, awareness and the right attitude to confront them head-on.

Musculoskeletal Disorders and Mental Health Issues on the Rise

Efforts by industry, governments and others to reduce accidents in the workplace have been largely successful. While industrial accidents have not been completely eliminated, among companies that have implemented a robust safety system incidents and associated injuries are declining or holding steady, so that in some cases 0 incidents is a reachable goal. At the same time, however, Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSDs) and mental health issues are on the rise in the workforce globally.



Figure 1: Mortality: Deaths resulting from work-related illness, Source EU OSHA/ILO
<https://visualisation.osha.europa.eu/osh-costs#!/>



Work-related MSDs are caused by frequent, repetitive on-the-job activities that result in overuse or strain to nerves, ligaments, muscles, tendons, joints and spinal discs. Some of the most common types of MSDs are Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (CTS), Thoracic Outlet Syndrome (TOS), tendonitis and back pain. Low back pain, in fact, has been identified as the leading cause of physical disability worldwide according to the 2012 Global Burden of Disease Study³, and regional figures reveal high rates of MSD in a range of countries. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that nearly 30% of days away from work in the private sector were the result of MSDs in 2018⁴.

brought with it increased challenges to mental well-being in the form of uncertainty, instability and changes in many people's work lives. In a December 2020 German work safety report (forsa), 88% of employees responding to the survey felt that **psychological stress** in the workplace was increasing⁹.

In the jungle of workplace health risks, unsafe and unhealthy working conditions are the lions and tigers, respectively, that threaten human well-being and productivity. The lions hunt openly, visible to their prey, just as certain salient unsafe conditions are given great attention in comprehensive safety



Figure 2: Main work-related illnesses and DALY (Years of life lost and lived with disability) per 100,000 workers, Source: EU-OSHA 2017 <https://visualisation.osha.europa.eu/osh-costs#!/>

These conditions are costly. In 2012-13, Australia estimated costs of over \$24 billion due to MSDs⁵, while in the US, costs have been estimated at between \$45 and \$54 billion annually⁶. Since the primary risk factors for MSDs – namely, prolonged sitting and the use of laptops, cell phones and other such devices – are quite prevalent in the modern workplace, the chances are slim that the problem will subside in the coming years without focused interventions to remedy it.

Mental health challenges are also widespread according to available data. In the EU, 68% of workers reported work-related stress in both 2010 and 2015⁷, while 42% of employees had been diagnosed with a mental health disorder in 2018¹. In Britain, anxiety, depression and stress cost employers 45 billion pounds according to a report published by Deloitte in 2020, up 16% since 2017⁸. Certainly, the global Covid-19 pandemic has

systems. But there are risks that remain unseen. Like tigers, MSDs and stress, anxiety and depression are stealthier before they strike, but just as threatening.

Case Study: Germany

It is challenging to compare labor statistics and data gathered in different countries. Any reliable analysis has to consider that each country operates under a distinct system that affects how data is reported and classified. The extent to which labor laws protect employees and guarantee time off for illness impacts how sick days are taken and counted, for example. Culture, too, has an influence in terms of expectations around missing work or how stigmatized mental health challenges are. There is a large discrepancy as well in the availability of up-to-date statistics. Since Germany has



Figure 3: Sick days per 100 FTE due to psychological diagnoses (Germany), Source: © DAK Gesundheit (major German Health Care Provider and Insurance)

comprehensive data, a system similar to other European countries and a level of industrialization comparable to the US, Japan, Canada and Australia, it can offer useful insights on the impact of MSDs and poor mental health on workplace performance around the world. Since 2004, Germany has seen the incidence of workplace MSD hover above 20% of all types of employee illness – a higher percentage than any other category¹⁰. Over the same period, mental illness has sharply increased, from 10% to more than 15%, and is

The UK has also documented an excellent ROI when it comes to combatting poor mental health in the workforce, reporting that for every £1 a company invests in its employees' psychological well-being, there is a £5 return⁸.

the only health issue dramatically rising¹⁰. Workplace injuries, meanwhile, have decreased the most of any reported health issue. In fact, only 5-10% of lost work days are traceable to injuries, while 40% are attributable to MSDs or mental health. Based on the mental health statistics alone, a company with 40,000 employees loses 100,000 workdays as a result of issues such as stress, depression and anxiety. But by reducing these losses by just 5%, the company could increase productivity by 1.6 million EUR^{11,12}.

Take Action: Raise Awareness and Deploy Existing Tools

Whether working to improve the factors that affect the musculoskeletal system or those that impact mental well-being, the good news is that the solutions are readily available. The same techniques and approaches that have resulted in fewer accidents even in high-risk settings like petrochemical plants can be applied to combat the lions and tigers circulating in the modern workplace. The EU-OSHA's "Lighten the Load" campaign recommends preventive measures such as varying tasks, providing ergonomic equipment and encouraging regular breaks, all of which have led to MSD reduction in the companies that have implemented them.

Deloitte's study of workplace mental health in the UK concluded that the most effective interventions were large scale, aimed at supporting many workers, and targeted company culture. Resilience-building was the focus here, and companies experienced success using technology and diagnostics to tailor support to those most at risk. In short, the tools and know-how are at hand; what has been lacking is a sense of urgency to drive decisive action.

Understanding the high cost of ignoring these problems – both to individual companies and to national economies, not to mention human lives – should be the catalyst that sets solutions in motion.

A 360° Approach to Workplace Health

A successful campaign to prevent MSDs and mental illness has to approach these issues from four fundamental perspectives:

- > Workspace elements
- > Organization and processes
- > Human elements
- > Culture and leadership



Figure 4: A 360° approach to workplace health



Workspace elements include **ergonomic equipment** as well as lighting (natural and artificial), temperature, exposure to noise, **hygiene measures**, cleanliness and sufficient space to carry out tasks. The workspace should be designed to protect humans from **hazardous substances** and physical threats, ensuring that emergency and other equipment is tested and maintained appropriately. Safety measures suited to the type of work being done must be in place.

From an organizational perspective, HSE assumes a central role, establishing a health and safety strategy and reasonable targets. This means carrying out risk exposure assessments and evaluating **workplace health** and well-being so that employees are protected and their needs met. Under this umbrella are issues such as work-life balance, integrating appropriate breaks into the workday, making meals available, facilitating child or elder care, monitoring reentry after an illness and much more.

Humans, of course, are a company's most valuable asset, so ensuring that workers are fully equipped to carry out their tasks is critical. Is each employee qualified and able to perform their duties? Do they have access to PPE where necessary? Are they able to access health care easily and affordably and take advantage of preventive medicine measures? Employers can also contribute to the health of their workforce by encouraging exercise, good nutrition, stress management and providing support in traumatic situations.

Finally, corporate **culture** and effective **leadership** can make or break efforts to promote workplace health. By communicating the value of health and safety and recognizing and demonstrating best practices, leaders can transform their organizations. DEKRA specializes in building leadership skills through consulting and coaching and can bring their expertise to bear on MSD reduction and mental health in the workplace.

Far-Reaching Benefits Through the Improvement of Health and Well-Being

The incentives for companies are clear when it comes to reducing musculoskeletal disorders and promoting mental well-being among their employees. Even modest headway in these areas can decrease absenteeism and boost productivity substantially. This translates as well into gains for society at large. When companies become proactive in addressing these issues, people reap the benefits in other areas of their lives and economies are less burdened by physical and mental disability. It is time for employers to recognize the outsize dimensions of these problems and address them with urgency they require.

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- 2 Eurostat, Labour Force Survey ad hoc module: Accidents at work and other work-related health problems, 2013.
- 3 Oakman J, Clune S, Stuckey R. Work-related musculoskeletal disorders in Australia. Canberra: Safe Work Australia. 2019.
- 4 US Bureau of Labor Statistics: Occupational injuries and illnesses resulting in musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), May 2020.
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- 8 Deloitte: Poor mental health costs UK employers up to £45 billion a year, 2020.
- 9 Forsa: Arbeitssicherheitsreport 2021, 2020.
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