

Summary

The food industry traditionally has a high level of work stress. This relates to both physical as well as psychological stress factors. For example, unilateral motion sequences and short, repetitive work steps are generally characteristic of the work performed by employees in production divisions. To improve the situation, raise awareness amongst employees and companies and to provide support wherever there is a need for action, the sponsors of the Joint German Occupational Safety and Health Strategy (GDA) initiated the "Safety and health protection for stressful and sedentary activities at production workplaces in the food industry" programme. The objectives were, in particular, to optimise the ergonomic context, motivate employees and companies to embrace the topic of health, to improve the stress-strain relationship for employees and to promote operational health management.

From January 2011 to August 2013, the Berufsgenossenschaft Nahrungsmittel und Gastgewerbe (German Social Accident Insurance Institution for the foodstuffs and catering industry, BGN) and the state supervisory authorities of Baden-Wuerttemberg, Brandenburg, Bremen, Hesse, Lower Saxony, Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt paid a visit to 491 companies in the food industry. A follow-up meeting with 386 companies took place after approximately 9 to 12 months. The programme's approach had previously been piloted in 19 companies.

The programme pursued a multi-level approach: Companies that received a critical assessment regarding their occupational health and safety and ergonomic prevention situation in the initial inspection were given the offer of completing a health check of their employees (level 1) as well as an ergonomic analysis and consulting in the especially critical areas of the operation (level 2).

The health checks were implemented by 34 companies and a total of 5,700 employees were able to be reached. Individual recommendations were provided as feedback. Ergonomic analyses and consultations by the GDA partners took place at 23 operations. Overall, the demand for the support offers in the level concept was considerably higher than what could be achieved by the consulting in accordance with the available programme resources. The BGN has included the support offer relating to the established level concept as part of their services for the future.

The company visits were evaluated based on the questionnaires provided and compared between the first and second meeting. Important indicators on occupational health and safety as well as on physical and psychological stress situations were recorded. The most important results of these evaluations and comparisons are outlined below:

The responses on the occupational health and safety organisation show that, in the overwhelming number of cases, occupational medical care and safety support as well as an adequate occupational health and safety organisation are provided in the company. The risk assessment is evaluated as appropriate in just under 70 % of the companies visited. The estimates made in this programme matched the results of the overarching GDA evaluation. About 40 % of the companies offer occupational health promotion measures.

A very high psychological stress level was identified by most companies in both the self-assessment by company representatives as well as in the external assessment by supporting supervisors. Significant improvements were achieved in the second company visit, including for psychological stresses. The ergonomic situation and its utilisation by companies was more favourable than what was estimated by the supervisors. A positive assessment was also identified in this area during the second company visit.

A comparison of the results of the first and second visits shows that, on average, slight improvements were made in the occupational health and safety situation. This particularly relates to the implementation of the risk assessment and the provision of funds for occupational health promotion.

Viewed as a whole, it can be assumed that the work programme has led to sustainable improvements in some areas. The objectives of the work programme were able to be achieved with the selected approach and instruments. However, with regard to musculoskeletal complaints and diseases, it must be assumed that the intervention timeframe was much too short to reach any findings with respect to potential changes. But indirect indicators such as health literacy and prevention culture, which may have an impact on musculoskeletal diseases, show slightly positive changes over time. The health literacy and the prevention culture were determined based on indices from the estimates on the occupational health and safety situation and the stress situation during the company visits.

The step-by-step approach proved to be successful in providing more targeted support for companies with a specific need for intervention. It was seen as useful by the majority of the supervisors involved as well as the company representatives. However, the operational needs could not always be covered by the resources available to the work programme.

The relevance of the topic for the food industry due to the comparatively high levels of stress was correctly identified by the Joint German Occupational Safety and Health Strategy. The programme's activities were able to provide the necessary stimulus to drive improvements in the work situation and the health of employees. The participatory approach certainly also contributed to its success, starting from the programme planning through to the broad involvement of implementation partners and the feedback loop between the company visits.