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Interview: "Social interaction within companies should be right at the top of the agenda"

How are the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises affecting the mental health of employees? How can their situation be improved? A conversation with Jasmine Kix and Esin Taskan, prevention experts from the German Social Accident Insurance (DGUV), Expert Committee Health in the Workplace.

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Ms Kix and Ms Taskan, the COVID-19 pandemic started two and a half years ago. Which psychological challenges are employees facing today?

TASKAN: Currently, people are faced with the challenge of continually adapting to the changing infection prevention measures. Sometimes there are more rules in place and sometimes there are fewer, and all of

this has an impact on the way work is organised and on work processes. In addition, people have very different perceptions of the current level of risk associated with the pandemic. This poses a certain potential for conflict. Many companies also had to deal with staff shortages due to COVID-19 infections. This resulted in increased amounts of work and increased intensity of the work. This is why it is important to hold up pro-

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tective measures in companies, such as the provision of tests or personal protective equipment such as masks. Despite all of this, there are some things that we are handling very well. We now know what needs to be done to keep infection rates down.

What is new and unexpected, on the other hand, is the accumulation of various crises. These are also referred to as cumulative crises. These include the war in Ukraine, which gave rise to the energy crisis, global shortages, the acute shortage of skilled workers and climate change. Many companies currently do not know whether they can produce at all, whether there is enough material and raw materials, or whether they have enough staff.

KIX: Anything that causes a general sense of anxiety and uncertainty also negatively impacts health and safety at work and affects employees. We receive corresponding enquiries from companies. Employees' problems range from job uncertainty, financial worries, problems with reconciling work and family life, increased consumption of alcohol and other addictive substances, to overwork, constant stress, and lack of rest.

Employees in the health service in particular experienced traumatising events during the pandemic. Which other sectors have been affected?

TASKAN: Witnessing a potentially traumatic event is an inherent risk of working in the health care sector, and this was the case even before the pandemic. The special circumstances during the pandemic increased the potential of experiencing such events

in this sector significantly. Just recently, the German Social Accident Insurance Institution for the health and welfare services (BGW) published a study according to which the tendency of employees in nursing professions to leave the company has increased significantly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has further exacerbated the shortage of skilled workers – with poor prospects for the future.

But other sectors also faced some tough challenges. Studies published by the Institute for Prevention and Occupational Medicine of the German Social Accident Insurance (IPA) and the Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (BAuA) had similar findings. Employees report being affected by difficulties in working with customers and other contacts. In general, symptoms of depression and anxiety are reported more frequently by employees who work in professions associated with a high risk of infection with SARS-Cov-2. It is therefore little wonder that in both studies, in addition to health care work, employees from the fields of education and social services are also mentioned.

The ever-changing infection prevention measures require a high level of flexibility and give rise to a certain degree of uncertainty. How can employees deal with this?

KIX: When the world is shaken by crises, people need that feeling of safety more than ever. We can get this feeling of safety through social interaction, for example. As social beings, humans feel safe and secure when they receive support from other people. During the pandemic, the challenges

associated with finding good solutions for social interaction at work have increased. When good solutions are found, employees are better able to handle the upcoming challenges. We need to be aware of the importance of the workplace as a social environment and actively shape social interaction at work. A strong team spirit and mutual support are invaluable resources in crisis situations. When this is done well, people can actually become more resilient through challenges. When it comes to the organisation of company communications and common action in crisis situations, managers play a key role.

What can employers do to ensure that employees working from home do not end up losing contact with their colleagues and managers?

KIX: Employers should ensure that employees working from home are able to maintain regular contact with their colleagues and supervisors, that they are able to openly discuss any fears and worries they may have and that they receive social support. They should ensure that communication within the company is empathetic and respectful.

For example, in terms of the organisation of work, management personnel can establish a culture of support ("Who needs what?") and distribute work tasks in a way that strengthens cooperation within the team. Discussions and team meetings can be carried out virtually. Face-to-face meetings, on the other hand, should be more frequently used to provide feedback and discuss day-to-day matters.

TASKAN: To ensure that conflicts and problems can be handled promptly, managers should ideally provide employees with opportunities for dialogue and should schedule time for one-to-one talks during days in the office. Making use of advisory services offered by external providers can also relieve the burden on management personnel.

Has anything improved for workers since the pandemic started?

KIX: Many employees were given the opportunity to work from home when they were previously not able to do so. This allowed them to gain more experience with handling flexible working hours, having more autonomy in terms of how their work is structured and reconciling family life and work life. Even after the mandatory working from home rules introduced during the pandemic ended, many employees continue to take advantage of the opportunity to work from home at least occasionally.

However, there is one thing that the pandemic has made clear: in the future, thanks to the possibilities offered by digitalisation, we can save on expenses for travel and in-person commitments.

From 10 October to 20 October, the "Woche der Seelischen Gesundheit" (mental health awareness week) takes a look at social relationships and social cohesion. Why are companies and institutions so important as social environments?

TASKAN: In our society, the workplace is a very important social environment. However,

due to the pandemic and the subsequent transition into working from home, some people are no longer experiencing this social environment. This creates a distance not only from our place of work, but also from the people that we work with.

KIX: We often forget that certain aspects of interacting with others at the workplace – which we may take for granted – create a sense of solidarity, connection and belonging. Eye contact and physical feedback have a stabilising effect on us psychologically. This effect often goes unnoticed. These are basic human needs, and therefore, important resources for humans, as they strengthen our feelings of safety and security – especially in difficult times.

TASKAN: It could be a "How are you?" in the corridor or eating lunch together in the canteen. Or it could be a one-to-one conversation about day-to-day life and joys and worries outside of work.

KIX: In our society, many people struggle with feelings of loneliness. According to the German National Cohort health study (NAKO Gesundheitsstudie), during the pandemic, 32 percent of people suffered from feelings of loneliness, while 80% stated that they sometimes or often miss having company. A deciding factor in the feeling of loneliness and isolation at the work place is the perception that there are no adequate support offerings.

When people feel lonely, they also experience stress more profoundly. Work satisfaction and productivity decrease, while the level of work required intensifies and working hours increase. If this situation continues, it can have dangerous consequences. Symptoms of depression and anxiety can increase. For this reason, social interaction within companies should be right at the top of the agenda.●

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