

Challenges in Self-Managing Vitality: A Qualitative Study about Staying Vital at Work among Dutch Office Workers

Authors : Violet Petit-Steeeghs, Jochem J. R. Van Roon, Jacqueline E. W. Broerse

Abstract : Last decennia the retirement age in Europe is gradually increasing. As a result, people have to continue working for a longer period of time. Health problems due to increased sedentary behavior and mental conditions like burn-out, pose a threat in fulfilling employees' working life. In order to stimulate the ability and willingness to work in the present and future, it is important to stay vital. Vitality is regarded in literature as a sense of energy, motivation and resilience. It is assumed that by increasing their vitality, employees will stay healthier and be more satisfied with their job, leading to a more sustainable employment and less absenteeism in the future. The aim of this project is to obtain insights into the experiences and barriers of employees, and specifically office workers, with regard to their vitality. These insights are essential in order to develop appropriate measures in the future. To get more insights in the experiences of office workers on their vitality, 8 focus group discussions were organized with 6-10 office workers from 4 different employers (an university, a national construction company and a large juridical and care service organization) in the Netherlands. The discussions were transcribed and analyzed via open coding. This project is part of a larger consortium project Provita2, and conducted in collaboration with University of Technology Eindhoven. Results showed that a range of interdependent factors form a complex network that influences office workers' vitality. These factors can be divided in three overarching groups: (1) personal (2) organizational and (3) environmental factors. Personal intrinsic factors, relating to the office worker, comprise someone's physical health, coping style, life style, needs, and private life. Organizational factors, relating to the employer, are the workload, management style and the structure, vision and culture of the organization. Lastly, environmental factors consist of the air, light, temperature at the workplace and whether the workplace is inspiring and workable. Office workers experienced barriers to improve their own vitality due to a lack of autonomy. On the one hand, because most factors were not only intrinsic but extrinsic, like work atmosphere or the temperature in the room. On the other hand, office workers were restricted in adapting both intrinsic as well as extrinsic factors. Restrictions to for instance the flexibility of working times and the workload, can set limitations for improving vitality through personal factors like physical activity and mental relaxation. In conclusion, a large range of interdependent factors influence the vitality of office workers. Office workers are often regarded to have a responsibility to improve their vitality, but are limitedly autonomous in adapting these factors. Measures to improve vitality should therefore not only focus on increasing awareness among office workers, but also on empowering them to fulfill this responsibility. A holistic approach that takes the complex mutual dependencies between the different factors and actors (like managers, employees and HR personnel) into account is highly recommended.

Keywords : occupational health, perspectives office workers, sustainable employment, vitality at work, work & wellbeing

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