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Risk Factors for Work Quality and Mental Health: Current findings and initial conclusions

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INTRODUCTION

Under the title "Psychosoziale Kosten turbulenter Veränderungen" (The Psychological and Social Costs of Turbulent Change), a report commissioned by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Supervision e. V. (The German Association for Supervision or DGSv) on the "inner life" of organisations in Germany was published as issue 1 of this series in 2009.[1] The report was based on a 2008 survey of members of the DGSv on their experience of working with and advising employees of commercial and non-commercial organisations.

The results presented in the report received a lot of public attention (the Süddeutsche Zeitung newspaper, for example, ran the headline "Organisational Climate Catastrophe"[2]). Above all, it was the findings on widespread overworking and mental strain on employees that made the biggest impression. The researchers themselves could at first hardly believe what was being reported to them from the world of organisations in Germany – for example the statement from an experienced supervisor that "the level of mental suffering is shocking". But once we had analysed all of the data, we were sure that we had found indications of an extremely problematic social development, that of a "hazardous working world"[3] with increasing psychological and social consequences.

The study was one of the first to reveal a significant increase in work-related mental illness in the last few years. This was taken note of in many other sectors (above all by health insurance organisations) and became a topic persistently discussed by the media under the catchphrase 'burn out syndrome', a term which by now has been specifically adopted in politics, by many associations and non-governmental organisations (from the German Confederation of Trade Unions to churches) and gradually by some businesses. The survey helped to objectify the widespread feeling that huge changes were taking place in the workplace and its conditions. Although these changes provide employees with more chances for individual fulfilment, more often than not they present a risk for their subjective well-being, and more importantly, for their mental health. Ultimately, this pool of surveys led to the topic of mental health in the workplace being put on the agenda of widespread public discourse and has kept it there until today.

This issue presents a report based on a second study, which once again, three years later, surveyed how members of the DGSv perceive working conditions in commercial and non-commercial organisations and their effects on employees.[4]

The basis of this second data collection phase was expanded in comparison to the first phase: this time thirty qualitative, intensive interviews and four group discussions were carried out, along with a new survey of DGSv members by means of a comprehensive questionnaire, both online and by post (in total 893 participants = 24.8 % of members). This random sample is also representative of the population (all members of the DGSv).

The questionnaire examined four main topics:

(a) Can distinct changes in working conditions since 2008 be identified on the basis of the repeated questions?
(b) What value do work quality standards have for employees? (Professionalism)
(c) What do employees do in order

to keep themselves (mentally) healthy in the workplace? (Self-care)

(d) To what extent is fairness in terms of workload and performance implemented in organisations?

A selection of findings from the second phase of data collection will be presented below. As with the last report, it is necessary to bear in mind that the reported findings reflect the perception of the supervisors and are not statements given by the employees themselves. Also, as in 2008, it cannot be assumed today that the perception of these experts in work-related consultancy is not significantly distorted, even if they judge the working world on the basis of comprehensive experience, usually of many years, from their particular professional point of view – however, it is precisely this experience that this research project aims to collect and make use of.

At the end of 2012, the qualitative and quantitative results of the study will be published in a comprehensive volume, once again published by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht in Göttingen.[5]

The impending publication of the book prompted us to make use of this chance to publish a position paper in a very special way: all members of both project groups in Chemnitz and Frankfurt am Main were each asked to select a section of one of the thirty qualitative interviews and to comment on this in reference to the overall results of the study. We then put the commented sections in an order that will enable readers to make associations and gain productive insights without pre-determining these for them.

This patchwork may be an unusual method of publishing the results of a scientific research project. Nonetheless, we have permitted ourselves this experiment in light of the soon to be published book, which follows the conventional standards of scientific writing and the presentation of results. The idea of this experiment attracted us because we felt it might represent the diversity of opinions in the study most effectively, both those of the supervisors and those of the researchers.

— *G. Günter Voß and Rolf Haubl*

INTERVIEW EXTRACTS WITH COMMENTARY

"I'll give you a practical example: the culture is that older employees have their own office, with their own pictures, their own coffee cup and plants, and it has to be like that, just as they need it, and always have." (F 5)

The Dutch photographer Jaqueline Hassink has published a photo series of "100 Coffee Cups", in a book entitled "Mindscapes". The series consist of photographs taken by her of coffee cups she collected in various companies.[6] The use of personal coffee cups is an interesting phenomenon in every organisation's culture, because they often symbolise the attempt to assert the employees' own personalities against the dictates of their organisation. With officially permitted coffee breaks, the company creates an institutionalised opportunity to maintain some private space in the midst of demanding work times. Personal coffee cups with individual designs reflect the conflict between the desire for autonomy and the expectation to conform, by making clear how connected or distanced employees feel to the organisation they work for.

1 Rolf Haubl and G. Günter Voß, "Psychosoziale Kosten turbulenter Veränderungen: Arbeit und Leben in Organisationen 2008", in *Positionen – Beiträge zur Beratung in der Arbeitswelt*, 1–8.

2 Dagmar Deckstein, "Betriebliche Klimakatastrophe: Arbeit ist auch nicht mehr das, was sie mal war. Der Frust wächst", in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 15.06.2009, 15.

3 This was the title of a comprehensive presentation of the study and its results: Rolf Haubl and G. Günter Voß (eds), *Riskante Arbeitswelt im Spiegel der Supervision: Eine Studie zu den psychosozialen Auswirkungen spätmodernen Erwerbsarbeit, published as part of the series Kölner Reihe Materialien zu Supervision und Beratung*, ed. by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Supervision e.V. (DGSv) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).

4 The scientific responsibility for the study is carried by Prof. Dr. Dr. Rolf Haubl from the Sigmund Freud Institute in Frankfurt am Main and Prof. Dr. G. Günter Voß from the Technical University Chemnitz, who conceived and carried out the study together with their colleagues. Dipl.-Soz. Nora Alsdorf, Saskia M. Fuchs, Dipl.-Päd. Ullrich Beumer, Dr. Anke Kerschgens, Julian S. Fritsch and Dr. Bettina Daser (all Sigmund Freud Institute); and Christoph Handrich M.A., Dr. Frank Kleemann, Dipl.-Soz. Benjamin Kahlert (all TU Chemnitz), as well as Dr. Ingo Matuschek (now at the INAG at the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena), were all members of the research group Working and Living in Organisations 2011.

5 Working papers on specific aspects of the study have already been published as research in progress and can be accessed at: http://www.dgsv.de/2012/05/neue-studie-beschaeftigte-ringen-um-qualitaet-gesundheit-und-professionalitaet-am-arbeitsplatz/ (accessed on 21.05.2012).

6 Jacqueline Hassink, *Mindscapes* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2003), 102ff.

In the quote above, the ensemble of coffee cup, personal pictures and plants in an office are more of an expression of an inner retreat from commitment to work obligations. This decreasing sense of commitment has by now been extensively researched and proven. The percentage of employees who do not work in a committed way is increasing.

The supervisor quoted describes this retreat as a phenomenon that mostly occurs with older employees, who have been employed by the organisation for a long time. This lack of commitment is in distinct contrast to other forms of commitment more common in young people. The interviews showed that young employees tend to identify strongly with their work and their organisation, or that they develop an instrumental approach. Instrumental means that they are capable of changing their jobs without much hesitation or emotional involvement if it serves their own interests. "Job hopping" is the term used for this in the interview.

In this case, however, having one's own office is not primarily the visible evidence of a position acquired over the course of a career and the privileges associated with this, to be proudly shown off and protected. Having one's own office instead becomes a place of retreat or even resistance. And it becomes a manifest expression of one's own inertia and resistance to change. Personal pictures, flowers and of course, the personal coffee cup, possibly printed with personal sayings or private photographs, all become a blatant symbol of not agreeing with the changes that have taken place and the increasing demands and burdens of work under the conditions common in modern organisations. Older employees organise themselves a private space that they can maintain an overview of, where they can protect themselves and show anyone who comes in, especially management, what they think of these changes. At the same time, they undermine their own role by doing this, as clients may feel uncomfortable or put off by the private character of the office décor. Creating this kind of space also has unsettling effects for everyone involved: the resentment of the older employee is tangible, and yet they seem unwilling or unable to find new, advantageous solutions for dealing with the often extremely demanding working conditions. The situation stagnates, both for the organisation and for the employee.

Still, coffee rituals play an important role in the modern organisation: 'open space' meetings with a coffee station in the middle or the 'world cafe', which already includes the coffee ritual in its name, are important methods in change management, which is concerned with creating agreeable strategies for change. Large, modern corporations deliberately encourage their employees to spend time with each other in communal kitchens or shared photocopying and printing areas, because they know how important communication-generating coffee rituals can be for increasing interaction and productivity in the company. In the quote above, the coffee cup is depicted more as preventing communication; at best its warmth will offer its owner some protection from the cold of the pressure to be more efficient, which he or she feels helpless facing. In this way, a space is created for a kind of personal pre-retirement.

— *Ullrich Beumer*

"... Employees who joke around, saying, 'Around here, things are restructured every four weeks!' will sooner or later be saying, 'Come on, you guys really have lost it! Can't we maybe first try to implement the last change properly, before we make the next one?' That's what they say. They've hit the nail on the head in one sense, because, as they say 'Everybody talks about change all the time. Changes are made all the time. Everything is constantly turned upside down. Can't we just get back to work at some stage?'" (C13)

This quote is exemplary of the position of employees who find themselves in a constant process of change in organisations. Those affected perceive the constant change to their work requirements as extremely stressful and are overwhelmed by the permanent temporary status of their tasks. A big problem for these employees is also that these change processes do not adequately take social consequences into consideration. They therefore feel neglected by management and make them responsible for the change of strategy, which they perceive as chaotic and lacking transparency. The management's competency is also often questioned. The findings show that the behaviour of management in organisations is often experienced as not very communicative and valuable. As the quote shows, this is one of the main reasons for serious problems. Instructions are not clearly formulated and hard to understand, and do not seem sensible to the employees. It is therefore increasingly difficult for employees to recognise clear goals in their work and they have problems seeing their specific tasks as part of a bigger picture.

The study has shown that deficient management often has structural causes. Socially-orientated management is very rarely recognised by organisations, if at all. Managers are told to first and foremost increase efficiency in

their divisions or departments, which is measured in figures and outputs. This places a large amount of pressure on managers to be successful in this regard, which they usually have only learned to deal with badly or cannot deal with at all. The reasons for this is that, because people are not properly assessed for their suitability for management and because of a lack of management training and development, most people in leadership positions in organisations are not actually very competent in management. Usually managers are awarded their positions because of their expertise; social competence plays a secondary role at best. This means that important aspects of management such as communication, coordination and cooperation are often perceived as a strain and a burden, and that the lack of practical experience in management leads to indecisive action. Concrete communication with employees about specific issues, for example through feedback structures, is often rejected by insufficiently trained managers. In cases of continuous organisational change, this defensive communication tactic is a particularly serious problem, however. Employees want to be involved in these processes in order to prevent their work from losing all meaning. They want to be informed about new decisions and participate in decision-making and solution-finding processes. A manager who can meet both the needs of his or her employees and the demands of his or her organisation needs support from the organisation. This means above all that management work needs to be recognised as an organisational factor in order to fill management positions with professional and socially competent individuals, and to continuously further train them in the management of people.

In many organisations that the surveyed supervisors work with, existing management culture falls short of these requirements.

— *Benjamin Kahlert*

"And that often has a bad reputation. [...] How is it even possible, I mean, adapting to a new situation and in a certain sense therefore endorsing it? It's a difficult topic, very delicate, very delicate. If it is successful, then it distances the employee from the organisation a bit more, but also results in more satisfaction. (I: So it means conforming more, but at the same time, distancing oneself more?) Yes, it's adapting to a real situation, the giving up of ideals, that is conforming, and yes, by distance I mean that you no longer feel a deep loyalty to the organisation, which is, when it's about ideals, usually the case, so there's a lot less dedication from the heart at stake, and that's really what I mean by distance, and this leads to, yes, really less of a burden. But eventually, I would say, the question of what it all means to the person will of course come up again, because an ideal also has something motivating and inspir ing about it, but when it becomes too unrealistic, it becomes a burden." (F13)

The supervisor interviewed above addresses an important dilemma that faces employees dealing with processes of change in the working world. The initial situation is that organisations and working conditions change, without employees necessarily changing with them in the way that they should. In the process of these organisational changes, situations often arise in which the employee has to adapt in relation to the organisation, creating friction and new conflicts. Work-related ideals and professional expectations suddenly become dysfunctional, sometimes as a result of changes not taking place in the open, and can no longer be reconciled with everyday work procedures.

What can organisations do in these situations? A pragmatic suggestion given by several supervisors in the interviews was: "love it, change it or leave it". However, in the quote above, it becomes clear that both the "love it", in the sense of an acceptance of the new situation, and the "change it" in the sense of holding on to one's original ideals with the desire of changing the working environment, as well as the "leave it", are associated with internal conflict and moral dilemmas.

Adapting to a new situation reduces conflicts and problems with the organisation. It leads to an internal distance if the employee's own ideals are in some way emotionally removed from his or her everyday work and pragmatic approaches begin to dominate. However, the supervisor quoted above also addresses the fact that re-adjusting oneself to the new working situation takes on the character of conforming and therefore, one could add, involves a form of subjective failure in terms of the employee's own ideals and expectations. Giving up one's ideals, no longer working with "dedication from the heart", can also result in a loss of motivation and commitment. If the desire for meaning, as a fundamental human desire from work, is no longer satisfied, then the feeling of being able to make a difference and act, and the subjectivity of the employee, is threatened.

Maintaining professional expectations leads to an opposition to the organisational environment, which can sometimes also be used constructively,

in the sense of "change it", if employees try to change working conditions together. However, it also leads to increased stress, internal conflict and a permanent opposition to the organisation when employees cannot influence and change their organisational environment.

Leaving the organisation is often associated with anxiety and in a constantly changing job market, often with very real risks. When entire economic sectors change, the chances of being better able realise one's own work-related ideals in other organisations are lower.

The dilemma between conforming by compromising one's ideals and an idealisation far removed from reality therefore remains. For the employees and also for their supervisors, it seems that the main aim is to find a subjectively acceptable balance. The "delicate" task here is to find as much inner distance as necessary, despite adapting to the new situation, and at the same time to maintain as many professional expectations along with the corresponding personal motivation as possible.

— *Anke Kerschgens*

"Now I know the individual departments for example, because I was also there as a supervisor at one stage, and they are on their last legs, I mean the perceptions really differ. Some guy sits there with his lists, his Excel lists, and says, 'Excess human resources, they could save ten per cent, there are far too many of them, they're stepping on each other's toes.' And the people on the ground are totally frustrated, because they just don't get anywhere anymore with their expectations for good jobs. And there's no dialogue, there's absolutely no exchange between them, they don't listen to each other, they don't see each other, they never even meet, because everyone is basically chained to his or her department." (F GD2)

The supervisor above describes the fact that departments in organisations are measured in performance indicators. However, not just departments but also individual employees are increasingly measured in figures, and more and more often nowadays, it is only the performance results that count.

In this conception of performance, effort, hard work and dedication do not count (anymore). The amount of work a particular outcome requires is not taken into consideration. On the other hand, the range of qualities expected of employees has widened enormously in the last few decades: employees are expected to demonstrate creativity, loyalty, flexibility, team spirit and above responsibility for themselves and initiative.

Today's definition of performance or achievement has become extremely blurry, which is why employees should in fact welcome objective performance measurement on first glance. This supervisor sees it exactly the same way: *"first of all, you can't actually measure all of those things. And that's why I think it's actually great that it can be broken down into measurable factors [...]. And if you work in a goal-orientated way, you can definitely see that you have achieved something, and that feels good, but it also must be done i n an intelligible way, and not in imposing numbers that no one understands."* The quality of an objective performance assessment ultimately depends on whether it can be realised. In both quotes however, it becomes clear that performance indicators may appear objective, but that they do not satisfactorily solve the problem of comparing fundamentally different kinds of achievement.

Cost control and market strategies at the expense of employees? It stands to reason that a misleading and inadequate implementation of such measurement systems will lead to feelings of failure, frustration and fear of the next round of 'quality control'. If the employee feels that his or her work is not being adequately assessed, then he or she will also feel that he or she is not being fairly rewarded, which is insulting and can cause mental strain as a result. The dream of a system of objective measurement can quickly turn into a nightmare.

— *Saskia M. Fuchs*

"In my experience of the care for the elderly sector, but also in the youth work sector, I've been noticing that, I would say, a change of values has taken place. While in the past, I would say, feelings and the person were always the central concern, now it's figures and cost-effectiveness – is a person causing losses or do they pay for themselves, can we tap into new markets, and can this be financed? So there's a huge economic pressure, and at the end all that's left are hard figures – do we have enough cases, do we have enough people, have we worked enough hours?" (F10)

In this quote, the supervisor clearly addresses organisations' attitude to work and professionalism. In particular though, he addresses the change in organisations' understanding of professionalism in the area of work with the elderly and young people, as this change, which the overall findings of this study also show, is having a major effect in the non-commercial sector. This attitude can also be found in commercial organisations,

though it has dominated there for longer. In this quote, the interviewee specifically mentions three important criteria of professionalism from the perspective of organisations, which also correspond to the findings of the study:

On the one hand, professionalism is geared towards the economic success or the economic survival of the organisation. In this regard, the highest level of efficiency is demanded, which is then measured in specific performance indicators. These indicators primarily serve to identify and measure economic success. The organisation is successful in this sense when a clearly measurable result is balanced against directly associated costs and provides a positive result, i.e. the costs should be kept as low as possible, in order to prevent "causing losses" and therefore being unsuccessful and ultimately unprofessional.

Increasing economic pressure had led to a change in the orientation of organisations, especially in the non-commercial sector. In a few key words, the supervisor quoted above describes a clear orientation towards cost-effectiveness and above all the drive to expand and tap into new markets, in order to generate enough "cases" and "hours".

The organisation's idea of professionalism is in contrast to that of the employees, who measure themselves with their own criteria. The supervisor also suggests in the quote that in the areas of work with the elderly and with young people, the definition of good and professional work on the part of the organisation used to match that of the employees in the past: *"Feelings and the person were always the central concern".* With the increasing commercialisation of these sectors, the two definitions are drifting apart, because for the employees, people and feelings remain the main focus of good work.

In general, the findings show that, regardless of which sector they work in, employees view customer focus and customer satisfaction as a measure of the quality of their professional work, in which for them the customer is always the direct recipient of their efforts and work. Furthermore, a sense of meaning and the recognisable effects of their own work are identified as important factors of professionalism in practice.

— *Christoph Handrich*

"A good team spirit is extremely helpful, so people think like this, 'Even if it's only us, at least we'll somehow create a pleasant group atmosphere, a sense of team spirit.' That helps to compensate for a lack of appreciation. If that isn't in place, then it all really becomes very individualist, and can actually lead to illness, and therefore a high number of sick days." (F12)

In this quote, collegiality appears to be a resource that helps employees to better deal with mental strain in the workplace. This sense of team spirit is about belonging to a group, which gives employees the feeling that their equals are affected in a similar way that they are. In this spirit of 'sharing the same fate', they expect each other to compensate for the lack of appreciation that they mainly experience from their supervisors as representatives of their employer. However, this expectation is not always fulfilled, seeing as it stipulates that members of the group show appreciation for each other, which only functions if there is no strong competition in the group, or at least if it can be kept in check so that everybody does not only think of themselves, not to mention a sense of solidarity.

Teams, as mentioned in the quote, can become niches in organisations, in which the team members reciprocally recognise each other's individuality and therefore provide protection from feeling hurt. But they can also create deep wounds, for example if the pressure of projects on tight time schedules causes the group to look for a scapegoat in the group for a feared impending failure. Then it *"really becomes very individualist",* which in these cases can be interpreted to mean 'isolated'. Employees who lose the protection of their colleagues must then not only ensure that they do not overwork themselves alone, but must also get by without any relationships based on trust, which makes working together more difficult, as it becomes grounded in fear and resentment.

If the number of sick days is rising in an organisation, then this may be an indicator that recurrent emotional attacks suffered by employees, including those inflicted on each other, are making them sick.

— *Rolf Haubl*

"Yes, they [the younger people, who] are so dedicated and come across so well, they then face these fatal structural, I mean, yes, let's first of all say, structural conditions, and then they have to face working conditions, how should I say, which are so full of contradictions, which they first of all, in their enthusiasm, really try to fulfil, all the demands placed on them, and they really take them on. And then because of this permanent stress and these permanent contradictions, which are inherent in these structures, eventually they just quit, just like that. I think that's just phenomenal." (C5)

"Phenomenal"? The slightly unusual word chosen at the end of this quote quite literally reflects the contradictions discussed in it. It is not only the demands placed on employees described that are contradictory, but also the euphoric word chosen for these precarious conditions. Whether formulated consciously or unconsciously: the word chosen by the supervisor reflects dismay at a situation that at the same time results in – seemingly paradoxically – a kind of awe, which is hard to understand. The feeling of powerlessness is however also implied, the feeling of only being spectators to an event and not participators in it. Is this a new phenomenon? Has supervision reached its limits?

What the supervisor above is discussing is the current climate for those just starting their careers: representatives of a generation who enter the working world as confident and motivated young people, but then encounter back-breaking demands and ultimately fail, completely disillusioned. Young employees especially, use their motivation to "run" against "walls", an image evoked by the quote. In the belief that they can achieve the targets prescribed to them with even more hard work, they constantly push themselves over their mental and physical limits. The results are shocking and ubiquitous: psychosomatic illnesses in the workplace are more common than ever – and the average age is dropping. The supervisor's statement reflects the view of many of those interviewed in the survey: today's working world is putting the health of employees at risk, and is a world which is characterised by inherently contradictory working conditions, which, correspondingly, permanently demand too much of the employee.

The fundamental problem is well-known by now: in the upper levels of the hierarchy, budgets and targets are drawn up that have nothing to do with the resources that are actually available. "Those responsible know that it's all pretend, and the Youth Welfare Office knows that it's all pretend – we are building Potemkin villages." The façade is maintained on every level, although everyone knows that these targets are based on unrealistic expectations. The process becomes problematic when the virtual numbers reach a level where they must be implemented using real resources. This is where this dreadful system runs into major problems and quite often pathogens. When the limits of what is possible are crossed, deficits arise, either in terms of employees taking appropriate care of themselves or in the quality of their work.

We are very far away from salutogenic workplaces; in fact the opposite is true: the potential for mental damage and illness is huge. In order not to be completely broken by structures that seem they cannot be changed, employees often have no choice but to change their own behaviour: some employees find 'loopholes' after a while, which allow them to retreat a little. An "instrumental" approach is also often observed in younger employees, which serves to protect them strategically and tactically. However, idealism will always be forced to give in to pragmatism, at least when the employee has a limited choice between "health-damaging company loyalty" or "company-damaging self-protection".

— Nora Alsdorf

"People working in a massage department […], they told me, 'There are too many seriously ill patients and we don't have enough time.' And then one of them told me – he seemed like a bit of a guru-type [...], he was constantly quoting Mahatma Gandhi [laughs] – he said, 'No, that's not his problem, he treats some people properly and some people not at all properly'. And he really had no problem with it, because he said, 'I draw a line for myself, I do my job as best I can, but I just can't do everything'." I: "It's nearly cynical to say that: 'I just can't do it, and that's the way it is', or maybe it's realistic, 'I'm just giving whatever I have to give'." (F1)

Cynical or realistic: when a realistic perspective on things is called cynical, then things are not as they should be. The masseur obviously did not want to put up with this disorder of things any longer – whether he is a cynic or a realist. For the difference between both is merely the line that the realist draws between himself and things: while one can still hear the faint sound of disappointment with his own powerlessness in the face of situation in the voice of the cynic, the realist no longer feels any powerlessness, because he has already calmly come to terms with that situation. Whether he is cynical or realistic: the masseur's attitude is mental protection in practice.

The masseur's dilemma: forfeiting quality standards in his work because he has too little time for his patients, or maintaining quality standards by reducing the number of patients, which his colleagues may see as selfish, however. If he decides to maintain quality standards in his work, in this case it means not giving in to the pressure, which is also a burden on the collective group in terms of time pressure, as an individual.

Pressure is the heart of the dilemma: the massage team is under time pressure, which means psychological strain for all concerned – for the patients

in terms of the quality standards, for the masseurs in terms of job satisfaction. The masseur's self-protection only shifts the pressure somewhere else. His attitude is selfish and not universally applicable, but yet it is hard to reproach him for it. He does not want to compensate for structural deficits at his own or at the patients' expense. The fact that the masseur has found a way to maintain his own mental health in the workplace, which is irresponsible and understandable at the same time, must be viewed as a troubling finding. It affects not only quality standards and job satisfaction, but ultimately also overall working conditions: because the example of the masseur shows that – at least in the hospital in question here – working conditions currently exist that can only make people unhappy and/or sick when they finally accept that the situation cannot be improved – and then start to act on the this basis.

— Julian Fritsch

"Time – the fewer people there are, the less time there is for individual tasks. There were also some redundancies, and because of that time pressure has also increased. But my impression is that they don't necessarily give in to that time pressure, but somehow keep things running anyway. Things like, deadlines are not kept, things take longer, recently planned new projects are buried, so that, eh, no one actually checks what results have been achieved and without really learning anything from it." (C12)

The cause for this particular professional situation is an increased time pressure on work required induced by the organisation. The employees react to this in a specific way: they do not comply with the organisation's requirements, but instead practice a form of passive resistance or ignore the new organisational goals, when they, for example, refuse organisational learning, let newly introduced measures come to nothing or simply allow agreed deadlines to elapse.

The employees therefore do not "give in" to the pressure, but reduce the quality of their work and give up their professional standards: they fulfil their tasks as best as they possibly can under the undesirable circumstances; but at the same time, they are not prepared to contribute constructively to the efficient functioning of work processes and the further development of the organisation through indirect support work. Although this was not the intention of the organisation, a self-reinforcing situation is created: the more the organisation fails to recognisably provide acceptable working conditions for its employees, the less the employees identify with the organisation and its goals.

In the situation described here, the employees do not seek out conflict in order to hold up their diverging definitions of professionalism and quality standards in work against those of the organisation, instead they resign themselves or react with the neglect, in particular, of aspects of carrying out their jobs that cannot be controlled or are hard to control, in order to create some relief for themselves from the excessive workload placed on them.

With regard to the form of professionalism in organisations, this results in a specific variety of the basic situation type of "subjective professionalism": this is fundamentally characterised by the fact that employees are given the responsibility and left to themselves by the organisation to define the form of their professional behaviour. The employees then have to self-reflexively develop their own individual professionalism on the basis of existing resources, their own expectations and structural circumstances. However, there are no uniform professional standards on the organisational level.

The individuals' most significant act of adaptation is being obliged to compensate for deficient resources through the individual redefinition of their own professional and quality standards. The employees thus fill existing gaps and replace the organisation's definition of sufficient work quality with their own definitions. This can open up more free space for flexible action and with it the chance to relieve the employee in terms of the deficient resources, but also brings with it the danger of overworking through excessively high personal standards.

In the specific situation described in the quote, the employees manage to create partial relief for themselves by indirectly neglecting general tasks connected with carrying out their jobs as a member of the organisation, but at the same time directly try to uphold job-related standards. The relief they achieve goes hand in hand with resignation with regard to identification with the organisation.

This situation differs categorically from the two other basic types of situation, identified in our analysis, in which professional standards are constituted: on the one hand, the situation in which the desired upholding of high professional standards by one of both sides is not possible because of the lack of possibilities for action required for qualitatively high-standard work; and on the other, the situation of commercialised professionalism, in which the efficiency demanded by the organisation requires employees to give up professional

standards, without being instructed as to how they should carry out their work by the organisation.

— Frank Kleemann

"The aim is to reduce absences from work, to reduce sick days. Yes, simply to maintain the staff level. […] When you look at the process of introducing these 'back-to-work meetings', if they are taken seriously, then they really are always an opportunity to fully reflect on working conditions. […] In one case, I led a back-to-work meeting, and first of all of course, it's met with quite a lot of suspicion, because the employee is afraid that it is only another means to control them. In order to have the upper hand and to discipline them. But if they realise that it can also be a chance have an open conversation, it can be really helpful. I don't know whether you would need an extra tool for it, I doubt it, because I think that if an organisation has invested in management and communication culture from the beginning, then it's probably unnecessary. This newspaper article also confirmed this: where there's a positive management culture, there are fewer people calling in sick." (C1)

Two different strategies for looking after staff and human resources management are addressed in the quote above: one which is focussed on the person and the other on the work process. Although these two things are actually inseparable from each other, many managers focus more on the work process – which they must ensure runs smoothly – and in doing so overlook, according to impression of the interviewee, working conditions and the consequences that can result for employees. In this sense they undermine a resource that is imperative for ensuring smooth work processes – above all their flexibility, which can only be guaranteed by human beings. An understanding of human resources management that goes beyond this, professional management in the best sense, would address the causes. This requires an authentic awareness of the problem beyond a simply going through the motions in a process seen as means of control, not open to a variety of results, by the employee. We are reminded of the value of this kind of understanding of management culture, and its ultimately demonstrable advantages are highlighted: at the end of the day it reduces costs and creates long-term stability at the same time, and should therefore always be chosen over short-term approaches.

— Ingo Matuschek

"[…] what worries me is how much the contempt for this whole business has already grown. I mean it's crazy, they go into a meeting and they talk about this and that completely normally. They leave, and they are all in complete agreement that it's the worst thing ever, that the whole thing is a fake, a show they all now have to put on. Something is smouldering, something has to go wrong, if I no longer believe that the thing can work – a big management peeve on every level. Even those responsible for certain achievements are no longer proud of what they achieve. I mean, you have to imagine, they say things like: 'The products we sell are basically a load of junk'. This results in an extreme case of de-professionalisation – excessive demands structurally and a lack of challenge professionally." (C15)

These are very striking statements. And they are particularly emphatic because one knows that the person speaking has worked for many years in almost every industrial sector, in the highest management levels of large corporations, as a supervision-orientated consultant.

The huge concern about the state of working culture in Germany that becomes clear not only in this quote, but also in the whole interview, is a recurring theme throughout the whole second phase of surveys on "Working and Living in Organisations 2011". Along with the mental and social strain on workers that was once again identified, it is precisely this obviously growing risk to quality-orientation and professionalism in connection with a loss of trust in one's own organisation that is particularly evident. And what is demonstrated insistently by the intensive interviews again and again can also be quantitatively confirmed in rather shocking figures from the additional written surveys of almost 1,000 members of the DGSv:

Over 80% stated for example that "employees need to work faster than what they think is necessary for high-quality work" and more than 60 % believe that "employees lack sufficient resources needed in order to produce high-quality work".

Almost 70% agreed that "increasing time and performance pressure leads to the inability to achieve quality in work carried out", "economic criteria are replacing quality standards" and that increasingly "conflicts between management and employees about quality standards" exist.

That these findings cannot just be found in our study, but are being noticed in a similar way in various other instances (if not always so clearly), will more than likely increase the concerns about the risk to such an important

resource, not just for the German economy, but also for our entire working and social culture. Here, I need only mention the "Engagement Index", collated for many years by the Gallup Institute,[7] and also the equally regularly updated "Index Gute Arbeit" (Good Work Index) by the DGB[8]. Both repeatedly show, as different as their perspectives are, that all is not well with employees' intrinsic connection to their companies, with job satisfaction and therefore ultimately the quality of work being carried out.

However, the DGSv survey demonstrates even more clearly than studies of that kind that we are not dealing with a deterioration of motivation or a shift of orientation in the workplace, as is sometimes interpreted from the situation. In fact the opposite is true. Our experts make it more than clear that employees still have a high level of interest in producing quality work and in the implementation of professional standards appropriate to their sector. What is evident is a creeping undermining of concrete possibilities to implement those things. Employees, ultimately on every level (including management) are dedicated to their jobs and want to produce good work, but increasingly the chance to do this is taken away from them, indeed very often they are positively handicapped from doing so. Many of the experts surveyed in the study also confirmed that employees are "suffering" massively as a result, that they "feel guilty" that they cannot produce work of high quality or even that they are forced "violate ethical standards".

What has ultimately been shown here is that one of the most significant causes of the increase in work-related mental illness that has attracted such widespread attention in recent years may be the fact that people are suffering massively because they are forced to do their jobs badly. It speaks for itself that (as the majority of the DGSv experts confirm) employees feel that "high-quality work is no longer valued".

— G. Günter Voß

A POSSIBLE CONCLUSION

If one reads through the commented interview extracts again, one gets the impression that the majority of supervised employees are under great strain because of their working conditions, if not completely overwhelmed. In this situation, they look for ways to fulfil their tasks at work as best as they can without risking their health. They are willing to work hard, clearly not only because they want to avoid sanctions, but also because it is personally important to them and because they see it as a social responsibility to uphold professional standards.

In order to keep the health risk low, a realistic self-perception of a person's own available resources is required: knowing was it possible and what is not possible (anymore) and to communicate and assert these limits appropriately was revealed as a key competence. This includes the ability to differentiate between internal and external stress factors: employees who are constantly ashamed for not being good enough and not being able to meet increasing demands are at risk of imprisoning themselves in unhealthy working conditions; employees who expect their employers to fulfil all of their obligations as a matter of course neglect to recognise their own responsibility, which an employer is also entitled to expect of them.

Measured against these criteria, impressive and well-developed employees are men and women who actively define their working environment, which cannot be successful without identification and possibly more free space for flexible action. Success stories of "lone

7 Cf. http://eu.gallup.com/Berlin/118645/Gallup-Engagement-Index.aspx (accessed on 21.05.2012).
8 Cf. http://www.dgb-index-gute-arbeit.de/ (accessed on 21.05.2012).

warriors" are rare, which is why it is important to represent common interests as a group. In terms of their emotional tone, many of the stories told in the interviews follow the pattern of "fleeing or holding one's ground?". "Industrial action" for better working conditions is rarely mentioned.

The question raises itself as to how well the supervisors are prepared for these social and psychological dynamics. Those that we interviewed know the challenges that their professional self-image and supervision techniques face. On the one hand, they are witnesses to the transformation of the late-modern working world, and on the other, they cannot claim to be merely 'supervising' these processes, as their profession is subject to exactly the same dynamics as those they observe.

From this point to view, the question of what to do must remain unanswered. Sometimes it is simply no longer possible to endure together what cannot be changed; in rare moments, a common vision of employment appears on the horizon, one which does not just promise personal fulfilment, but also delivers on its promise.

Supervision is not a rigid form of consultancy. In order to be helpful, it must adapt to new working conditions and with them, changed employees. This does not mean blindly conforming to the dominant conditions of an organisation, but rather the precise knowledge of these conditions, in order to be able to offer specific, tailored consultancy.

— Rolf Haubl and G. Günter Voß

IMPRINT

Positionen is an information service that provides researchers, consultants and others interested in consultancy in the working world with current, practice-orientated scientific debate. The aim is to present an engaging, subjective position, grounded in scientific thinking, but not necessarily watertight in all of its scientific details, a position that is provocative and open to critical response.

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