IT'S EASY IF YOU KNOW HOW: TIPS ON ORGANISING OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY

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It's a responsibility that weighs heavily. The responsibility for occupational health and safety often feels like a heavy burden on the shoulders of business owners. Even the management of small companies finds it difficult to deal with the scope of tasks to be fulfilled. Owners of a company can delegate tasks to their employees, however. To this end, it is essential that occupational health and safety matters are structured and well organised. We will explain below how this can be accomplished.

A first step towards organising occupational health and safety matters is to involve both managers and employees in an assessment of risks. Employees who operate the machinery are often much more aware of the potential hazards at their workplace in terms of occupational health than their boss. All managing directors or owners should therefore raise the awareness of all employees regarding the risks and hazards, and ask for their involvement in risk assessments.

Specifying responsibilities

The management and the managers must agree on clear responsibilities regarding occupational health and safety so that information on potential risks and hazards does not fall by the wayside. These potential risks and hazards should be documented and checked regularly. For example, a determination should be made as to who is to record hazard-relevant information, how this information is to be documented and to whom the information should be forwarded so that recommended actions can be determined based on the information. This could include training courses or training sessions on systems or machines, for example, or first-aid courses so that everybody would know how to provide assistance in an emergency situation, or even how to rearrange workstations.

External qualified personnel in occupational health and safety or safety officers requested by the Employer's Liability Insurance Association can provide support and assistance. These associations often offer courses and informative events free of charge. The following points generally apply: All employees must be informed in detail and receive training regarding occupational health and safety, and this applies especially if they are working with hazardous substances or on machines. Clear communication is imperative within a company.

A higher absenteeism rate with poor occupational health and safety

Companies who fail to properly organise occupational health and safety or who fail to successfully address the concerns of their employees often have higher absenteeism rates and work-related illnesses. In Germany, the average employee absenteeism rate was 18.2 days in 2020, according to the Information Service of the German Economic Institute . 24.6 per cent of these employee absences could be attributed to diseases of the musculoskeletal system, 17.5 per cent to mental illnesses and 14 per cent to respiratory diseases. Occupational health and safety that is well organised and thought out can help reduce employee absences. Statistics from the Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health indicate that the quantity and quality of occupational health and safety increase with the company size and degree of employee involvement via workers' representation in company decision-making processes.

The company size is decisive

For the organisation of occupational health and safety, the company size is of relevance. Companies with up to ten employees merely require basic occupational health care services and incident-related support provided by company physicians and qualified personnel in occupational health and safety. In addition to basic occupational health care services, companies with more than ten employees have to provide company-specific support, which for example, requires welding companies to conduct regular inspections of hazards at welding stations. This specific risk potential is subject to scrutiny at other companies, where work involves the handling of chemicals, for example. For companies with up to 250 employees, the Employer's Liability Insurance Association for Wood and Metal (BGHM) recommends obtaining certification of their occupational health and safety organisation through the BGHM. Safety officers should be appointed according to the size of the company: The appointment of one safety officer is mandated for companies with 21 to 150 employees. The appointment of two safety officers is required for companies with up to 250 employees, and an additional safety officer has to be appointed for each additional 250 employees.

The exchange of ideas is important within the company

Those faced with the enormous task of having to organise company-wide occupational health and safety matters should seek the support and knowledge of both in-house employees and external professionals. On its website, the BGHM offers a checklist for use by managing directors and owners to help establish an organisational structure that can subsequently be adapted to the requirements of the own company. Communication is essential to the process. Only those who are well aware of where the hazardous points can be found in the company are in a position to act accordingly and prevent harm. To this end, an exchange of ideas is essential within the company and across all hierarchy levels. More information on the topic can be found on the website of the Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.