

# IRELAND 2010

A series of reports examining the issues central to Ireland's future economic success

## HEALTH & WELL-BEING

### Exercise is good for you and your crew

Recent research puts the onus on employers to promote a healthier work environment. ELAINE LARKIN reports

**H**EALTH and well-being in the workplace has become an increasingly hot topic among employers and employees alike as lifestyles change and productivity pressures rise.

Research by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (EFILWC) found that 29pc of Irish workers put in more than 45 hours a week. Meanwhile, according to a recent survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in the UK, one of the main causes of stress-related absence among employees is the pressure to meet targets, which 41pc of bosses identified as a reason for people being out of work.

The new Safety, Health and Welfare Act, 2005 came into force on 1 September, pushing workplace health and well-being issues further to the fore. The new legislation represents a modernisation of occupational health and safety law as well as setting the scene for improving standards in the future.

"The new Act ensures every company has proper health and safety systems in place," says Tom Beegan, chief executive of the Health and Safety Authority (HAS). "It states the duties of employers as well as the duties of employees and Government."

**'We asked does your workplace promote physical activity and some 76pc of the people said no, it didn't, and they felt they were unsupported by their companies trying to engage in activity on a day-to-day basis'**



Workplaces should do more to encourage physical activity among workers during the day

The most controversial aspect of the Act is that it will allow for employers to drug test employees if they feel it is necessary. As well as that, the introduction of on-the-spot fines for employers and employees if it is felt by a HAS inspector that there are health and safety breaches taking place has also been highlighted.

These aspects of the legislation need to go through a consultation process and will be phased in within the next

few months, according to Beegan.

The Act makes health and safety compliance the responsibility of the employer and makes it easier to impose criminal liability on employers and managers. Yet it also emphasises the need for employees to not engage in improper conduct, to comply with all legislation and not put themselves in any dangerous situations. On the welfare side, the legislation requires emp-

loyers to provide a decent and appropriate environment and facilities.

#### Get up and go

A survey released in September found that three quarters of people felt that their workplace did nothing to encourage physical activity during the day or outside working hours.

The survey was conducted by the Nutrition and Health Foundation, which is funded by companies in the food and

drink industry. It revealed that the majority of Irish people (49pc of respondents) believe that we are less healthy than we were 20 years ago, but we lack the time and motivation to adopt healthier lifestyles.

Exercise was identified as the number one thing that people think they should be doing more of to improve their overall health. The main reasons why people don't get enough exercise are lack of time (50pc of respondents) and lack of

motivation (47pc of respondents). The survey showed that 69pc of working adults travel to work by car, 21pc walk and only 6pc take public transport.

Explains Dr Louise Sullivan, manager of the foundation: "We asked does your workplace promote physical activity and some 76pc of the people said no, it didn't, and they felt they were unsupported by their companies trying to engage in activity on a day-to-day basis."

When asked whether they would participate in a healthy lifestyle programme if offered by their employers, 55pc said they would.

"The modern consumer leads an extremely busy life, with longer working hours and commuting times, leaving less and less time for engaging in physical activity or cooking the traditional family meal. These, combined with other social pressures, have resulted in a sharp decline in the number of individuals meeting the minimum requirements for physical activity and a sharp increase in the incidence of overweight/obesity," says Sullivan.

According to the foundation, an employer could receive more than a threefold return from investment in workplace well-being through improved morale, reduced absenteeism and increased productivity.

Fieldwork for the fourth European Working Conditions

Survey started in September, the results of which should reveal the latest trends in health and well-being in the workplace.

More than 23,000 face-to-face interviews are being carried out with workers in the former EU15 countries, the four accession and candidate countries, plus Norway and Switzerland. The questionnaire covers all aspects of working conditions, including physical environment, workplace design, working hours, work organisation and social relationships in the workplace.

Five years ago, Irish workers reported the least amount of stress among workers in the former EU15 countries, as well as very high levels of job satisfaction, job control and autonomy. Only one in five Irish workers regarded their health and safety to be at risk because of their work, indicating lower perceived levels of risk than the EU15 averages.

"The European Working Conditions Survey is a unique tool that allows Europe's decision makers to monitor and make policies for better working conditions. In its fourth edition, the survey has been expanded to also cover issues relating to modern forms of work organisation, gender-sensitive issues and how people perceive their quality of work," says Willy Buschak, acting director of the EFILWC.

### The need for EAPs

The importance of integrating Employee Assistance Programmes into the human resources function was highlighted at a conference

THE annual Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) conference took place in September in Dublin. Its focus was 'Integrating Employee Assistance Programmes into Human Resources Management' and included speakers from Ireland, the UK, Greece, Finland, Canada and the US.

The thrust of the conference was to integrate EAPs into the mainstream as a human resources (HR) function as it interacts with human resources, health and safety and equality, according to Maurice Quinlan of the EAP Institute.

"EAPs have been over-identified with employee counselling," Quinlan comments. The challenge for the workforce for the moment is to reconcile work-life balance and the changing needs of their personal health including stresses, mental health and addictions. "Employees are going into a stressful work environment that's under constant change. For that transition an organisation that has an effective EAP can provide the supports to help employees balance their lives, deal with their stresses and become more productive," Quinlan explains.

#### EAPs offer a solution

In Quinlan's opening speech at the conference he noted EAPs can meet business needs and comply with legal obligations under the Safety, Health & Welfare at Work Act 2005 which requires employers to provide support for the following: work stress (overload); critical incident stress; workplace violence (staff assaults); workplace bullying; harassment and sexual harassment; and intoxicants (defined as drugs or alcohol).

Other preventive activities EAPs can take care of are: work-life balance initiatives; childcare; flexible working; risk management and safety statement; policies and



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procedures to control all psychological hazards.

He also mentioned that employees adapting to stress

as a result of change management or personal problems impacting their work should have access to an EAP which

will in turn provide access to community and professional services. These types of problems are: personal family issues; separation, divorce family; financial and legal; bereavement and suicide; addiction and mental health; chronic illness; domestic violence and sexual abuse; dual careers, elder care and childcare; and community.

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