

Development of a web-based participatory workplace improvement program for the primary prevention of mental health issues in small and medium-sized enterprises

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Background :

With challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work has become increasingly prevalent, facilitating flexible work methods not bound by time or location. This is in accord with the advances in digitalization of occupational health services. Within this context, the challenge lies in supporting employer and employee health activities, particularly promoting dialogue for work stress management. Participatory workplace improvement programs, crucial for supporting workplace-level dialogue, have spread across various sectors. These programs offer benefits when applied in small-scale business settings. Therefore, our team has undertaken the development of a web-based participatory workplace improvement programs for the primary prevention of mental health stress. We have examined the outcomes and challenges.

Developed Program:

The Participatory Workplace Improvement Program (PWIP) is applying participatory approaches tailored to meet the specific needs of each workplace. The program is supported by internal facilitators appointed within each workplace. External coordinators, namely the research team members, train and support these internal facilitators in executing the PWIP.

Step 1 involves a 2-hour training session for internal facilitators. Subsequently, these facilitators evaluate the PWIP readiness applying a checklist (Basic Organizational Development for Your Workplace, BODY checklist), learn facilitation skills through a 5-minute instructional video or receive suggestions for coordinating workplace activities.

Step 2 includes planning and implementing PWIP actions involving co-workers, with the assistance of a web-based procedures. Employees utilize the app to discern positive and improvable workplace conditions, engage in group activities, and contribute to planning workplace improvements. The PWIP comprises the following three sessions:

1. The initial kick-off session involves a brief workplace-level workshop for learning local good practices and how to use the mental health action checklist focusing on low-cost interventions, and job stress prevention measures.
2. Subsequent follow-up and action sessions occur within 1–3 months later through fostering consensus and enabling actions according to the agreed-on plans.
3. Reporting and sharing achievements follow in subsequent months, with a clear focus on local successes in improving workplace conditions and workers' safety and health.

Results and Discussion:

We gained trial experiences in several workplaces. The program followed the stress prevention guidelines in learning from local practices, tackling multifaceted stress-related risks, and taking group-work steps at the workplace level. Emphasis was placed on low-cost strategies for improving internal communication, work schedules, and team-work arrangements. The majority of improvements were attributed to these areas, often implemented in a combined manner, with communication enhancements frequently integrated with better work methods or less stressful schedules. Improvements in the physical environment were also usually paired with better communication or team dynamics. These multifaceted improvements were facilitated by the use of action checklists reflecting local good practices.

The web-based participatory program facilitated: a) joint workplace assessments leading to locally adjusted actions, b) documentation and sharing of primary preventive measures for job stress at the workplace, and c) provision of local resources for promoting employee dialogue. It is poised to support workplace environment improvements through stress-check programs, particularly expanding its reach in small and medium-sized enterprises with limited resources. These experiences confirm that there is a need to: 1) develop training for internal/external facilitators for program utilization, 2) devise usage strategies for workplaces unfamiliar with IT tools, and 3) innovate approaches to addressing workplaces with clear issues, such as high-stress workplace environments. The accumulation of good practices by utilizing both on-site and web-based approaches, and the development of new off-line occupational health services, is anticipated.

Keywords : workplace improvements, participatory approach, web-based program, stress prevention, small-medium sized enterprises