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# Stress – Psychology – Health: the START process for assessing the risk posed by work-related stress



The 'Start process'<sup>1</sup> is an instrument for classifying and assessing psychological stress in the workplace.

The 'Start process' falls in the area of preventive health measures. The process enables workplace practitioners to evaluate psychological stress and, by deriving corresponding measures, to reduce or even do away with sources of stress. A reduction of the stress risk in the workplace not only improves the health of employees; it also enables their potential to be better utilised and work processes to be carried out more effectively. This is more likely to be achieved if employees participate in the evaluation of the stress situation and if the evaluation is carried out – as envisaged by the 'Start process' – on the basis of information given by the employees.

The 'Start process' follows recommendations made by the *Bundesanstalt für Arbeitsschutz und Arbeitsmedizin* (Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health), as well as the rules laid down by official trade associations and labour inspectorates; in case of more complex situations, the process can include other measures, e.g. consultation with experts or the use of procedures for detailed analysis of psychological stress.

## Objective/benefits

The Start process is intended to enable all players in the workplace (employees, members of the works council and occupational health practitioners) to assess psychological stress in the workplace objectively (in accordance with the requirements laid down by the German Occupational Health and Safety Act) as part of an overall analysis that will pave the way for further investigation.

This risk assessment aims to improve the stress levels and health of the employees in order to improve efficiency and smoother running of the company concerned.

The process adopts a preventive approach, i.e. it aims to ensure that the work is set up in such a way that potential risks to health do not arise (see Figure 1).

<sup>1</sup> PRO:AGTIV – Betriebliche Prozesse zur Gestaltung von Arbeit, Kompetenz, Gesundheit and Technologie innovativ verbessern; reference: 99-V52A-2759 – research project funded by the EU and the Region of North-Rhine Westphalia.

Figure 1 The prevention spiral in occupational health and safety



Source: Sätzer, Rolf (co-authored with Geray, Max): *Stress – Psyche – Gesundheit, Das START-Verfahren zur Gefährdungsbeurteilung von Arbeitsbelastungen*, Bund Verlag – Frankfurt 2006

As the prelude to an ongoing programme of improvement, the START system allows users to derive practical measures aimed at tackling the specific situation in their workplace which can then be documented in a company collection of sample scenarios.

## Nature/type of instrument

START comprises a handbook including:

- A START questionnaire with open and closed questions (to assess psychological stress in the workplace from the subjective viewpoint of employees)
- Checklists (to enable an on-site evaluation of psychological stress). These checklists combine with inspections, workplace observations and interviews with employees in the workplace.

## Structure and methodology

The START handbook is structured as follows:

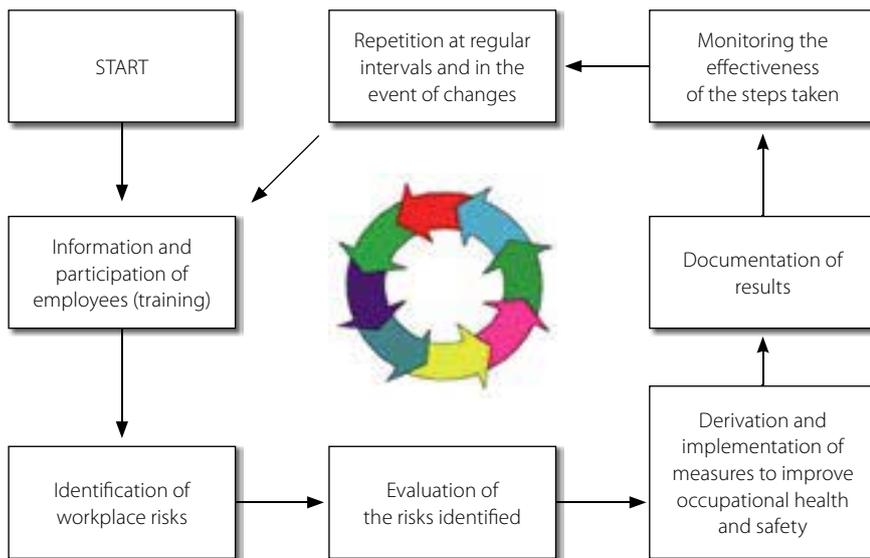
- Chapter 1 provides an overview of the process.
- Chapter 2 goes into more detail about how measures to deal with psychological stress can be derived, giving a practical example.
- Chapter 3 gives further information for practitioners on the process itself and how to evaluate risk.



- Chapter 4 gives a list of 30 companies that have already carried out a risk assessment of psychological stress or have done the relevant preliminary work leading up to this.
- Chapters 5 and 6 provide guidelines on the inclusion and participation of employees in training measures relating to psychological stress as well as an explanation of the current legal situation, the role of co-determination and company agreements.
- The Appendix contains selected company agreements relating to the risk assessment of psychological stress, as well as a sample draft agreement.

- The works council must be informed about the process, and trained to a sufficient level to carry it out
- The workers must be thoroughly briefed about the process so that they can participate fully
- Clarification of the methodology with employers
- An in-house assessment team must be formed to carry out the risk assessment
- Creation/identification of necessary organisational measures
- In-house occupational health and safety bodies must be suitably qualified
- It must be determined whether external consultants will be needed to carry out the assessment.

**Figure 2 Risk assessment sequence in the START process**



Source: Sätzer, Rolf (co-authored with Geray, Max): *Stress – Psyche – Gesundheit, Das START-Verfahren zur Gefährdungsbeurteilung von Arbeitsbelastungen*, Bund Verlag – Frankfurt 2006

### Requisite resources/expenditure

Completing the questionnaire takes about 10 to 15 minutes; it is important to ensure that employees are not rushed when doing so. This means that the time needed can vary from person to person.

Thanks to the simple and practical design of the form, the questionnaire can be evaluated by in-house staff using the appropriate PC software.

### Guidelines on participation

#### *Who can participate?*

The START process allows employees and works council members to be involved, as required by modern occupational health and safety practices.

#### *How do workers participate?*

Employees provide preliminary information and participate throughout the entire risk assessment process. This includes the following steps:

- Training in preparation for risk assessment
- Filling in the questionnaire. Employees can also raise topics of importance to them outside the scope of the questions themselves
- Inclusion of employees in the assessment team to clarify specific questions
- Derivation and implementation of measures.

It is critical that the works council is involved at all stages of the risk assessment so that it can advise on the identification, evaluation and derivation of suitable measures.

#### *What is the degree of participation?*

Because the works council identifies, evaluates and derives suitable measures for implementation, it can be said that the degree of participation is high, as the process enables the works council to make a genuine contribution to the employer's central decision-making bodies.

The degree of participation on the part of employees can also be rated as high, because when completing the questionnaire,

### Methodology

The handbook explains the cyclical sequence of risk assessment as part of the START process, forming a basis on which to model a modern occupational health and safety strategy according to the following steps:

- Start
- Information and participation of employees (training measures)
- Identification of workplace risks (using START questionnaires and checklists for on-site analysis)
- Evaluation of the risks identified
- Derivation and implementation of measures to improve occupational health and safety
- Documentation of results
- Monitoring of effectiveness of the measures taken
- Repetition at regular intervals and if there are any changes.

### Putting the process into practice

The employer is responsible for carrying out a risk assessment. The START process can be carried out by lay-persons with basic qualifications.

Before the START process can begin, however, the following prerequisites must be in place:



In small or very small companies, personal interviews and the use of simple checklists can be used at little expense.

Information on deriving measures to combat psychological stress can be found in the following standards and guidelines, which members of the assessment team should consult as necessary:

- DIN ISO Norm 10075 – Parts 1 and 2
- ISO Norm 9241 – 2
- *Advice on identify risk-related occupational health and safety measures* (Bundesanstalt für Arbeitsschutz und Arbeitsmedizin 2004)
- *Psychological stress and challenges at work / recognise – organise* (Bundesanstalt für Arbeitsschutz und Arbeitsmedizin 2002)
- *Stress at work? Practical guidelines* (Bundesanstalt für Arbeitsschutz und Arbeitsmedizin 2004)
- Advice on how the occupational health and safety departments of the German

employees can provide additional information on each question, thus ensuring that from the viewpoint of employees, they can make important observations in the questionnaires. Employees also have the opportunity to raise topics of importance to them beyond the scope of the questions themselves. In addition, employees complete the questionnaires at their workplace, they are consulted by the assessment teams on important questions and are involved in deriving measures for implementation.

Länder can identify and assess psychological stress at work and options for prevention (Länderausschuss für Arbeitsschutz und Arbeitssicherheit – LASI 2003)

- *Psychological stress in the world of work* (published by: Großhandels- und Lagerei-Berufsgenossenschaft 2002)<sup>2</sup>

### What are the instruments of participation?

The instruments of participation are: the assessment team for the organisational planning, control and implementation of the risk assessment; evaluation of the questionnaire results and derivation of measures for implementation; the questionnaire survey using START questionnaires; supplementary evaluation by means of inspection rounds, workplace observations, checklists as well as interviews with employees on the topic of risk assessment; the various measures relating to psychological stress (e.g. training for employees and managers).

### Goal of participation

The goal of employee participation is to adequately evaluate stress on the basis of information provided by employees.

As well as promoting health, participation is also intended to promote acceptance of the preventive measures taken by employees.

### Combinability

If at any time during the process of risk assessment, evaluation or derivation of measures, serious problems arise, the START process can be supplemented by more in-depth procedures. This is recommended for complex cases in particular. In such situations the results obtained can be analysed in greater depth by involving external professionals or applying detailed analysis procedures.

### Processing the results

In the START strategy, the various workplace components are evaluated from larger to smaller. First the overall workplace is taken into consideration, then the immediate area of the work activity then the activity itself. Thus the results obtained can be traced back to individual activities. This means that conclusions can be drawn about potential employee stress. These conclusions can then be used to derive measures to reduce or even eliminate stress at the individual workplace.

### Observations

The START process – which was developed largely by workplace practitioners – in essence brings together the experience of occupational health and safety bodies, works councils and workers.

The handbook documents the results of one of the occupational health and safety campaigns conducted by IG Metall Baden-Württemberg, in which works council members in over 200

<sup>2</sup> These guidelines were published in German with the following titles: Ratgeber zur Ermittlung gefährdungsbezogener Arbeitsschutzmaßnahmen im Betrieb (Bundesanstalt für Arbeitsschutz und Arbeitsmedizin 2004); Psychische Belastungen und Beanspruchungen im Berufsleben/Erkennen – Gestalten (Bundesanstalt für Arbeitsschutz und Arbeitsmedizin 2002); Stress im Betrieb? Handlungshilfen für die Praxis (Bundesanstalt für Arbeitsschutz und Arbeitsmedizin 2004); Handlungsanleitung für die Arbeitsschutzverwaltungen der Länder zur Ermittlung psychischer Fehlbelastungen am Arbeitsplatz und zu Möglichkeiten der Prävention (Länderausschuss für Arbeitsschutz und Arbeitssicherheit – LASI 2003); Psychische Belastungen in der Arbeitswelt (Hrsg. Großhandels- und Lagerei-Berufsgenossenschaft 2002).



companies took part in information seminars on psychological stress and risk assessment.

The process has been successfully implemented by numerous companies.

The process expressly focuses on the statutory framework and prevailing norms. As such, it follows the recommendations given by the *Bundesanstalt für Arbeitsschutz und Arbeitsmedizin* as well as the rules laid down by the official trade associations and labour inspectorates.

The process is open to change, i.e. it can be tailored to meet the requirements of different workplaces.

The process implies a preventative approach (it does not deal exclusively with eliminating shortcomings, as is the case with traditional occupational health and safety measures).

The inclusion of open questions allows employees to make more detailed comments that go beyond the scope of the questions themselves; this in itself can raise additional important points on risk assessment.

#### Source

Satzer, Rolf (co-authored with Geray, Max): *Stress – Psychology – Health, the START process for evaluating workplace stress*, Bund Verlag – Frankfurt 2006.<sup>3</sup>



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<sup>3</sup> German source: Handbuch: Satzer, Rolf (unter Mitarbeit von Geray, Max): *Stress - Psyche - Gesundheit, Das START-Verfahren zur Gefährdungsbeurteilung von Arbeitsbelastungen*, Bund Verlag - Frankfurt 2006.