

POLICY RECOMMENDATION REPORT

January 2024

CONTENT

Contents

INTRODUCTION	2
ISSUES IN CONCERN BASED ON PRELIMINARY RESULTS on WORK-RELATED STRESS SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUPS.....	3
A mandatory Corporate wellness plan	5
Annual report on employees' mental health.....	7
Changes in EU and EU Member States' policy frameworks.....	8
The Private sector	9
Lessons learned from COVID-19.....	10
Corporate wellness plan	12
Training cycle at the workplace	19
Designated areas for rest and meditation	24
Mental health surveys.....	25
Annual reporting on employees' mental health	26
National health systems and burnout. Sick leave.....	29
National health insurance and psychotherapy	31
Private health insurance packages and corporate responsibility	33
NGOs and mental health support	35
Legal framework on workweek duration, annual paid leave and overtime.....	37
Labor legislation and working conditions: standard working week duration and breaks	38
Labor legislation and working conditions: annual paid leave.....	42
Labor legislation and working conditions: overtime	44
Flexible working conditions.....	47
COVID-19 impact	52

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Vulnerable groups - parents of small children, caregivers, single parents, elders, students, etc.54

National initiatives and funding opportunities60

INTRODUCTION

Modern tools for work-related stress management or StressOut in short, is a European wide initiative funded by the Erasmus+ program of the EU, which aims to provide tools for stress prevention and stress management on both a personal and a business level.

Stress and burnout are nowadays an unavoidable issue caused by the demands of contemporary work environments. Research has confirmed, that more than half of all working days lost in the EU are because of stress at the working environment, and more than half of all workers in the EU report that work-related stress is common at their workplace. Furthermore, focusing on psychosocial risks and reducing stress at the workplace is one of the goals within the „EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027 Occupational safety and health“, according to which mental health problems affect some 84 million people in the EU.

Hence, the StressOut project will facilitate the creation of an innovative training course with experiential training activities to enable both employers and employees to combat work-related stress and burnout, as well as effective techniques on how to prevent them via an easily accessible and modern tool – a mobile app.

The project is coordinated by Business Innovation Centre Innobridge (Bulgaria) in partnership with E-Business Academy (Bulgaria), Coordina Organización De Empresas Y Recursos Humanos - COORDINA (Spain), Parents' Association "Step By Step" (Croatia), A & A Emphasys Interactive Solutions (Cyprus) and VI One Consultancy (the Netherlands).

This document aims to (1) provide an impetus for a EU-wide action on work-related stress management and (2) elaborate a set of policy recommendations addressing national policy gaps in terms of working conditions, work-life balance and stress prevention and management.

The contents of this report have been created based on the following key activities:

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1. **An EU-wide Research on Work-related Stress Prevention & Management:** The partnership has conducted a preliminary survey in early 2023, across the five member states, mentioned above, collecting more than 150 responses in total. The survey is still open for participation and the final version of this document will encompass the latest statistics as of spring 2024.
2. **End Users Focus Groups:** The partnership has also conducted 14 focus groups attended by 96 individuals and 5 individual interviews across the same member states, representing employees, employers and management personnel in order to confirm and elaborate on the results collected from the preliminary survey.
3. **Research on national legislative frameworks:** A national research in the same five member states was conducted, shedding more light on the current issues, practices and legislation in place, with regards to employment conditions, mental health and employee wellbeing.

Based on the data collected from the above-mentioned activities, our consortium has come to the following valuable conclusions, which we would now like to further bring to the attention of respective national and EU bodies and policymakers.

ISSUES IN CONCERN BASED ON PRELIMINARY RESULTS on WORK-RELATED STRESS SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUPS

According to preliminary analysis of survey results, on average respondents assessed the level of stress at work at 5.8 (on 1-10 self-assessment scale, where 1 is considered the minimal subjective stress level and 10 is considered maximal subjective stress level) and the impact of stress on quality of life at 7.5 (on 1-10 self-assessment scale, where 1 is considered the minimal subjective level of impact and 10 is considered maximal subjective level of impact). Many of them reported they failed to cope with stress successfully or didn't know how.

According to preliminary analysis of survey results 81% of respondents reported that their organization provides **trainings** related to stress management very rarely or never. Only 7% report receiving such training more than once per year, while above 70% of respondents report that they would like to receive training about stress management in the future.

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Preliminary analysis of survey results suggest that 81% of respondents' organizations have no **Corporate wellness plan**.

Currently, 45% of the inquired individuals reported experiencing **burnout** at least once, while an additional 35% reported not being sure. 74% of respondents reported they didn't receive or were not aware of any support provided by their employer in cases of burn-out.

Only 3% of survey respondents reported **therapy** as a stress-coping technique they know of.

Moreover, 32% of the inquired individuals found working **overtime** as a main reason to experience stress at the workplace.

Based on preliminary analysis of survey results 57% of respondents reported working more than 8 hrs per day (55% reported working overtime not as an exception); 30% reported having to work during the weekends at least once per month, while another 17% reported more than once per month – without being part of their job description or essence of employment. Another 15% reported having to work more than once per month on weekends due to the nature of their employment. This rounds to more than 60% of respondents working at least once per month during weekends. 34% of those who work overtime reported not receiving any type of compensation. Others reported receiving an “opportunity for promotion” as compensation for working overtime.

As a consequence, 24% of respondents reported their work-life balance as bad or relatively-bad and said that they often have to sacrifice other areas of their life in order to fulfill their work responsibilities.

Moreover, 35% of respondents experienced **anxiety** as a symptom during periods of high stress; 40% reported **sleeping difficulties**; in total 56% reported either anxiety or sleeping issues.

According to the preliminary analysis of survey results 71% of respondents reported that not being able to attend group activities or practice hobbies due to **COVID-19** had a medium to high impact on their stress levels. Moreover, 64% of respondents reported not being able to leave home due to COVID-19 as another factor that had a medium to high impact on their stress levels. Based on the preliminary analysis of survey results the above-mentioned were selected as the two factors with highest negative impact on respondents' stress levels related to COVID-19.

Last but not least, 32% of respondents reported it was important for them that their working schedule involves more **flexibility** and opportunities for a hybrid environment. 25% reported they would like to have an opportunity to work part-time or on reduced working hours.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on our research, our consortium concluded that a recommendation towards the national and EU decision-makers shall consist of the following two main aspects:

- 1) Implementation of a consistent and effective legal framework across the EU member states, which ensures that companies prioritize employees' mental well-being;
- 2) Focus on work-related stress prevention and management, and adequately support employees who experience burnout.

In addition, we have identified a shared need for certain measures to be implemented within the national health systems for them to become better prepared to support the increasing number of people experiencing mental health conditions, related to continuous work-related stress exposure, such as anxiety and burnout. We are confident that, if implemented, the above-mentioned measures can directly impact the quality of life, the amount of funds spent on pharmacology, lost productivity and absenteeism, and indirectly - funds spent on compensations and collected tax, overall creating a positive impact on the welfare working age adults.

In the following pages we will focus on specific measures in relation to the identified main policy recommendation areas mentioned above, compelled by our collective research results. The latter includes a series of focus groups conducted across 5 EU member states, which aimed further explore what makes a healthier and more supportive environment to employees regarding mental health challenges.

A mandatory Corporate wellness plan

Our consortium recommends that medium to large size employers implement a **Corporate wellness plan**, approved by HR or general management. Although such a

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strategic framework might vary in content and measures for different companies based on their sector, size, reality, processes and practices, its ultimate aims would be:

- to raise employees' awareness and tackle existing stigma regarding mental health challenges and conditions, experienced by the majority of people in the workplace in recent years;
- to bring employer and management personnel's attention to employees' mental health status and elicit hidden links between certain work practices and increased levels of stress and burnout amongst employees, which in turn have indirect negative impact on the company's business performance;
- to identify and implement measures preventing employees from experiencing continuously high levels of work-related stress and burnout;
- to identify and implement practical solutions providing support for employees dealing with stress and/or experiencing burnout.

As mentioned above the measures that a company could include in a Corporate wellness plan could vary, but few examples could be: introducing mental health surveys to gather information regarding employees' status, introducing workshops on stress and burnout in the internal training cycle of the company or involving external expertise, closing a contract with a mental health services provider for an access to a 24/7 hotline and/or a limited number of psychotherapy sessions, designating a quiet area for relaxation/meditation practices at the office, etc.

Hence, an important measure to be conceived by employers, is to introduce a **training plan** on work-related stress topics, involving HR department and/or general management.

Although for an optimal effect a variety of measures should be introduced in combination, and based on a preliminary analysis and company's specifics, all of the above-mentioned could be implemented. This is also applicable individually i.e. provide limited, yet steady positive impact regarding widely spread mental health challenges experienced by the EU working population.

Annual report on employees' mental health

From a normative perspective, we suggest that such a measure could be supported by a legislation that encourages employers to **devote 2 days per annum to trainings on working stress related issues**, paid by the employer and in addition to minimal annual paid leave days. As an example, topics for such workshops could include stress prevention and management, burnout, mental health, relaxation techniques, work-life balance, etc. Introducing such training to the majority of the EU working population, holds the potential to start a rapid widespread growth in awareness over the problem with work-related stress and burnout, which has already led to increasingly negative economic consequences. Providing employees with practical solutions on stress prevention and coping techniques, in a longer term ensures that the European population will be better equipped to sustain a healthier lifestyle, and thus alleviate the increasing weight on member states' health systems related to mental health conditions.

In addition to the above-mentioned recommendations, it is necessary that **team leaders and management** of medium to large size companies **undergo additional training sessions showcasing** their crucial role in people management and HR development. Introduction of this measure would allow employees with managerial responsibilities to identify in a timely manner chronic stress and burnout symptoms, navigate adequately in such situations and better support their subordinates in case of burnout.

Another recommendation to medium to large size employers is to provide designated quiet **space for rest/meditation** within the office premises. Recent research has established that not only relaxation techniques and practices decrease stress levels, but also that people perform better when they alternate intervals of intense efforts with periods of rest and recovery (Fritz et. al., 2013). Thus, allowing time for rest, recovery and recreation within the working hours is a necessity rather than a whim and should be encouraged to **become part of employees daily and/or weekly routine**.

A key measure that our consortium recommends is companies to introduce an anonymous **Mental health survey**, conducted annually or more often, depending on the company's size and needs, which can provide the employer and management personnel with relevant information regarding the past and current mental health status and related needs of the employees. Moreover, such a tool will not only allows management to assess the effectiveness of already implemented measures regarding stress prevention and management, but it can also be a key in employee retention rate analyzes and potentially improve the latter metric.

We recommend that the above-mentioned measure is supported by a normative framework for large companies to deliver an **Annual report on employees' mental health**, as part of an existing more general reporting package (e.g. ESG, GRI, ESRS) or separately, based on anonymous surveys and organizational policies in place. Such report could encompass points like:

- *how the company prevents work-related stress and burnout?*
- *what/how many trainings have been delivered to employees and management?*
- *what policies and initiatives targeted at stress prevention and management have been implemented?*
- *what percentage of employees experienced burnout?*
- *how employees rate their levels of stress and what factors they considered as major?*

The aim of introducing a report on employees' mental health, delivered annually by employers, is not just to raise awareness on the topic amongst employees, employers and policy makers, but more importantly to provide **reliable data** for current state analyzes on a larger scale and in turn to support implementation of meaningful future local and national policies.

Changes in EU and EU Member States' policy frameworks

While most of the proposed recommendations so far have been directed towards employers, we would like to stress on the crucial role of both European and national legislative bodies in the wider process of raising awareness on the issue of work-related stress and burnout prevention and management. While various measures can be implemented in the European and Member states' own legislation, we will list a few suggestions, which we have identified as crucially important.

There is a growing trend of workers across EU experiencing work-related stress and burnouts, as well as its potential consequences of the latter transitioning into chronic anxiety or depressive episodes. Hence, the list of recommendations in terms of policy changes begins with the need for **GPs to get familiarized with work-related stress issues and begin monitoring it in order to be able to suggest proper treatment in a timely manner**. The latter can be achieved via the national systems of health governance being engaged in national-wide campaigns of awareness raising including dedicated **annual training**, covering topics such as continuous work-related stress symptoms and consequences on both mental and physical health, burnout symptoms

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and basic techniques on how to deal with it. We reckon that introducing such a measure will allow GPs to be better-prepared to deal with patients undergoing burnout and provide more adequate guidance on recovery and advise them on prevention. Moreover, we recommend that the National health systems start considering the introduction of **sick leave due to burnout** with full confidentiality to the employer. We consider that this measure should be applicable for severe cases of stress and/or burnout, when the employee becomes temporarily unable to perform their professional duties due to their ongoing mental or physical state.

Another recommendation concerning the Member states health systems is that the **National health insurances include psychotherapy in their coverage** under certain eligibility criteria and conditions both for patients and therapists. We recommend an annual limit of up to 5 sessions or a fixed allowance for predefined milder temporary mental health conditions and a higher limit for psychiatric patients. Such a measure is expected not only to support patients' current treatment for diagnosed conditions but also to act as a prevention for patients facing milder and/or episodic mental health challenges from developing more severe pathologies.

It also should be taken into consideration the effectiveness of the system under which the national health insurances include psychotherapy – the actual availability of the specialist and the average period a person needs to wait until their appointment is due.

The Private sector

When it comes to the private sector, we recommend that medium to large size **employers include mental health services in their benefits packages** - be it a 24/7 hotline, a limited number of psychotherapy sessions per annum, or an assigned HR or another trusted person to each employee to whom they can address related issues can be of great support for workers experiencing severe work-related stress or burnout.

An important normative measure that our consortium recommends is that national legislation requires employers to introduce **declarations**, signed by employees upon employment and change of role (on paper or digital), confirming the latter have been familiarized with current legislation on working hours, eligible breaks, overtime and their related rights. Such a measure is expected to raise awareness across employees regarding their rights but also to put pressure on employers to conform with current normative requirements regarding length of working day and related compensations due. As indicated by our research, regardless of the fact that normally this information

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should be included in the employment contract, many respondents share that they are not aware of it.

Additionally, in cases when overtime is not part of the contractual agreement with the employee or is not due to force majeure occasions, we recommend that a **written statement of voluntary consent** signed by the employee is being introduced in the labor legislation. Moreover, we advise that the labor legislation is even more protective for vulnerable groups such as parents of small children, caregivers, single parents, pregnant women, elders, students, etc. when it comes to exercising overtime. In addition, labor legislation should ensure **fair remuneration for overtime execution**, which exceeds the contracted basic hourly rate for the regular working hours, or a compensation in additional time off.

Lessons learned from COVID-19

Based on conducted surveys and focus groups our consortium has noted troubling trends regarding employees regularly working extended hours without being compensated for in cases when this has not been agreed as a contractual obligation and is not part of their job description or essence of employment. We believe that the increasing number of digital professions and digital jobs available, accompanied by COVID-19 measures has naturally allowed for such practices, which should however not be normalized and tolerated.

In addition to the above-mentioned issue, we recommend that EU and national policy-makers introduce **stricter reporting regulations and inspections** regarding excessive **overtime** and its compensation, and insure penalties for non-compliance with labor legislation on the subject.

To further mitigate the negative consequences of COVID-19 related to human alienation, especially regarding the increasing number of people working in isolation from their homes, national legislation should adopt measures targeting companies whose employees work predominantly away from office premises or don't have such to **organize at least two physical working or team building days** per annum for their employees. Such a measure is not an indulgence but a necessity to support employees' mental health in a decade of ever increasing sense of loneliness and alienation across European societies.

To further support work-life balance, our consortium recommends that EU and Member states' **labor legislation** becomes more compliant with and even incentivizes **flexible working conditions**, including flexible working hours, reduced working hours opportunities, home and hybrid environment, etc. This has been the most discussed and desired measure that participants in our focus groups recommended when it comes to additional policies that could reduce stress levels, prevent burnout, support emotional balance and generally improve employees' well-being. Some participants pointed to flexibility as a preferred option amongst many other "perks" as it allows employees to better accommodate their personal needs, and in turn reduce stress levels.

In addition, we recommend that **additional measures and incentives** are introduced in the Labor legislation **for individuals with special needs or status** such as parents of small children, caregivers, single parents, pregnant women, elders, students, etc., which acknowledge the needs and challenges of those vulnerable groups, and enables them to choose a 4-hour working day or 4-day working week labor contract, if they prefer to. Other measures can include introduction of reduced (up to 1 hour per day) or flexible working hours under certain conditions, upon which the employee is allowed to hand-in a written request to the employer in order to benefit from such a regime while the latter is expected to provide a justified decision in case of refusal in a pre-defined timely manner.

Moreover, our consortium recommends that Member states' decision makers consider allowing for **tax-free reimbursement claims** from employees working from home towards their employers up to a maximum daily allowance, **covering for utilities and consumables**, which are provided for employees working from the office premises.

Last, but not least, we would like to stress on the importance of available **EU and national funding** opportunities for campaigns performed on local, national and EU level targeting to raise awareness on mental health and work-related stress prevention and management, burnout symptoms and techniques to deal. In addition to the latter, there's a need of establishing an annual day dedicated to achieve a lasting awareness raising effect on the European communities and introduce the available effective measures to manage stress and burnout.

Furthermore, the EU countries should be advised to provision an incentive measures to stimulate the companies to provide the described measures (such as tax reduction and others).

ARGUMENTATION

In the following chapter we present the argumentation that has led us to propose the recommendations stated in the previous chapter. The information below is based on activities conducted in 5 EU countries, namely Bulgaria, Cyprus, Spain, Netherlands and Croatia. In total 155 EU citizens in working age from the five member states participated in a survey, while 96 different participants expressed their opinion regarding the topic under review through 14 focus groups and 5 individual interviews. Moreover, our consortium has conducted national research in each of the five member states to gather more information and confirm the current normative basis and established practices.

Corporate wellness plan

Benefits packages have lately become increasingly popular amongst corporate environments. The goal of such measures is to help employees stay healthy, and thus more productive, as well as to help attract and keep best talents on the market through a positive employer branding image.

According to the preliminary results from our survey, 30% of employers provide some sort of training opportunities, 28% - a free or discounted gym membership, 19% - healthy food available at work, 15% - ergonomically designed workspaces, etc. At the same time, about 81% of respondents report that their organization has no Corporate wellness plan.

The information that our consortium has gathered through focus groups and individual interviews supports the preliminary data from the survey.

The majority of the participants in one of the employees' focus groups in Bulgaria reported that their company currently does not have a Corporate Wellness Plan in place. Amongst attendees' suggestions about what such plan should include were to have access to a psychologist, which could provide employees with resources and support for managing work-related stress, as well as to have a dedicated room for seclusion within the office area, which could be used as a quiet space for employees to take breaks and recharge. Most of the attendees indicated that their company currently does not incentivize employees to attend therapy, yoga classes, or any other alternative form of self-development and relaxation. Some attendees did mention that their companies have offered incentives in the past, but these were often not frequent or not enough.

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Other suggestions included access to cards for sports and massage, which could help alleviate physical stress associated with work, as well as an option for a home office, which could provide employees with greater flexibility and control over their work environment, and in turn reduce stress levels.

Attendees of another employees' focus group in Bulgaria shared that their companies didn't have a Corporate Wellness Plan in place and its absence was noticeable. One of them shared that they have trainings on occupational safety and how to protect oneself from burnout, as well as an arrangement with psychological counselors who can be contacted 24/7. Another participant said that they knew that a lot of companies had embraced supplemental health insurance, but their company's priorities lied in addressing concerns related to overtime and payroll recalculations. One of the employees shared that their company had a sports club for boxing, yoga and the like and it was almost free for the employees to work out there, and that sport was a good way to relax. Finally, attendees recommended that companies offer an option for a home office. This could provide employees with greater flexibility and control over their work environment, which could in turn reduce stress levels.

Some attendees' of a third focus group with employees from Bulgaria shared that their organization had a Corporate Wellness plan implemented, however they didn't really understand it as things were done only formally. They added that hangouts with managers stressed them out. Other participants shared that they were part of very small companies and it made no sense to formalize structure and procedures. However, they said they were trying to spell things out right from the start and they were doing mini team buildings aiming to get to know each other. They tried to serve their needs, however there was still stress that they were looking at how to accurately and properly deal with.

Participants agreed that team buildings, including social events, retreats, and offsite meetings, were a commonly employed strategy by companies to tackle stress-related issues. However, attendees also expressed their concerns that the effectiveness of such initiatives varied, and at times, it had even happened to leave employees feeling fatigued and overwhelmed, as well as to lack authenticity, and overall resulting in minimal improvement in employees' well-being or stress levels. Some participants noticed that their companies have opted for supplemental health insurance plans that grant access to psychologists - some provided a 24-hour hotline available, incl. an option for face-to-face consultations. Lastly, one employee mentioned "employee surveys" were used by their employer, aiming to assess the current motivation and challenges.

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A general recommendation that employees provided was that companies implement flexible working hours, provide additional training and support for managers to effectively handle employee workload and stress, and promote regular communication between employees and management to address concerns and issues. Additionally, they shared that access to mental health resources, such as counseling and therapy services, and advocating for healthy work-life balance practices would be valuable for employees to handle stress-related issues better.

One of the attendees from the employers' focus group in Bulgaria confirmed that the company she works for has a Corporate Wellness Plan in place. This plan was designed to promote the health and well-being of all employees, including those working from home. She explained that the plan offered a range of initiatives, such as providing healthy food options in the cafeteria and offering regular fitness classes to encourage employees to lead a healthy lifestyle. In addition to these initiatives, the plan also included an optional annual medical examination for all employees.

Another participant advised that at organizational level policies aiming to support employees' mental health could include regular assessments of workloads and stress levels, as well as access to mental health resources and support for employees who may be struggling with work-related stress. She was confident that, whenever possible, home office (or work from home) and hybrid options should be available at all times.

Attendees of the employees' focus group in Croatia shared that their companies do not have a Corporate wellness plan but they think it should include policies providing flexibility considering work time and place, sick leave and educations and similar, supervision and therapy. Attendees of the employers' focus group in Croatia also shared that their organizations have no Corporate wellness plan implemented.

Attendees of the employees' focus group in Spain shared that their organizations do not have specific corporate wellness plans. Participants belonging to small organizations couldn't identify any action promoted by their companies in order to facilitate prevention or management of stress. Only participants from large companies were able to identify isolated actions related to the well-being of their workers - e.g. some participants recognized that their company provided them an access to an online training platform, which included trainings related to stress management, but they didn't know any colleague who had done any of those courses; other participants shared that the company had organized spaces where workers could relax and where they had, for example, relaxation couches, however, due to the high workload and its intensity, with few legal moments of rest, they could not benefit from them. One participant reported a

physiotherapist service available once per week, but mainly for administration or office employees not for production or operations employees.

In addition to that, attendees of both the employees' and employers' focus group in Spain reported that all Spanish companies, regardless of their size, have the legal obligation to develop certain occupational risk prevention plans and trainings, and although one of them is related to applied psychosociology, all participants agreed that there are very few resources dedicated to the latter topic and no focus is placed on stress prevention and management.

Attendees of the employers' focus group in Spain pointed out that it was very important to work in the prevention side instead of in the correction once the stress was already affecting the employees. In this regard, they said that the organization models could have a big impact, but HR experts needed knowledge, resources and to develop a commitment of the general direction.

Only two big companies participating in the focus groups had specific plans to address stress at work acting in a proactive way. In their case, health and wellbeing of employees were strategic pillars of their HR strategy. They had dedicated resources to develop different actions in this regard aiming to prevent and act towards stress reduction as it was a growing problem in their organizations. The actions were directed at: (1) developing the right leadership providing tools and knowledge to leaders to help their teams to deal with stress, (2) training, giving tools to employees to prevent and deal with stress and (3) support in the form of psychological attention or similar actions (mindfulness, healthy lifestyles, etc.).

The rest of participants recognized the relevance of stress at work but they said they were more reactive in their measures. All organizations had HR policies where the health and wellbeing of employees were important but didn't have specific Corporate wellness plans to address the problem. Some of them identified actions, mainly related to training and management of working time. All participants agreed that the companies should incorporate strategies related to both prevention and management of stress in Corporate wellness plans, such as:

- Participation of the workers in the design of the plan and in the selection of measures to be developed.
- Awareness about the impact of stress on employees' health and in the company results.
- Benefits for the company and for employees of the actions related with stress reduction.

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- The importance of organizational design and leadership to generate healthy work environments.
- The culture of the organization as a stepstone for developing healthy organizations.
- List of actions that employees can benefit from in order to prevent and manage their stress.

In addition, they shared that the following actions have shown to be useful for stress reduction:

- Open dialogue
- Psychological support: agreement with a private psychologist to deliver services to the employees and their families, keeping confidentiality.
- Training the employees in areas like “time management”, “The 7 habits of highly effective people”,
- Mindfulness and yoga sessions
- Promotion of sport activities
- Enhancing the work-life balance
- Training the leaders in how to organize the work, communication skills, stress prevention.
- Outdoor activities (do something different)
- Some Apps have been used (e.g., <https://nilohealth.com/>)

All attendees of the employers’ focus group in Cyprus mentioned that there was not a specific policy about mental health or stress management in their companies, but some measures and initiatives were taken from the management to ensure the mental wellbeing of the employees.

For example, all attendees confirmed that they are offering flexible working hours (some of the companies started it after COVID-19); some shared about other benefits as well, such as opportunities for 1-1 conversations and offering bonding trips for the team twice a year, however they did not mention having a Corporate wellness plan in place. Some participants added that in case an employee has additional needs (e.g. care giving to a relative), this is being discussed and accommodated on a 1-1 basis and not as part of a general policy.

One of the attendees on the employees’ focus group in Cyprus shared that the company had organized a child care and kindergarten for the employees, and summer schools for older kids, which she found really helpful as childcare was a big stressor for

her. Other participants shared that their company provides bonding activities such as dinners and trips as a stress relief for the team.

As part of the individual interviews conducted in Cyprus, employees shared that their company has no specific policy or plan – but various measures and provisions are in place, such as: flexible working hours; one of the employees shared about an access to specialized help, such as psychological services; one of the three companies offered trainings and seminars related to stress, well-being etc. one company offered bonding trips and benefits at hotels for the employers; more flexibility allowed for mothers, when needed, offered by all companies; one company offered bonus schemes when an employee reached a pre-defined goal.

Attendees of the HR managers' focus group in Cyprus also shared that no specific policy or plan has been implemented in their companies, but various measures and provisions instead, such as: flexible working hours; hybrid working arrangements (2 days from home – 3 from the office, which can be different for people living in other cities); access to specialized help, such as psychological services; opportunity for an internal university that provides trainings and seminars related to stress, well-being etc.; organized happy hours once a week; the company covers (economically) any seminar that their employees are interested to follow; company outings (once a month); more flexibility is allowed for mothers, when needed; bonus schemes are offered when an employee reaches a SMART goal.

Attendees of the employees' focus group in the Netherlands shared that their institution organizes yoga sessions on a weekly basis, as well annual cycles with happiness workshops and mindfulness techniques webinars and workshops, and even there is a club on yoga and mindfulness. They also shared that a special application is being implemented within the employee platform environment that can be used on an individual as well as a group basis to incorporate meditation and mindfulness practices in the daily routines. They said that the effect is generally positive, however the time limit within the daily schedule of lecturers does not always allow for them to be part of those opportunities or to find mental space to search for such options.

They expressed an opinion that it was crucial for organizations to incorporate policies and plans tackling topics/issues such as: the rise of burnout and how to tackle it; importance of happiness; importance of sleep; remote work productivity tips; managing financial stress; retaining talent through wellbeing; mental health; work-related stress.

Attendees of the employers' focus group in the Netherlands shared that they have not yet implemented a Corporate Wellness Plan, but that they had developed a Work

Pressure Policy since 2020. However, they stated that there was a need for the first one as well and that so far their organization had most of the initiatives in place even without a central strategic document on the issue yet. They advised that such a document should contain the following initiatives:

- Good practices;
- Direct links with the people/functions one would need to reach out to;
- The offer of tools/trainings;
- The way the wellness policy relates to the day-to-day tasks.

Participants added that the institution has already developed a policy for training/working with topics related to socio-emotional intelligence, as part of a unit called “Bureau Future” that deals with such type of trainings/coaching and tackles topics such as “Impact of mental health”; “Work-life balance”, “Prioritizing”, etc.

They mentioned that a lot had been done in terms of prevention, as they had implemented training and webinars on burnout prevention, coaching hours provided to employees who need them, confidential counselors in place, etc. Another GCP is the so called “MTO monitor”, which was a employee work-balance survey conducted bi-annually that provided direct information on the effect of prevention, as well as direct intervention methods. However, participants clarified that more was done as a reaction rather than pro-action, and that managers were now acting upon the latter and they would like to see how to further support the employees by means of their personal development hours.

Moreover, attendees shared that the institution supported any form of self-development, relaxation, etc. as part of the Year Work plans and employees had to report on the exact way of using those and on the effect on their general well-being as well as on their work performance and work satisfaction level.

Last, but not least, they shared that the institution supported further employees with special needs such as parents and people taking care of relatives, even beyond the regulation – always looking into the contextual situation of the given employee.

A good example of a corporate wellness plan would be one that encompasses a complex of measures, that have been chosen based on the company’s specifics and employees’ needs and opinions, which target to solve very concrete problems identified through careful analyzes. Those measures are supposed to work holistically and as a system to address a wide range of issues related to human well-being, including physical and mental health, as well as to support a positive social environment.

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Amongst the few good case practices of focus group participants working in a company with a robust Corporate wellness plan in place, was an HR manager in Bulgaria who shared that a comprehensive Corporate Wellness Plan should address both physical and mental health, promote preventive care, offer resources for work-life balance, provide access to counseling services, and encourage employee engagement in wellness initiatives. It should be tailored, she said, to the specific needs and preferences of the workforce, and regularly evaluated for its effectiveness in promoting employee well-being.

A Corporate Wellness plan might vary in content and measures for different companies based on their sector, size, reality, processes and practices, however, as mentioned above, its ultimate goals would be:

- to raise employees' awareness and fight existing stigma regarding mental health challenges and conditions, experienced by the majority of people in the workplace in recent years;
- to bring employer and management personnel's attention to employees' mental health status and elicit hidden links between certain work practices and increased levels of stress and burnout amongst employees, which in turn have indirect negative impact on the company's business performance;
- to identify and implement measures preventing employees from experiencing continuously high levels of work-related stress and burnout;
- to identify and implement practical solutions providing support for employees dealing with increased working stress levels and experiencing burnout.

Training cycle at the workplace

Results from our survey point out that introduction of training cycle on topics related to work-related stress prevention and management, burnout and mental health are not only well-desired by employees, but they also have a highly positive impact.

Amongst the opinions of respondents, who have undergone such trainings, are the following: "I found these trainings very important as many employees are prone to stress related disorders or high stress that affect their daily life. Therefore, an informative training that provides them with tools, skills and knowledge to identify their stress symptoms and know how to manage their own stress will be very beneficial for

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better (mental) health and productivity” and “The training is useful to raise awareness and learn about the types of stress, learn the techniques, etc. [...] Self-awareness and knowing what limits you when managing it is essential.” Another participant shared the following: “Currently no such trainings are conducted, but I believe they would be very useful to employees, at least for early recognition of burnout and other conditions resulting from stress”

Unfortunately, our survey results support such a claim - about 81% of respondents stated that their employer provides training related to stress management very rarely or never, while only 7% confirmed being exposed to such workshops more than once per year. Moreover, about 70% of respondents reported that they would like to receive training about stress management in the future. Lastly, 35% report not being sure whether they have experienced a burnout due to lack of inability to identify the symptoms.

Information and opinions gathered through focus groups only confirmed the data from the survey.

Attendees of the employers’ focus group in Croatia shared that there are no specific events targeted at stress reduction that they provide to employees. As some alternatives they pointed out frequent meetings, tracking workload, team strategic planning in the form of a retreat, and going out of a routine for a working lunch or celebration of personal accomplishments.

Most attendees in the Bulgarian focus group for employees also shared that their companies do not have a policy for training or working with topics related to socio-emotional intelligence and they have not received any specific training or guidance from their employer on how to manage or improve their socio-emotional intelligence in the workplace, which, as they suggested, could contribute to work-related stress and potentially hinder employee well-being and performance.

When asked for recommendations on a training program's content, the attendees suggested that it should include materials on stress management in the workplace, covering topics such as identifying the signs of stress, understanding the causes of workplace stress, and developing effective stress reduction techniques.

All participants agreed that topics such as time management, work-life balance, and self-care should be covered, as they identified all of these components of great importance to overall well-being that can help to reduce stress levels among employees.

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Concerning the preferred method of delivery of stress management trainings, many attendees expressed a preference towards face-to-face, citing the benefits of in-person interaction and the ability to ask questions and receive feedback in real-time. They felt that face-to-face trainings could provide a more engaging and interactive learning experience, which could help to reinforce the importance of stress management techniques and motivate employees to take action.

However, some attendees also noted that online or virtual trainings could be a convenient and accessible option, especially since some of them said that they work remotely or have busy schedules. They suggested that a combination of both face-to-face and virtual trainings could be a good approach, as it could provide the benefits of in-person interaction while also offering flexibility and convenience for employees.

Moreover, when asked to share their thoughts on additional policies at the organizational level that could improve employees' well-being, at second place attendees proposed additional training and support for managers to effectively manage employee workload and stress, and regular communication between employees and management to address any concerns or issues.

Similar recommendation was provided also in the Bulgarian focus group for employers, where the suggestion regarding organizational level policies aimed to reduce work-related stress was to include regular training and education on stress management and mental health, as well as more resources for staff to seek support and assistance when needed.

Additionally, attendees of the employers' focus group in Bulgaria recommended the following topics for a training cycle: techniques for stress management and relaxation, such as mindfulness, meditation, and yoga; strategies for time management and prioritization to help employees better balance their workload and personal responsibilities; information on the importance of nutrition, exercise, and self-care for managing stress; tools for effective communication and conflict resolution to help people manage workplace relationships and reduce stress; resources for seeking additional support and counseling, as well as trainings on strategies for maintaining work-life balance, such as flexible scheduling and time-off policies; training on effective communication and de-escalation techniques for handling difficult customer interactions; information on the potential health risks associated with prolonged exposure to stress and how to recognize and manage the symptoms.

Regarding the delivery methods of stress management trainings, employers identified as most useful the following: in-person workshops or training sessions led by a qualified

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expert or counselor who can provide personalized guidance and support to employees; online courses or self-guided modules that can be completed at employees' own pace and on their own time, providing flexibility and accessibility, as well as stress management techniques and practices incorporated into daily school routines and activities, such as mindfulness breaks or group exercise classes.

In addition to the above mentioned topics for a training cycle content, an HR manager from Bulgaria advised to include workshops on stress awareness and resilience, emotional intelligence, mental health awareness, leadership, and inclusion and diversity. They also advised that any training program should be tailored to the specific needs and context, and its effectiveness regularly evaluated through feedback and assessments. They concluded that providing ongoing support and resources for employees to implement what they have learnt from the training program is also crucial for long-term success in reducing stress and promoting well-being in the workplace.

When it comes to training programs delivery methods and usefulness, the HR manager also agreed that a combination of in-person workshops or seminars, and virtual or online training sessions are important, as well as on-demand resources, peer-to-peer or employee-led sessions, external experts or guest speakers, internal resources and tools. They pointed out that it's crucial to consider the accessibility, effectiveness, and engagement level of the chosen delivery method, and to continuously assess and adjust the approach based on feedback and outcomes to ensure that the stress management training is effective and well-received by employees.

The picture drawn from the focus groups in Cyprus is a bit different to the one in Bulgaria and Croatia - four out of five attendees of the employees' focus group shared that their employers provide training seminars about stress management. However, they added that such activities should take place more often and at a greater depth. Both attendees of the employers' and employees' focus groups in Cyprus pointed out that stress management techniques presented in trainings shall address both personal and management level and focus on practical tips and exercises.

Moreover, attendees of the employees' and HR managers' focus groups in Cyprus shared that they find trainings more useful when they include interactive exercises (incl. videos) and are tailored to the learners' needs. Attendees of the employers' focus group in Cyprus agreed that when it comes to training methods and practices they find more useful practical exercises than theory, as well as content that could be applied both at a personal and professional level.

In Spain only attendees of employees' focus group, belonging to big companies, identified examples of trainings related to stress reduction techniques, provided by their employer, however they reported not participating in them as such activities normally were at the end of their "to do list".

Attendees of the employers' focus group shared that trainings in stress prevention had shown to be useful for employees' stress reduction. Yet, attendees of both the employees' and employers' focus groups in Spain reported that more awareness actions in regards to the appearance of stress, more education and training were necessary. Amongst other they identified the following topics as important to be included in a training cycle:

- What is stress and what are its triggers at work?
- Types of stress and how to identify them.
- How to deal with negative thoughts and their effects on increasing stress levels?
- What physical effects does stress have on the body?

In addition to what has already been described above, attendees of the employees' focus group in the Netherlands suggested that stress management training materials should include good practices of real-life case, while attendees of the employers' focus group in the Netherlands recognized that since people have different needs, they would be inclined to engage in different methods and ways of training content delivery - either offline or online; either synchronous or asynchronous; either in a group or individually, etc.

Attendees of different focus groups shared that in cases when trainings on mental health were provided by the employer, they were expected to complete them outside of working hours or that they were in addition to their regular daily activities, thus attending added even more pressure and stress for participants.

Through a national research that our consortium conducted in all five member states, we confirmed that in none of them there is a specific legislation that requires employers to provide mental health trainings to their employees. Moreover, we confirmed that member states' legislation does not specify whether such trainings, if conducted at all, should be executed within or outside working hours. The latter seem to leave a space for employers who provide training opportunities to their employees to conduct them outside working hours. This was confirmed as a practice taking place through the survey results. For this reason we recommend that future legislation ensures such work-related activities to be conducted within working hours (at least up to a certain number of hours annually).

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Designated areas for rest and meditation

As discussed above a huge percentage of the respondents of our survey experience anxiety (35%) and/or sleeping difficulties (40%) during periods of high levels of work-related stress (56% in total).

At the same time, mindfulness and meditation were amongst the most popular stress-coping techniques that respondents of our survey reported knowing of - 48% and 40% respectively. Moreover, 27% reported they would like to receive training about mindfulness in the future, while 25% reported they would like to receive training about relaxation in the future.

Discussions during focus groups only confirmed what we had learned from the survey results.

Techniques for stress management and relaxation, such as mindfulness, meditation, and yoga were the first recommended among other topics for trainings aiming to improve employees' mental health discussed at the employers' focus group in Bulgaria.

Similarly, attendees of both the employees' and employers' focus group in Spain and the employees' focus group in the Netherlands recommended that techniques to reduce stress, such as mindfulness and physical relaxation techniques, as well as "How to deal with negative thoughts and their effects on increasing my stress?" should be included in a training cycle on work-related stress.

Participants in the employers' focus group in Spain also shared that mindfulness and yoga sessions have shown to be useful for employees' stress reduction.

Employees from the focus group in Bulgaria proposed having a dedicated room for seclusion within the office area as one of four main ideas for wellness initiatives for it could be used as a quiet space for employees to take breaks and recharge.

An employers' focus group attendee in Bulgaria even shared that one amongst various initiatives and events aimed to reduce stress, prevent burnout, and promote emotional balance that the company provides, is the provision of regular mindfulness and meditation sessions. These sessions were being conducted by a certified trainer and offered on a weekly basis to interested employees. The aim of these sessions was to promote relaxation, reduce stress, and increase focus and productivity. The feedback from employees regarding these initiatives had been overwhelmingly positive.

Overall, we reckon that designating such space within the office premises not only seems to be highly desired by employees who have already tried practices such as

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mindfulness, meditation and physical relaxation techniques, for providing them with an opportunity to relax, decrease stress levels and focus better, but it holds potential to promote those techniques to other employees who have not yet benefited from them. Evidence from plenty of research studies have already supported the understanding that yoga, meditation and mindfulness techniques increase focus and improve performance, which makes it a win-win scenario for both employers and employees.

Mental health surveys

A key measure that our consortium recommends is companies to introduce an anonymous **Mental health survey**, conducted at least annually, through which the management personnel can gather relevant information regarding employees' mental health status, the major stress factors they identify at work, any mental health related needs, recommendations and feedback on any implemented measures.

One suggestion that emerged from the employers' focus group in Cyprus was that it would be a valuable tool for companies to introduce a self-assessment questionnaire, which each employee can attempt, and based on the answers provided, the user will receive feedback and personalized techniques to use for stress reduction.

During the employers' focus group in Spain attendees expressed concerns that currently there was a lack of collection of data to measure the stress within the organizations. They pointed out that the existing indicators were usually measured once the stress was already creating problems (e.g., absenteeism) and the information available for the prevention was usually not structured, nor valued (e.g.; work load; incidences with customers, etc.). They also added that organizations were facing challenges in measuring the impact of the resources in the reduction of stress and competitiveness (e.g., is the company increasing the productivity and/or customer satisfaction and sales when they allocate additional staff and reduce the workload to specific jobs).

Some member states have already adopted strategies targeting to reduce work-related stress, which goals can be supported through implementation of such surveys across organizations. For example, based on the national research our consortium has conducted in the Netherlands, the employers must prevent employees experiencing psychosocial strain as much as possible. Furthermore, they must examine what the causes are, how to prevent them and how to solve any issues in the "risk inventory and evaluation" (RI&E) to prevent or reduce psychosocial stress.

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Another example is Cyprus, where a Joint Policy Statement on Work Related Stress was signed in 2008, in accordance with which a main goal set by the Department of Labour Inspection was the dissemination of information to as many employers as possible informing them about their obligation to assess psychological risks as well. Other goals were the raising of awareness of employees and the training of inspectors.

Mental health surveys have already been implemented by some large companies, although often under names such as “happiness” or “satisfaction” surveys.

We support implementation of such a survey a key measure as it can altogether raise awareness of employees, fight the existing stigma around mental health problems and provide important information to the management and HR department regarding psychological risks, major stress factors in the local reality of the company, collect feedback on what employees consider best ways to deal with such challenges, and even identify more severe mental health challenges. Another advantage is that its implementation does not require a lot of resources from the company's perspective.

Mental health surveys, if implemented widely on an organizational level, can at a subsequent stage be used for national and EU-level statistics and analysis on the working population's mental health status and trends, contributing factors for excessive stress, measures implemented to prevent and manage burnout, etc.

Annual reporting on employees' mental health

Based on the national research our consortium has confirmed that in none of the five member states participating in the project an annual reporting on employees' mental health has been introduced as a normative measure - individually or as part of a general reporting package. Although some companies are starting to introduce such reporting as part of their corporate social responsibility initiatives or efforts to promote employee well-being, it is not yet widely implemented, nor is it standardized.

The aim of introducing a report on employees' mental health, delivered annually by employers, is not just to raise awareness on the topic amongst employees, employers and policy makers, but more importantly to provide reliable data for current state analyzes on a larger scale and in turn to support implementation of meaningful future local, national and EU policies.

As a future consideration, we advise that such report could encompass points on internal policies and implemented initiatives within the company targeting excessive

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stress and burnout prevention and management, topics and duration of trainings delivered to employees and management related to mental health, subjective ratings on how valuable employees find those measures, self-assessed subjective ratings on work-related stress levels, statistics on burnout, statistics on absenteeism due to burnout and other mental health conditions, major factors contributing negatively to employees' work-related stress levels based on their opinion, etc.

National health insurance systems and mental health

Based on the national research that our consortium conducted in five member states, we came to the following conclusions:

- The national health insurance system in all of the analyzed countries covers at least to some extent mental health services.

In Bulgaria, mental health is covered by the national health insurance system. The national health insurance system includes coverage for consultations with psychiatrists, coverage for psychiatric hospitalization, psychiatric medications. To benefit from the services of the NHIF (National Health Insurance Fund), the patient needs to visit their GP, obtain a referral to a specialist, visit the specialist, then validate the received prescription protocol. If the prescription is for expensive medications, the patient also needs to go through a special commission. Afterward, they should return to their GP to have the prescription issued, and then visit a pharmacy to obtain the medications. Medications for schizophrenia and severe mental disorders are fully reimbursed, but not more than three per patient. Antidepressants are partially reimbursed but only for cases of depressive disorders.

In Spain, mental health is covered by the national health insurance system and there are three levels of care defined: primary care, specialized care in mental health for adults or children/adolescents, and specialized hospital care.

Likewise, mental health care includes intermediate care centers, among which you can find day hospitals with or without admission, and addiction care centers.

The benefits of the National Health System include a common portfolio for the entire Spanish territory. In accordance with the provisions of Royal Decree 1030/2006, which establishes the portfolio of common services of the National Health System, benefits related to mental health care include the diagnosis and clinical monitoring of mental disorders, psychopharmacotherapy, individual, group or family psychotherapies

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(including psychologists, psychotherapists or psychiatrists), electroconvulsive therapy and, where appropriate, hospitalization, as well as the guarantee of continuity of care and information, counseling, prevention and promotion of mental health activities.

Access to assistance within the mental health care system is done through primary care (GPs). The medical professional considers referring the patient to specialized mental health care units.

Medications related to mental health are partially reimbursed.

In Croatia, as part of public health, psychological and psychiatric support services are included through health centers, and when directed by the family doctor. Hospital treatment of mental disorders is included in public health (free of charge), also when directed by a family doctor or when urgent.

Additional type services, like Center for the protection of mental health + mental health of young people, Nutrition Center, Addiction Prevention Department, Counseling Center for Learning and Adjustment Difficulties, etc. are provided through various institutes and also free of charge in Croatia.

In Cyprus, the public health sector managed by the Ministry of Health provides free services including dental, mental health and pharmaceutical services, as well as general public health resources. Specifically, Clinical Psychologists are part of GESY and beneficiaries are entitled to a certain number of visits to a psychologist per year with the amount of 10 euros after a referral from their GP or other relevant doctor. The number of visits is determined by the beneficiary's psychological or psychiatric diagnosis. In general, adults are entitled to between 6 and 18 visits per year.

In the Netherlands, as long as one has a referral from their GP, the psychological treatment will be covered by their health insurance. Once the patient has been issued a referral, they can visit one of the many GGZ institutions in the Netherlands. The GGZ is the 'Dutch Association of Mental Health and Addiction Care'. At their first appointment, the patient will have an intake interview with a health care professional, who will decide on the required treatment, arrange and plan out for them.

The Netherlands uses the DBC System. DBC stands for 'Diagnose Behandel Combinatie', meaning 'Diagnosis Treatment Combination'. It is used to catalog the care one is given, and to determine how much it should cost. To make this calculation, a minute-by-minute record of patient care is kept. No one knows exactly how long a patient's treatment will take. This means that the cost of one's mental health care can

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only be determined after it has been completed. It cannot, therefore, be paid per session.

Health insurance covers all or part of the costs of primary and secondary mental health care. The exact conditions depend on your insurer and the policy you have. If you are admitted to a mental health institution, your insurance will in any case cover the first three years of your hospitalization. This is laid down in the Chronic Care Act (WLZ).

National health systems and burnout. Sick leave

- Despite the fact that since May 2019 The World Health Organization has included the burnout syndrome in the 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases, ICD-11, as an occupational phenomenon, defining it as “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed”, our national research suggests that in many of the analyzed member states the national health system has not recognized the syndrome yet and does not provide for sick leave due to burnout.

Taking into account the fact that the majority of the analyzed member states have not yet recognized the burnout syndrome as a medical or occupational phenomenon, it does not seem surprising that in some countries the GPs (General practitioners) are not yet well acquainted and trained to deal with such a condition.

Unfortunately, based on our survey results, about 45% of respondents have experienced burnout once or more, while 35% report not being sure, meaning that they lack education regarding the symptoms and thus do not recognize them. When inquired how their employer handles cases of burnout, the majority of answers refer to “Not sure” or “Not at all”. Very few answers refer to conversations with the HR or psychotherapeutic services, which the company has provided for.

Indeed because of the lack of awareness amongst the general public it is crucial that General practitioners are at least well acquainted with the burnout symptoms, trained to recognize them and to provide basic guidance and techniques to support patients undergoing this condition.

In Bulgaria, the national health system does not provide for sick leave due to burnout. Some general practitioners in Bulgaria might be familiar with burnout and might provide diagnoses, treatment, and support to individuals experiencing burnout if they deem that it's needed.

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In Spain, despite the fact that many workers, both salaried and self-employed, may be suffering from burnout at the moment, especially due to the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis, the burnout syndrome has not yet been recognized as an occupational disease by the Spanish National Health System. However, various Superior Courts of Justice have already positioned themselves in favor of the recognition of this new occupational disease.

In Croatia it is possible to get sick leave and a referral for a psychologist/ psychiatrist/ hospital treatment due to burnout.

In Cyprus, the law does not make any distinction for a sick leave due to burnout or any other mental health problems. Each beneficiary may have access to a clinical psychologist of his/her choice, provided that he/she is referred by a Personal Doctor or a Specialist Doctor, who participates in the General Health System.

In the Netherlands, upon burnout cases, this needs to be independently confirmed. An employee can prove it with the help of expert statements, such as a statement from the family doctor and/or psychologist.

If the employee's sick leave will last for longer than 6 weeks, the manager should report it to the company doctor or occupational health and safety service (Arbodienst) who will draw up a problem analysis. This problem analysis will include the diagnosis, the opportunities for recovery, and the date the employee expects to return to work. The company doctor will also assess the steps that the employee is taking to recover, and then use that information to write a prognosis.

Based on the company doctor's analysis, in week 8 of the sick leave the employee and employer will make an action plan together. This plan includes agreements about the number of working hours and the work activities. Every 6 weeks, the action plan must be evaluated and a coach can be appointed to do it. The coach may be an external expert, like an occupational health and safety consultant or an insurance expert. The coach will periodically evaluate the employee, and the company doctor will evaluate the employee at least once every 6 weeks.

Unfortunately, poor mental health has been proven as the main cause of long-term work absence in the Netherlands. According to the Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research (TNO) mental health problems account for about 43% of the disability inflow in the Netherlands. The Dutch Association of Mental Health and Addiction Care (GGZ Nederland) made a pact in 2012 with the Social Security Institute to strengthen collaboration on support for people with mental health problems returning to work.

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National health insurance and psychotherapy

- The extent of the mental health services covered by the National health insurance systems varies significantly from one to another member state. In some countries only psychiatric care and pharmacological solutions are financed by the public system, while in other member states psychological care is also covered and insured citizens can benefit from psychotherapy.

In Bulgaria the national health insurance does not cover psychotherapy sessions. Moreover, no national strategy or legislation regulating psychology and psychotherapy professions has been passed, so currently there is no regulation regarding eligibility criteria of specialists and their services.

In Spain, the National health system covers the primary and specialized attention to persons with mental health problems. That includes sessions with psychologists, psychotherapists and psychiatrists. If you need to access mental healthcare services in Spain, you need to follow three steps. The first step is to visit your GP who can prescribe drugs if necessary. The second step is to seek a referral to other doctors, or for specialist treatment, if required. Most of this is provided by community health centers. And the third step involves being treated for serious mental health problems in psychiatric hospitals, daycare centers, and rehabilitation centers.

Psychotherapy services are free for insured citizens but there are long waiting lists, which means that a patient can spend months waiting for a mental health professional to treat them.

In Croatia, psychotherapy is covered by the national health insurance - in accordance with the instructions of a general practitioner or after hospital treatment in the form of a day hospital. Therapy takes place individually or in groups. Unfortunately, due to the great need, the service is basic and relatively rare. The programs are more clearly defined after leaving the hospital treatment.

In Cyprus, adult patients can receive up to 18 sessions with a psychotherapist, while children and adolescents can receive 24 treatments a year. These figures refer to all diagnoses covered by these services in combination. In cases of patients where the clinical psychologist and the doctor consider that they need more treatments, then they should jointly submit a request for a greater number of treatments which, if adequately documented, will be evaluated by the Organization.

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In the Netherlands, patients must require a GP referral to access a primary care consultation with a mental health expert. Basic health insurance policies usually cover this under their 'mental healthcare' section. However, for in-depth and secondary care treatment, coverage can vary depending on your health insurance policy.

Mild mental health problems can be treated by a GP, often working together with a general practice mental health worker. A form that occurs almost exclusively in the Netherlands are the first-line psychologists. First-line psychologists are trained according to state guidelines. They must be certified and registered. They should only diagnose and treat mild cases. The field of care of the primary care psychologist consists of treating common problems such as complicated grief, pain without physical findings, sleep disorders or anxiety.

If one's GP and general practice mental health worker consider the patient's problems too complex to treat themselves, they may refer him/her to a primary mental healthcare provider, or directly to secondary care.

Treatment may consist of:

- counselling from a psychologist, psychotherapist or psychiatrist;
- some form of online mental health support (e-health);
- a combination of counselling and online support. For instance, one may have a number of sessions with a psychologist or psychotherapist in addition to following an e-health program.

Secondary mental health care is intended for patients with serious and complex psychiatric disorders, like ADHD, anxiety disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Treatment is provided by a psychiatrist or clinical psychologist working in a mental health institution, hospital or private practice.

In addition in the Netherlands, trained professionals provide social services, which can include aid in psychological issues. They are available 24/7 and patients do not require a referral from their GP to access them. Other organizations such as Fiom also provide similar private services and do not require a GP referral, either.

Under the job title 'psychotherapist', around 5,000 therapists work in the Netherlands who offer a wide range of therapies. The Individual Health Care Professions Act regulates the training and professional activity of health professions in the Netherlands. Therapists must have a BIG (Beroepen in de Gezondheidszorg, Professions in Healthcare) registration to be able to perform their profession.

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Currently, mental health care is struggling with a shortage of capacity. The waiting lists at mental health care institutions are increasing. Recently the NOS (Dutch public media company) reported on a patient stop in mental health care due to a shortage of practitioners and too long waiting lists (Van den Brink, 2021). Research by the NOS in 2017 regarding the number of vacancies for psychiatrists at mental health institutions showed that these were not caused by a shortage of psychiatrists, but because supply and demand were not matched. Psychiatrists increasingly appear to opt for their own practice or move to areas such as mindfulness or stress reduction.

Depending on the problem, professional coaches can be used by the companies to (indirectly) reduce the pressure on mental health care. For example, research shows that the use of coaching can be effective in reducing feelings of stress or depressive symptoms (Theeboom et al., 2014). But coaching can also be used preventively, for example to increase resilience or general well-being (Theeboom et al., 2014).

The increase in the number of coaches is leading to concerns among company doctors and psychologists, especially because only a fraction of Dutch coaches is affiliated with a professional organization such as NOBCO/EMCC Netherlands (Dutch Association of Professional Coaches) or ICF Netherlands (International Coaching Federation Netherlands).

Private health insurance packages and corporate responsibility

In Bulgaria it has become increasingly popular in recent years for companies to provide additional private health insurance for their employees with one of the many funds operating on the market. Such additional health packages are voluntary and available to all individuals from 0 to 65 years old. They are carried out through a medical insurance policy against specific medical risks. Based on the research our consortium conducted, we did not find information for any of those additional health packages to include psychotherapy services.

National research in Spain confirmed that some big companies have started to include access to therapists amongst their social corporate responsibility initiatives in order to support employees in dealing with their mental health problems. As partially the psychotherapy care is included in the national insurance, very few people are able to use it due to lack of specialists who work under the governmental payment procedure. This leads to waiting period of months for an initial appointment and reduce significantly the effectiveness of the measure.

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In Croatia psychotherapy is also not included in the coverage of private additional health insurance funds. However, some larger private entrepreneurs have recognized the problem related to lack of available support for mental health issues and have provided access to their employees.

In Cyprus, in addition to the national insurance, which provides for mental health examinations with a clinical psychologist, which can be requested through one's GP, some organizations have started offering psychological counseling to their employees. Despite these efforts though, many companies seem to remain ill-equipped to address the problem.

In the Netherlands, you are required to arrange health insurance if you live and work there. Unless you are willing to pay for your treatment privately, you must do this before you receive any form of medical treatment. Your GP will determine whether or not you require specialist care. If they feel that you are in need of mental health treatment, they will refer you to an appropriate medical professional.

So long as you have a referral from your GP, your psychological treatment will be covered by your health insurance. There is a nationally agreed minimum level of reimbursement per year, but each insurer and package have their own different criteria for reimbursement above that level.

In the Netherlands there has been a reform of the system and certain forms of care or treatment of some problems do not (any longer) fall within the scope of the Health Insurance Act, thus are not eligible for reimbursement. In the old system, it was the diagnosis that often determined the costs of treatment. This is no longer the case in the new way of charging. The healthcare provider records the type of care required: the type of care does not determine the price of the treatment, instead it is the care services that you are given that determine the price and can vary during the year. For example, treatment of relationship problems that are not related to psychological and/or psychiatric problems does not fall under insured care, even though the problems can be serious and treatment is considered desirable. Treatment of serious problems in the context of grief without depression is not reimbursed. Problems at work, or other specific adjustment disorders that can be associated with many complaints, such as sadness and less ability to function, are also not covered by the health insurance law. Employees eligible for these treatments have to pay the costs themselves on a monthly basis, unless the company has signed an additional mental health services package.

Based on our survey results, about 23% of respondents have sought professional help and/or guidance from a psychologist/psychotherapist and another 5% have participated

in specialized coaching and/or mentoring sessions in an attempt to manage their work-related stress or burnout. Unfortunately, 74% of respondents reported they didn't receive or were not aware of any support provided by their employer in cases of burnout. In total about 5% reported that their employer provides psychological support in terms of either covering sessions with an external psychologist/psychotherapist or having an internal one as part of a social package.

This topic regarding access to psychotherapy was not bypassed at the focus groups where many participants saw necessity in both fighting the stereotypes around people using mental health services and providing an accessible professional psychological care to a wide range of employees.

Attendees of the employers' focus group in Cyprus shared that they find it necessary for an additional policy to be implemented aiming to tackle the stereotypes around mental health and raise awareness so people feel that it is normal to ask for professional help when they need it.

Attendees of the employees' focus group in Bulgaria emphasized the need for more comprehensive stress management policies, including mental health benefits, such as access to counseling services or mindfulness training. They agreed on having access to a psychologist as one of four main ideas for wellness initiatives for it could provide employees with resources and support for managing work-related stress.

Attendees of the employers' focus group in Spain, who have provided an opportunity to employees and their families to attend sessions with an external psychologist, keeping confidentiality, shared that this has shown to be useful for stress reduction.

A more affordable alternative to companies, that has been implemented more widely in some of the analyzed countries, is to appoint a trusted person to each employee, who needs support related to work-related stress. A trusted person, also called a counselor or mentor in some companies, can provide information and support to the employee related to various working challenges, while keeping confidentiality of their conversations. Yet, those are not professionally trained people and cannot be as effective as a psychotherapist.

NGOs and mental health support

Alternative resource for individuals, facing excessive work-related stress and burnout, is to seek help in the face of organizations, most often NGOs, that provide free mental

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support. Based on the national research that our consortium has conducted in five member states, we have identified such organizations.

In Bulgaria, UNICEF Bulgaria provides a free online platform for self-check and mental health.

In Spain, citizens can turn to The Mental Health Confederation of Spain.

In Croatia, there's a number of civil society organizations (NGO sector), which provide that kind of services but they are often limited in the sense of their own organizational capacities, funding, etc. They are also often limited to 10 meetings per person. To name a few, such organizations include Society for Psychological Assistance and Modus, Association 'Kako si?', Psychological center 'Tesa'. In addition, there is Center for crisis situations and suicide prevention at the clinical hospital center 'Rebro', which provides support to all health insured people.

In Cyprus, free mental health support can be found through:

- Cyprus Samaritans – trained listening volunteers offering emotional support;
- UNHCR – free access to counseling services for refugees and migrants;
- Cyprus Social Welfare Services - provision and promotion of social welfare services.

In The Netherlands, you can contact a helpline for quick and free support. A confidential counseling service is available to anyone experiencing difficulties in their mental health, or worried about the mental health of someone they know. They are sometimes known as crisis lines or hotlines, and offer support over the phone, text message or chat. Some are available 24/7. Among other topics, they cover:

- ANXIETY (MIND Korrelatie)
- DEPRESSION (MIND Korrelatie)
- WORK (de Luisterlijn)
- STRESS (de Luisterlijn)

As an overall conclusion, accessible mental health support, beyond pharmacological solutions, seems to have a limited range within some EU member states. Unfortunately, until psychotherapy services become covered by the national insurance funds and/or provided by an increasing number of companies as part of their social package, it remains a privilege only for those who can afford it.

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Legal framework on workweek duration, annual paid leave and overtime

Based on the survey and focus groups that our consortium has conducted, we noticed concerning trends regarding employees regularly working overtime hours without being compensated for and often without a written consent or contractual obligation without being part of their job description or essence of employment and not a force majeure.

According to our preliminary survey results, 57% of respondents report working more than 8 hrs per day and 55% report working overtime not as an exception. 30% of participants report having to work during the weekends at least once per month, while another 17% report more than once per month – without being part of their job description or essence of employment. Another 15% report having to work on weekends more than once per month due to the nature of their employment. This rounds to more than 60% of respondents working at least once per month during weekends. 34% of those who work overtime report not receiving any type of compensation. Surprisingly, some participants reported receiving an “opportunity for promotion” as compensation for working overtime.

The observed trend from the survey was somewhat confirmed by the information gathered from focus groups.

While some attendees of the employees’ focus group in Bulgaria mentioned that their companies follow standard working hours and provide employees with a set number of holidays each year, others expressed concerns that they were not properly compensated for working on holidays, which added to their stress levels.

Attendees of both the employees’ and employers’ focus group in Spain shared that their labor legislation is highly developed and they have a very exhaustive legislative display in line with international and European legislation, where issues such as working hours, overtime, vacations, occupational risk prevention and management, etc. were dealt with. In addition, they mentioned about the collective agreements in place, agreed between employers and workers, where all these aspects are specified depending on the sector or company. In this way the legal minimums are guaranteed as workers’ rights.

Some participants said that they have these rights very clearly stated and that their companies provide them the security of its application - in the case they have to do overtime, their companies provide them with days off. Yet, other participants added that in small companies these measures are more diffuse and there are no personnel

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policies where the compensation that companies provide to their workers is expressly established.

Working consistently overtime hours can contribute to a wide range of negative consequences - both for the employer in terms of decreased productivity, absenteeism, increased employee turnover and poor employer branding image, and for the employee in terms of worsened physical and mental health, poor relationships and lack of work-life balance. Based on preliminary survey results, 24% of participants reported their work-life balance as bad or relatively-bad and said that they often have to sacrifice other areas of their life in order to fulfill their work responsibilities. The economic costs measured in terms of weight on the national health systems due to sick leave absenteeism and treatment and ethical aspects should also be considered.

For this reason, our consortium has conducted extensive research in all five participating member states, related to definitions of work week duration, eligible breaks, annual paid leave, and regulations on overtime in the respective Labor codes. Based on that, we have drawn a few conclusions:

Labor legislation and working conditions: standard working week duration and breaks

- The standard workweek has similar duration in all of the five analyzed member states, as well as more or less similar regulations regarding daily and weekly breaks.

In Bulgaria the standard working week consists of five days, with a standard duration of up to 40 hours per week or 8 hours per day. The standard duration of working time cannot be extended, except in cases and according to the procedure provided for in the Labour Code.

The working time of an employee or a worker is interrupted by one or several breaks. The employer provides the employee or worker with a meal break, which cannot be less than 30 minutes. The breaks are not included in the working time. In production processes with continuous work and in enterprises where work is performed continuously, the employer provides the employee or worker with time for meals during working hours.

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The employee or worker is entitled to uninterrupted daily rest, which cannot be less than 12 hours. In a five-day working week, the employee or worker is entitled to a weekly rest of two consecutive days, with one of them starting on Sunday. In these cases, the employee or worker is provided with a minimum of 48 hours of uninterrupted weekly rest.

In Spain the duration of the workday will be that agreed in the collective agreements or employment contracts. The maximum duration of the ordinary workday will be 40 hours per week of effective work on an annual average.

Through a collective agreement or, failing that, by agreement between the company and the workers' representatives, the irregular distribution of working hours may be established throughout the year. In the absence of an agreement, the company may distribute 10 percent of the working day irregularly throughout the year. Said distribution must in all cases respect the minimum daily and weekly rest periods and the worker must know, with at least five days' notice, the day and time of the work provision resulting from it.

Compensation for differences, whether due to excess or defect, between the working day and the maximum duration of the ordinary legal or agreed working day are required as agreed in the collective agreement or, in the absence of provision in this regard, by agreement between the company and workers' representatives.

In the absence of an agreement, the differences arising from the irregular distribution of working hours must be compensated within twelve months from when they occur.

The number of ordinary hours of effective work may not exceed nine per day, unless by collective agreement or, failing that, agreement between the company and the workers' representatives, another distribution of daily working time is established, respecting in any case the rest between days.

Workers under 18 years of age may not carry out more than eight hours of effective work per day, including, where appropriate, the time dedicated to training and, if they work for several employers, those carried out with each of them.

Annually, the company, after consultation and prior report from the workers' representatives, will prepare a work calendar that will include the work schedule and the annual distribution of workdays, holidays, weekly breaks or between days, and other non-working days, taking into account the maximum legal working day or, where applicable, the agreed one.

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From May 12, 2019, the company guarantees the daily record of the working day, which must include the specific start and end time of the workday of each worker, without prejudice to the time flexibility that is established. Through collective bargaining or a company agreement or, failing that, a decision by the employer after consultation with the legal representatives of the workers in the company, this working day record will be organized and documented. The company will keep the daily working hours records for four years and they will remain available to the workers, their legal representatives and the Labor and Social Security Inspection.

When it comes to daily rest, during the day and weekly, the labor legislation states that between the end of one day and the beginning of the next there should be at least twelve hours.

Workers will have the right to a minimum weekly rest period, cumulative for periods of up to fourteen days, of a day and a half uninterrupted, which, as a rule, will include Saturday afternoon or, where applicable, Monday morning and the full day of Sunday.

The duration of the weekly rest for those under 18 years of age will be, at least, two uninterrupted days.

When the duration of the continuous daily shift exceeds six hours, a rest period of no less than fifteen minutes must be established during it. This period will be considered effective working time when it is set or established by collective agreement or employment contract.

When the duration of the continuous daily workday exceeds four hours and thirty minutes, workers under 18 years of age will have a rest period of a minimum duration of thirty minutes.

Labor legislation in Spain establishes that workers have the right to enjoy a meal break, if their working day exceeds six hours. The duration of this break cannot be less than 30 minutes and can be extended up to two hours.

It is important to note that this break is not included in the workday, so it is not considered time worked. Furthermore, the company is not obliged to remunerate this rest period, although it may choose to do so through collective agreements or individual agreements with its workers.

Another important aspect to keep in mind is that the law does not establish a specific time for mealtime, but rather it is the company that must ensure that its employees can

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enjoy this break at an appropriate time and that it does not interrupt the development of work.

In the event of non-compliance with this regulation, workers can claim their right to enjoy the meal break before the company, the workers' representatives or, ultimately, before the Labor and Social Security Inspection.

In Croatia, the Labor code defines that working hours are the period of time during which the worker is obliged to perform tasks, that is, during which he is ready (available) to perform tasks according to the instructions of the employer, at the place where his tasks are performed or at another place determined by the employer. The employment contract can be concluded for full-time or part-time work. Full-time work may not exceed 40 hours per week.

A worker who works at least six hours a day has the right to a rest (break) of at least thirty minutes every working day, unless otherwise specified by a special law. Rest time is included in working time.

During each twenty-four-hour time period, the worker is entitled to a daily rest of at least twelve continuous hours. A worker has the right to a weekly vacation of at least twenty-four hours continuous duration, to which a daily vacation is added. For each calendar year, the worker has the right to a paid vacation of at least four weeks.

In Cyprus, the Labor code establishes that the total number of hours of work of persons covered cannot exceed 48 per week, including overtime - the usual pattern of working hours in Cyprus is 40 hours per week. Certain exceptions are made for specific industries. For example, the healthcare and hospitality industries have different limitations.

Regarding rest breaks, when the working day is longer than six hours, the worker is entitled to a rest break of 15 consecutive minutes. During the break the worker may leave his work-station. The rest period may not be granted at the beginning or the end of the working day.

Every worker is entitled to a daily rest period of at least 11 consecutive hours per 24-hour period. Every worker is entitled to a minimum weekly rest period of 24 hours. If the employer so decides, the worker may, for a period of 14 days, have:

- Two separate rest periods of 24 hours each; or
- One rest period of 48 consecutive hours.

In the Netherlands the working week is five days, with a normal weekly working time between 36 to 40 hours; 7 to 8 hours daily. The amount of working hours depends upon

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the sector of industry and the kind of labor performed. In general, an employee is only allowed to work a maximum of 12 hours per day, for a maximum of 60 hours per week. Over a period of 4 weeks, the maximum number of working hours is 55 per week. Over a period of 16 weeks, the maximum number of working hours is 48 hours per week. The arrangements on working hours included in an individual employment contract, which are not in conformity with the Working Hours Act, can be declared null and void. The Working Hours Decree provides exceptions and additional measures for certain industries (inter alia the care sector).

The working time of an employee or a worker is interrupted by one or several breaks. Employees working 5.5 hours are entitled to a 30-minute break at least, which can be split into two 15 minute breaks. Employees working more than 10 hours must have at least 45 minutes of break time, which can be split into several intervals of 15 minutes. A collective arrangement (CAO) may include agreements on fewer breaks, but if the employee works for more than 5 ½ hours, he must at least have 15 minutes of break time.

Employees are also entitled to 11 hours break between shifts (once a week, the break can be eight hours if the nature of the work or the business circumstances requires it) and a minimum of 36 consecutive hours of non-work per week. A longer workweek is only possible if the employee has at least 72 consecutive hours break in 14 days. The rest can be split into two periods of 32 hours each.

Labor legislation and working conditions: annual paid leave

- The annual paid leave has similar duration in all of the five analyzed member states.

In Bulgaria, the minimum duration of the basic paid annual leave is not less than 20 working days.

Upon starting employment for the first time, the employee or worker may use their paid annual leave once they have acquired a minimum of 4 months of employment.

In the event of termination of the employment relationship, the employee or worker is entitled to compensation for unused paid annual leave, calculated in accordance with the Labour Code.

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In Spain, the duration of the basic paid annual leave is agreed individually or collectively but it is never less than 30 calendar days, which amounts to 22 working days per year.

Annual paid leave is not replaceable with financial compensation, except in the event of termination of the employment contract that makes it impossible to enjoy them.

In Croatia, the worker has the right to a paid vacation of at least 4 working weeks for each calendar year.

Minor workers and workers who work in jobs where, with the application of health and safety protection measures at work, it is not possible to protect the worker from harmful influences, have the right to an annual vacation of at least five weeks for each calendar year.

In Cyprus, every worker is entitled to a paid annual leave of at least 4 weeks, that is 20 working days for a five-day working week and 24 working days for a six-day working week. Payment in lieu of leave is allowed only in case of termination of the employment relationship.

In the Netherlands, employees are entitled to statutory leave of a minimum of 4 times the number of hours they work per week. For example, if they work 40 hours a week, they will then be entitled to $4 \times 40 = 160$ hours (20 days) of paid leave per year. The amount of statutory leave is calculated proportionally for employees that work part-time. Employers can offer employees additional leave, which is sometimes required under collective labor agreements. Many companies offer more than the minimum number of days, with 24 and even 32 days of annual leave being fairly common.

Once an employee has worked for an employer continuously for one year, they are legally entitled to paid annual leave. Any annual leave from the previous year that an employee did not take, carries over into the next year (added to their new entitlement of leave).

If a person is employed on a fixed term agreement, and the term is less than 12 months, then instead of giving paid leave, the employer may offer a holiday pay.

Labor legislation and working conditions: overtime

- When it comes to overtime work, based on the national research conducted in the analyzed five member states, our consortium has noticed the variety in practices regarding maximum hours per set period of time, type and size of compensation and regulatory procedures. While in some countries the overtime hours should be paid at a higher than basic rate, in others - there is no specific legislation on compensation for working overtime and some citizens seek compensation via labor disputes in Court. In some countries a reporting procedure towards governmental bodies regarding overtime hours has been implemented, while in others - compliance has been left on the employees' responsibility.

In Bulgaria, for the performance of overtime work, being on standby, or being at the disposal of the company, an order is issued by the employer. It is communicated to the workers and employees at least 24 hours in advance. In cases that the overtime is taking place during the weekend, the order for overtime work must specify the day on which an uninterrupted rest period of not less than 24 hours will be taken during the following working week.

Labor Code in Bulgaria defines that overtime is paid at a higher than the basic rate, which has been agreed between the employee or the worker and the employer, but not less than: 50% increase for overtime during working days; 75% - for overtime during weekends; 100% - for overtime during national holidays; 50% - for overtime when a cumulative working hours are being implemented.

The duration of overtime work cannot exceed:

1. 30 hours of daytime or 20 hours of nighttime work within a calendar month;
2. 6 hours of daytime or 4 hours of nighttime work within a calendar week;
3. 3 hours of daytime or 2 hours of nighttime work over 2 consecutive working days.

The employer is obligated to keep a special book for recording overtime work. The accumulated overtime work during the calendar year must be recorded and reported to the labor inspection authority by January 31 of the following calendar year.

The special book for recording overtime work includes the following information: the full name of the employee or worker, the number of the order for performing overtime work, the day and time of starting and ending the work, the amount of remuneration paid to the employee or worker for the performed overtime work, and the day designated for rest according to the National Regulation on Working Hours, Rest Periods, and Leave.

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In Spain, every hour of work carried out over the maximum duration of the ordinary day will be considered overtime. Its provision is voluntary, unless there is an individual or collective agreement, or in cases when it is needed to prevent or repair accidents or other extraordinary and urgent damages, such as the risk of loss of raw materials.

Carrying out voluntary overtime during the night period is prohibited (except in the cases of special days extended by regulation or when it is necessary to prevent and repair accidents or other extraordinary and urgent damages). Likewise, its performance is prohibited to minors under 18 years of age.

For the purposes of calculating overtime, the workday of each worker will be recorded day by day and will be totaled in the period set for the payment of remuneration, delivering a copy of the summary to the worker in the corresponding receipt.

The workers' representatives will have the right to be informed monthly by the employer of the overtime hours performed by the workers, regardless of their form of compensation, receiving for this purpose a copy of the summaries.

Overtime hours may be added to the ordinary day. The maximum number of overtime hours is 80 per year, although overtime compensated for rest time (not with pay) within the four months following its completion does not count within this limit. Neither will the excess of hours worked to prevent or repair accidents and other extraordinary and urgent damages be considered, for the purposes of the maximum duration of the ordinary working day, nor for the calculation of the maximum number of authorized overtime hours, without prejudice of their compensation as overtime.

For the purposes of calculating overtime, from 2019 the workday of each worker is being recorded day by day and is being totaled in the period set for the payment of remuneration, delivering a copy of the summary to the worker in the corresponding receipt. Working time will be calculated so that both at the beginning and at the end of the daily shift the worker is at his or her workplace.

Worked overtime is compensated either financially or with rest by individual or collective agreement. The amount to be paid for each overtime hour may in no case be less than the value of the ordinary hour or will be compensated for equivalent times of paid rest. In the absence of an agreement in this regard, it will be understood that the overtime worked must be compensated through rest within four months following its completion.

The maximum number of overtime hours that workers with an annual working day less than the general working day in the company can perform will be reduced in the same proportion that exists between such working hours.

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The limit of 80 annual overtime hours does not apply to those carried out to prevent or repair extraordinary and urgent damages, although they will have to be paid as overtime, and their completion is mandatory for the worker.

In Croatia, in the case of force majeure, an extraordinary increase in the scope of work and in other similar cases of urgent need, the worker must work longer than full-time or part-time working time (overtime), but up to eight hours a week at the request of the employer.

The overtime work of an individual employee should not exceed 32 hours per month or 180 hours per year.

Overtime work of minors is prohibited. A pregnant woman, a parent with a child up to three years of age, a single parent with a child up to six years of age, and a part-time worker may work overtime only if they provide the employer with a written statement of voluntary consent to such work, except in cases of force majeure.

For difficult working conditions, overtime and night work, and for work on Sundays, holidays and non-working days determined by a special law, the worker has the right to an increased salary, in the amount and in the manner determined by the collective agreement, work regulations or work contract, whereby the increase for each hour of work on Sundays or holidays cannot be less than 50%.

In Cyprus, except where more favorable provisions apply for the workers, the period of weekly working time cannot exceed 48 hours on average, including overtime. Where the employer requires the worker to work longer than 48 hours, this may be done only by prior mutual agreement. The worker has the right to refuse, without any detriment to his employment. Overtime compensation is usually in agreement with the employer and can be paid at a normal rate or more or to be used as a rest day.

Where, with the worker's consent, the work exceeds the maximum weekly working time (48 hours), the employer has to keep a record of the names of all workers working longer than 48 hours, and make this record available to the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance, together with the workers' particulars, including their consent to perform work exceeding the maximum of 48 hours. The Minister may restrict or prohibit the possibility of exceeding the maximum weekly working hours for reasons of the safety and health of the workers.

In the Netherlands, there is no specific legislation on compensation for working overtime. Whether overtime will have to be compensated should follow from what was agreed to in the employment contract, supplemented by the employee handbook or

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established in a Collective Labour Agreement (if applicable). Even supposing that these prescribed sources are altogether silent with regards to compensating employees for overtime services rendered, it is still possible that the employer is obliged to do so. Especially considering the high probability that in a labor dispute, the Courts are likely to decide that the employer should compensate an employee for working overtime, because this is what may be expected from a “good employer” in the same circumstances.

When working overtime, the Working Hours Act must be observed. Overtime pay can be provided in the form of either cash compensation or additional time off. However, the actual hourly wage in a pay period may never be less than the statutory minimum hourly wage, except if a collective bargaining agreement provides so.

The Dutch legislation has defined the following regulations for being on-call for unforeseen circumstances (on-call duty):

1. No more than 13 hours per 24 hours, including the hours that arise from calls.
2. Maximum of 14 working days during a 4-week period.
3. Must have at least 2 consecutive days off in every 4-week period
4. Not immediately before or after a night shift.
5. Not in the 11 hours preceding a night shift or during the 14 hours after a night shift.

Flexible working conditions

Flexible working conditions such as home office and flexible working hours have become increasingly popular in the last decade, and especially during and after COVID-19. Yet, preliminary results from our survey and information from the focus groups which our consortium has conducted leave an impression that such benefits are not yet so widespread or insufficient in their essence to support the ever-changing lifestyle and need of the European citizens.

Based on the preliminary analysis of survey results, 32% of participants report that their “ideal way of working” would involve more flexibility in the schedule and opportunities for a hybrid environment. Moreover, 25% report they would like an opportunity to work part-time or on reduced working hours.

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'Flexibility' was the most desired and widely discussed measure that participants in the focus groups conducted in all five member states pointed out as necessary to support them in achieving better work-life balance and dealing with work-related stress.

In Bulgaria, one of the employers' focus group attendees supported the idea that, whenever possible, home office (or work from home) and hybrid options should be available at all times.

During the employees' focus groups in Bulgaria there were discussions about the need for more comprehensive stress management policies, including flexible work arrangements. Some participants emphasized the importance of work-life balance, suggesting that their companies could consider implementing flexible work arrangements, such as remote work or flexible scheduling, to better accommodate employees' personal needs and reduce their stress levels.

Later in the discussion, when asked to share thoughts on additional policies at the organizational level that could improve employees' well-being, at first place attendees suggested implementation of flexible working hours. The option for a home office was suggested as one of four main ideas for wellness initiatives that companies could implement, for it could provide employees with greater flexibility and control over their work environment, and in turn reduce stress levels.

Attendees of another focus group with employees' from Bulgaria also recommended that companies offer an option for a home office for it could provide them with greater flexibility and control over their work environment, which could in turn reduce stress levels. One of the participants added that during COVID-19 many companies realized that not all meetings had to be conducted face-to-face and that remote work could be more efficient and conducive to productivity.

Being asked to share thoughts on any policies that can help promote employee well-being and productivity, at second place an HR manager pointed that those should include flexible work policies that allow for flexible work arrangements, such as remote work options, flexible working hours, compressed workweeks, or job-sharing arrangements as such policies could help employees achieve better work-life balance, reduce stress from commuting, and improve overall well-being. In addition, she mentioned paid family and caregiver leave policies, workload and work hours policies, etc. The HR manager also added that it's important to assess the specific needs and context of the organization or region and develop policies that are tailored to the unique circumstances and requirements of the employees and the organization as a whole.

Both attendees of the employers' and employees' focus group in Cyprus pointed to flexible working conditions – in the cases that can be applied and yet be productive, as a necessary policy to be implemented by companies.

Attendees of the employee's focus group in Croatia reported that flexibility is the most important policy for them when it comes to stress reduction, burnout prevention and support for employee's emotional balance – thus, everybody prioritized flexibility with time and place of work.

Moreover, when asked to share their thoughts regarding any additional policies to be implemented on various levels, employees suggested an introduction of a 4-day work week or 6-hour work day as an opportunity for employees to choose from. A reduced work week duration can possibly be beneficial for both employers and employees due to increased productivity and better work-life balance.

Similarly, attendees of the HR managers' focus group in Cyprus advised that working fewer hours and more efficiently, such as a 4-days-a-week policy could be implemented.

Due to the high interest in flexible working conditions, the prevalence across digital jobs, and especially the rapid increase in the scope of people who started working from home as a result of COVID-19, our consortium has investigated the current legislation implemented in the analyzed member states regarding flexible working conditions.

In Bulgaria, flexible working hours are established on the basis of the Labour Code, aiming to provide greater freedom and mobility for employees/workers. The following characteristics of flexible working hours have been defined:

1. It can be established for all employees or specific cases. The employer determines the mandatory presence time in the company, while the start and end of the working day are determined by the employee.
2. Similar to compressed working hours, flexible working hours with variable boundaries are determined by an Order issued by the employer. This Order is one-time and remains valid until a new Order is issued to revoke the previous one.

The Bulgarian national labor legislation does not specifically encourage employers to provide flexible working conditions for their employees, however the European Union Directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and carers may have influenced employers in Bulgaria to provide flexible working conditions for their employees.

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In Spain, remote work is regulated from September 2020. According to the passed legislation, remote work is conceived as the “form of organization of work or carrying out work activity in accordance with which it is provided at the home of the worker or in the place chosen by him, during all of his day or part of his work on a regular basis.” It is understood that it is regulated "remote work that is provided, in a reference period of 3 months, a minimum of 30% of the working day, or the equivalent proportional percentage depending on the duration of the employment contract."

The exercise of remote work must be formalized in writing through an agreement reached between the company and the worker, either in the initial contract or at a later time, but in any case, before remote work begins.

Remote workers enjoy the same rights as face-to-face workers, except for those that are inherent to the performance of in-person work and, therefore, they may not suffer any harm in their working conditions.

The worker has the right to request a return to their previous working day or contractual modality once the agreed period has concluded or when the change in circumstances justifies it, even if the planned period has not elapsed.

Since the entry into force in 2007 of the Law on Equal Opportunities between Women and Men at Work and its subsequent improvements and adaptations, which determined the obligation of certain companies (currently, 2023, companies with more than 50 workers) to develop equality plans in the company, companies are increasingly including measures to balance professional, family and personal life in these plans, among which are measures related to time flexibility.

Some private companies on their own initiative and many public entities, as a measure to facilitate the reconciliation of workers' professional, family and personal lives, establish flexible measures such as flexible entry and exit times at work, for example, they establish a time slot for entering work and another for leaving, so workers can choose to enter work earlier and leave earlier as well or the other way around, enter work later and leave later.

In Croatia, if the daily and weekly schedule of working hours is not determined by regulation, collective agreement, agreement concluded between the works council and the employer or the employment contract, the employer decides on the schedule of working hours in a written decision.

An employment contract concluded in writing, i.e. a certificate of a concluded employment contract must contain all essential information, as well as the place of

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work, and if there is no permanent or main place of work, a note that the work is performed in different places.

An employment contract concluded in writing, i.e. a certificate of a concluded employment contract for the performance of work at the worker's home or in another area that is not the employer's premises, must also contain additional information on:

1. the daily, weekly or monthly time of the worker's mandatory presence at the workplace,
2. the deadlines, time and method of monitoring the work and the quality of the worker's performance,
3. machines, tools and equipment for performing tasks that the employer is obliged to acquire, install and maintain,
4. use of workers' own machines, tools and other equipment and reimbursement of related costs,
5. reimbursement of other costs to the worker related to the performance of work,
6. the method of training and professional development of workers.

The salary of a worker with whom an employer enters into a contract may not be set at a lower amount than the salary of a worker who works on the premises of that employer on the same or similar jobs.

In Cyprus, up to this date, there is no specific legislation that explicitly governs flexible working conditions, such as flexible working hours, remote work, or hybrid office arrangements. Employment regulations in Cyprus are primarily governed by the Employment of Persons Law and other related legislation. However, these laws did not provide detailed provisions for flexible work arrangements. Flexible working conditions in Cyprus are typically a matter of negotiation between employers and employees, outlined in employment contracts, and subject to mutual agreement. The specific terms and conditions of flexible working arrangements are typically addressed through employment contracts, workplace policies, or collective bargaining agreements.

However, it is important to note that a draft law is under review by the House of Representatives, in regards to teleworking and hybrid work.

In the Netherlands, working from home is not a legal right. However, according to the Flexible Working Act, employees may submit a written request to work (partly) from home. For example, because they are concerned about their health. There must be a good reason for refusing such a request. Some examples would include: working from home causes problems with the work schedule; the work cannot be done elsewhere; or the home workplace is not safe or suitable for work.

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There are also conditions for employees who want to work from home:

- The company must have a minimum of 10 employees.
- The employee must have been employed for at least six months.
- The employee must submit a written request no later than 2 months before the desired start date.

Employees must also be able to do their work safely and properly at home. When employees work from home, they have additional costs that they do not have at the office: more costs for heating, water, electricity, but also tea, coffee, and toilet paper. Companies can reimburse these costs tax-free with a working from home allowance of € 2,15 per day.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many employees worked from home. Now that most COVID-19 measures are no longer necessary, the Dutch government encourages hybrid working, considering working from home advantages, like less travel time and costs. On 5 July 2022, the Dutch Parliament Lower House adopted the proposal for the "Work where you want" Act (amending Flexible Working Act) but Dutch senate rejected it in October 2023. This bill could have significantly strengthened the right of employees to work remotely, including in other EU countries. There were concerns about the potential regulatory burden, especially if employees wanted to work abroad, it could have had far-reaching consequences, including Dutch employers having to consider and apply foreign employment law. There would have been tax and social security implications too.

COVID-19 impact

There is no doubt that COVID-19 had a significant impact on digitalization and working flexibility. The consequences of COVID-19 on EU citizens' life was also discussed at the focus groups our consortium has conducted.

While some attendees of the employees' focus group in Bulgaria shared that COVID-19 provided them with an opportunity to be more flexible as they transitioned to working from home and one found it as a valuable time for self-awareness and prioritization, most participants shared that overall the disruption caused by the pandemic significantly increased their stress levels, challenged the established work patterns and forced them to quickly acquire new skills in order to remain productive. Some participants said that things got very challenging both personally and professionally.

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Attendees of the employer's focus group in the Netherlands shared that COVID-19 has affected the levels of stress in the institution to a very substantial extent and that it had been the greatest disruptor in the last 20 years in the arena of education and especially in the way employees perceive stress and work dynamics.

Based on her observations an HR Manager from Bulgaria shared that COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the levels of stress among employees as the sudden shift to remote work, uncertainties about job security, concerns about health and safety, increased workload for some, and the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life have contributed to elevated stress levels in organizations. She added that the need to adapt to new ways of working, rapid changes in business strategies, and the emotional toll of the pandemic on individuals and their families had all added to the overall stress levels in organizations.

Attendees of both the employees' and employers' focus groups in Spain shared that in the first months of restrictions due to COVID-19, stress levels were very high for several reasons. In the first place, they mentioned the need to adapt to the new situation that in many cases forced people to work online, for long working hours and a lot of intensity, combined with an emotional distress.

An attendee at the employers' focus group in Bulgaria (a call center manager) shared that COVID-19 had had a significant impact on the levels of stress within her organization. The pandemic had caused a lot of uncertainty and fear, leading to increased anxiety and stress, thus directly affecting the employees' mental health. In addition, the transition to remote work had been challenging for many of her employees, as they had to adjust to a new work environment, while dealing with personal challenges such as homeschooling and caring for family members. This had led to a lot of stress and burnouts among her employees.

Attendees of the employee's focus group in Croatia confirmed that COVID-19 had a significant impact on their life, leading to employees being reluctant to "waste" time on traveling to and from work, spending 8hr and 5 days a week at work when they saw they could do their job in a more reasonable amount of time, and thus currently preferred flexibility over many other "perks". Employers' focus group attendees also shared that returning back to the office and adjusting to the old habits following COVID-19 restrictions caused extra anxiety to employees.

While home office can indeed help employees to build a better work-life balance, save time on travel and decrease greenhouse emissions, decrease companies' bills on rent and facilities, and overall contribute to lower work-related stress levels, we want to

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remind that a continuous lack of contact to others can be alienating, especially in the digital era and that an increasing number of citizens suffer from mental health issues such as depression, due to insufficient social interactions.

Based on the preliminary analysis of our survey results 71% of respondents reported that not being able to attend group activities or practice hobbies due to **COVID-19** had a medium to high impact on their stress levels and 64% of respondents reported not being able to leave home due to COVID-19 as another factor that had a medium to high impact on their stress levels. Not surprisingly, the above-mentioned were selected as the two factors with highest negative impact on respondents' stress levels related to COVID-19.

For this reason, we have recommended that the companies, whose employees predominantly work from home, organize at least 2 days per annum in which employees meet physically for working, training or team building purposes.

Vulnerable groups - parents of small children, caregivers, single parents, elders, students, etc.

In some of the focus groups the topic about flexibility was extended to discussions regarding vulnerable groups such as parents of small children, caregivers, single parents, elders, students, etc. to whom such conditions seem even more desired and necessary.

During the focus group discussion with employees from Bulgaria, most of the attendees indicated that their company does not have an internal policy regarding extra days off or flexible working hours for parents or employees who are caring for relatives. However, some attendees suggested that their company should consider implementing such policies to support employees who are managing family responsibilities and reduce their stress levels. They pointed out that many companies in their industries have begun to offer these types of benefits as part of their employee wellness programs, and that doing so could help to attract and retain top talent and create a more positive work environment overall.

Amongst the few good case practices, an HR manager from Bulgaria shared that her company strives to provide a supportive and inclusive work environment that acknowledges the needs and challenges of employees with caregiving responsibilities, and that they worked with employees to find suitable arrangements that help them

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manage their work and caregiving responsibilities effectively while minimizing stress and promoting well-being.

To gain more clarity on the subject, our consortium investigated further the national legislation in the five analyzed member states as part of the national research conducted.

In Bulgaria, the Labor code does not explicitly require or incentivize companies to provide more privileged or flexible working conditions to employees with special needs such as parents of small children, caregivers, elders, or students.

When it comes to overtime work, the Labour Code says that the consent for performing overtime work by mothers with children up to the age of 6, by mothers who care for children with disabilities regardless of their age, and by employed workers and employees, shall be given in a written form for each individual case.

In Spain, a reduction of working hours for family reasons can be applied under certain circumstances. In the cases of birth, adoption, custody for the purposes of adoption or foster care, workers will have the right to one hour of absence from work (after the initial maternity allowance of at least 16 weeks has expired), which they may divide into two fractions, for the care of the infant until he or she is nine months old. When both parents, adopters, guardians or foster parents exercise this right with the same duration and regime, the period of enjoyment may be extended until the infant is twelve months old, with a proportional reduction in salary after nine months.

Workers who are considered victims of gender violence or victims of terrorism will have the right to make effective their protection or their right to comprehensive social assistance, to a reduction in working hours with a proportional decrease in salary, or to reorganization of working time through the adaptation of the schedule, the application of flexible hours or other forms of organization of working time used in the company. They will also have the right to carry out their work totally or partially remotely or to stop doing so if this is the established system, provided in both cases that this type of service provision is compatible with the position and functions carried out by the person.

Workers have the right to request adaptations to the duration and distribution of the working day, in the organization of working time and in the form of benefits, including the provision of their work remotely, to make effective their right to Conciliation of work and family life. These adaptations must be reasonable and proportionate in relation to the needs of the worker and the organizational or productive needs of the company. If

they have sons or daughters, workers have the right to make this request until the sons or daughters turn twelve years old.

In an absence of collective agreements, the company, upon request to adapt the working day, will open a negotiation process with the worker for a maximum period of thirty days. Once this is completed, the company, in writing, will communicate the acceptance of the request, will propose an alternative proposal that enables the conciliation needs of the worker or will express its refusal to exercise it. In the latter case, the objective reasons supporting the decision will be indicated.

In Croatia, an extensive legislation has been dedicated to the protection of pregnant women, parents and adoptives, encompassed in chapter 7 of the Labor Law. However, other measures in terms of flexibility, home office, reduced working hours, etc. targeting to support a wider range of vulnerable groups have not been implemented as part of the current legislation.

During pregnancy, use of maternity, parental, adoption leave, half-time work, reduced-time work due to increased child care, leave of a pregnant or nursing mother, and leave or reduced-time work for child care with severe developmental disabilities, i.e. within fifteen days from termination of pregnancy or termination of use of these rights, the employer cannot cancel the employment contract of a pregnant woman and a person who uses one of the mentioned rights.

After the expiration of maternity, parental, adoption leave, leave for the care and care of a child with severe developmental disabilities, and the suspension of the employment relationship until the third year of the child's life in accordance with a special regulation, the worker who used one of these rights has the right to return to the jobs he worked on before exercising that right, and if the need to perform those jobs has ceased, the employer is obliged to offer him the conclusion of an employment contract for the performance of other suitable jobs, the working conditions of which must not be less favorable than the working conditions of the jobs he performed before exercising that right.

This is further defined by other laws, like law on parental and maternity benefits. The defined used of benefits user has the right to:

1. maternity leave
2. paternity leave
3. parental leave
4. half-time work
5. half-time work due to increased child care
6. break for breastfeeding the child

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7. leave of a pregnant worker or leave of a worker who has given birth or leave of a worker who is breastfeeding a child
8. free working day for prenatal examination
9. leave or half-time work for the care of a child with developmental disabilities
10. suspension of the employment relationship or activity on the basis of which the insured status was acquired until the third year of the child's life (unpaid leave).

Chapter 7 is dedicated to defining the protection of workers who are temporarily or permanently unfit to work in the form of a ban on dismissal, the right to return to the same radon location or employment in other jobs, etc.

A large number of articles are devoted to defining the possibility of work for minors.

A large number of items are aimed at defining obligations towards shift, temporary and permanent employees.

The Act on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities defines the employment conditions for this group of employees.

In Cyprus, the new Flexible Working Arrangements for Work-Life Balance Law of 2022 was introduced with the aim to harmonize national legislation with the provisions of the Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU.

Every working parent with a child up to the age of 8 (eight), and every carer, has also the right to request flexible working arrangements for care reasons. In order to be eligible, the employee must have completed 6 (six) months of continuous employment with the same employer. The duration of such arrangements may be limited in a reasonable way. Importantly, working parents have the right to return to the same work pattern at the end of the agreed-upon period.

Pursuant to the Law, the employer shall examine and process a request for flexible working arrangements and inform in writing form the employee on the decision within 1 (one) month as of submitting such request. Having considered the needs of both the employer and the employee, the Law entitles the employer either to approve, postpone or reject such a request. Provided that, before postponing or rejecting the working parents' requests, employers must take into account the representations of the working parents and inform them in writing of the decision, justifying the reasons for postponing or rejecting such request.

In the Netherlands, under the Flexible Working Act (Wfw), employers must allow employees to work part-time or to work flexible hours. The employer can only turn down such a request if there are strong and objective reasons not to permit it. After six months of employment, employees can request an adjustment of their working hours and workplace (i.e., work from home). If the employer denies this request, the employee can file a new one after a year. Only employers with ten or more employees fall under the scope of the Flexible Working Act. For these employees it is possible to negotiate flexible working hours with their employer. This can include:

- working from home one or more days a week.
- longer working days in exchange for one free day per week or fortnight.
- time in lieu to replace hours worked in the evenings or on weekends.

Work from home is usually addressed in the employee manual, a specific policy or (depending on the industry) in the collective bargaining agreement. It is not common to add work-from-home clauses in the standard employment agreement except in cases where it is agreed that a newly hired employee will work from home. It is more common to include a reference to a specific policy or the more general employee manual.

The employers must inform new and expectant mothers about special rights with regard to working conditions (e.g. adjusting working conditions and working hours). They need also to limit psychological and physical stress for pregnant employees. There are no legal prescriptions on how to reduce psychological stress, other than more breaks during working hours. Regarding physical stress on a pregnant employee, up to 6 months after giving birth, any work involving lifting, carrying, pulling and pushing objects should be slowly built up.

Workers with one or more children are entitled to 'ouderschapsverlof' (parental leave). This leave corresponds to a maximum of 26 times the number of hours of work per week. They are entitled to this amount of parental leave during the period from birth up until the child turns 8 years old. This leave is unpaid, unless other arrangements had been made with the employer or in a collective labor agreement. From 2 August 2022, parents can make use of the paid parental leave scheme as the result of amendments to European Directive 2019/1158. The aim of the Directive is to achieve work-life balance and equal treatment for women and men by promoting women's participation in the labor market and by eliminating the difference between women and men in income and pay. Now they receive a benefit from the Employee Insurance Agency (Uitvoeringsinstituut Werknemersverzekeringen, UWV). The UWV benefit for paid parental leave amounts to 70% of the daily wage. Employees must take the paid leave in the child's first year.

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Employees, who have adopted a child or have taken in a foster child, are entitled to 6 weeks adoption or foster leave. The leave applies to both parents. They have the right to an adoption allowance or foster care benefit. The employee must apply for the adoption or foster leave at least 3 weeks in advance. They may take this leave spread out over a longer period of time. The employer may not refuse this, unless the business will face serious problems as a result. If employees used up all of their parental leave and they need to modify working times after parental leave, they may request a temporary modification of working times for the period following this. The employee must submit this request 3 months before the end of the parental leave period and the company must decide 4 weeks before the leave period ends.

Employees can apply for 'zorgverlof' (care leave), either short-term or long-term, when they need to take time off work to care for someone close to them, such as a sick child, partner, parent, other relative, friend. In case of short-term care leave, they will receive at least 70% of their salary, but never less than the minimum wage. They do not have the right to a salary during long-term care leave. During care leave, the statutory holiday days will continue to build up. The employer may only refuse short- and long-term care leave if this leave would cause serious problems at work.

Children aged between the ages of 13 and 16 are allowed to work outside school hours and in the holidays, but only under certain conditions. From the age of 16, young people are free to do any kind of work. Young people from 15 to 20 receive the minimum youth wage.

Students from the EU/EEA or Switzerland are free to work without restrictions. They do not need a work permit and there are no restrictions regarding working hours, other than the restrictions and rules stipulated by Dutch law in the Working Hours Act (ATW). For students not from the EU/EEA or Switzerland, there are some restrictions if they want to work alongside your studies. The employer has to provide them with a personal work permit. They can only work if they have this specific work permit and can either work for a maximum of 16 hours a week during the year, or fulltime during the months of June, July and August.

New labour market rules are on the way. For instance, zero-hour contracts will disappear and employees will get a permanent contract more quickly. The new rules do not apply to students with a side job: they may continue to work on an on-call basis and thus allow their work to coincide with, for example, test weeks and holidays.

“Law for more security for flex workers” was in consultation until September 4, 2023 via internetconsultatie.nl. Minister Karien van Gennip (Social Affairs and Employment) said:

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“The measures that I agreed with employers and employees last spring are and remain desperately needed. Flexible work will always be available to accommodate temporary crowds and illness. However, in the Netherlands too many people do not know whether they can pay the rent next month. They postpone future plans. Employees with a temporary contract or on-call job in particular need more certainty about their wages and schedule. That is why it is important to tighten the rules so that you in principle receive a permanent contract for structural work.” In fact, the uncertainty of temporary contracts might lead to stress and complaints.

National initiatives and funding opportunities

Lastly, we discuss the current national initiatives, as well as available funding opportunities targeting to raise awareness regarding mental health, reduce work-related stress and prevent burnout.

We have researched the topic through national research in all five analyzed member states.

In Bulgaria, national initiatives are lacking when it comes to mental health awareness, reducing work-related stress, or preventing burnout. However, as an EU member state, Bulgaria may also be influenced by European initiatives and guidelines related to mental health and well-being in the workplace.

The EU project "Parents in Employment" is implemented under the "Human Resources Development Program 2021-2027," Priority 1: "Promoting employment and skills development," Specific Objective 3: "Promoting balanced gender participation in the labor market, equal working conditions, and a balance between professional and personal life, including through financially accessible childcare and care for dependents."

Project budget: BGN 24,000,000.00.

Duration: until 2026

In Spain, there is a Mental Health Action Plan 2022-2024. The Mental Health Action Plan of the Ministry of Health is endowed with 100 million euros for the period 2022 to 2024, it has six strategic lines and 44 actions with their respective indicators to move towards improving the quality of mental health of people. The main lines of action are:

- Line 1: Strengthening human resources in mental health.
- Line 2: Optimization of comprehensive mental health care in all areas of the SNS

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- Line 3. Raising awareness and fighting against the stigmatization of people with mental health problems.
- Line 4. Prevention, early detection and attention to suicidal behavior
- Line 5. Addressing mental health problems in contexts of greater vulnerability

Action 5.9. Development of actions on Mental Health and Work within the framework of the Spanish Strategy for Safety and Health at Work 2022-2027 and Occupational Health, aimed at understanding the impact of employment and work conditions on mental health and preventing psychosocial risks in the workplace.

- Line 6. Prevention of addictive behaviors with and without substances

Additionally, in the Spanish Strategy for Safety and Health at Work 2022-2027 there is one objective related to the topic, Objective 2: Manage the changes arising from new forms of work organization, demographic and climate changes. Within this objective we can find the next areas of action:

- Analyze regulations to identify possible shortcomings in terms of their applicability to new work models.
- Study emerging risks, identify the most affected activities and groups, and promote actions to protect all workers equally.
- Support companies in the process of adapting to these changes through tools that facilitate the management of new risks, with special attention to those emerging from digitalisation.
- Insist on the objective of making companies aware of the importance of health care, promoting advanced health management models, with special emphasis on mental health.

In March 2023, the Ministry of Labor presented the report on Job Precariousness and Mental Health. The report makes three general recommendations: fight against job insecurity and its effects on mental health, improve the protection, health and care conditions of workers and measure, analyze, and evaluate job insecurity and mental health problems. It also proposes developing a universal, equitable, free, humane and quality mental health system.

Last but not least, the Mental Health Confederation of Spain has launched different initiatives to increase social sensitivity and awareness regarding mental health at work.

In Croatia, The Strategic framework for the development of mental health until 2030 has a chapter on the preservation and improvement of mental health at work.

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The chapter foresees the following measures:

1. develop programs for employers and workers to reduce psychosocial stress, work-related or work-related stress, with an emphasis on burnout at the workplace, encouraging optimal work organization with the aim of achieving a balance between work and private life;
2. identify psychosocial stressors at work and implement measures to preserve mental health, including early recognition of impaired mental health while encouraging and destigmatizing mental illnesses and disorders;
3. improve the awareness of all social partners about the importance of healthy conditions at the workplace and educate employees about the impact of the work environment on mental health;
4. encourage the establishment of a balance between business and family life in the working environment;
5. plan and implement programs and interventions aimed at preventing harassment, sexual harassment, all forms of violent behavior and abuse at the workplace;
6. improve early recognition of mental health problems, especially problems related to the use of alcohol and other addictive substances, and improve early intervention methods at the workplace;
7. implement interventions for employees and employers to improve mental health;
8. encourage a comprehensive public dialogue on the importance of norms that encourage equality in the organization of work and time for rest, as well as organizational ethics and justice in the regulation of work stress and the prevention of work-related mental health problems;
9. strengthen the cooperation of all stakeholders in the work process, including work inspection;
10. systematically educate the public and other stakeholders about the need to improve health at the workplace;
11. promote the active participation of workers in decision-making and encourage recognition of areas of personal competence in workers;
12. in accordance with EU guidelines and national legislation, independent evaluators should regularly assess the presence of psychosocial stressors at the workplace and

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implement interventions within the framework of the work environment in order to reduce them;

13. encourage research on work-related or work-related stress and burnout syndrome, as well as mental disorders and disorders related to workplace risks related to the workplace

14. preservation and improvement of mental health, provision of psychological support and implementation of crisis interventions in professions that are the first to arrive at the scene of the incident (police, firefighters, workers in emergency services, etc.);

15. enhanced care for the mental health of workers in high-risk occupations (police, firefighters, workers in emergency services, etc.) by conducting various scientifically and professionally validated psychological training and programs by mental health experts;

16. reinforced care for mental health and additional education of workers who take care of the protection of vulnerable groups (victims of violence, drug addicts, users of social welfare services, prisoners) in order to provide adequate help to people who, in addition to belonging to a certain vulnerable group, have a mental health disorder.

In Cyprus, amongst the key efforts and initiatives to address mental health in the workplace and reduce work-related stress, are the following:

1. **Mental Health Awareness:** Various organizations, including governmental and non-governmental entities, have been promoting mental health awareness campaigns in Cyprus. These initiatives aim to reduce stigma surrounding mental health issues and encourage individuals to seek help when needed.

2. **Occupational Health and Safety:** The Cyprus Department of Labour Inspection (DLI) is responsible for enforcing health and safety regulations in the workplace. They have been working to ensure that employers comply with health and safety standards, which can indirectly contribute to reducing work-related stress and preventing burnout.

In the Netherlands, there is no general national strategy addressing mental health.

However, in 2014, Minister Asscher (Social Affairs and Employment) launched the "**Check Your Work Stress Week**" because research showed that 1 in 8 employees have issues with work related stress and it was estimated that almost 1 million people run the risk each year of burn-out and other work and stress related illness. Since then, one week of November has been declared "Work Stress Week" to encourage employers and employees to focus on introducing measures to address this issue. A website was launched offering a number of activities and facts related to stress at work.

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From 13 to 17 November 2023, OVAL (Organization for Vitality, Activation and Career) is organizing the Work Stress Week and this year's central theme is 'Mentally and physically strong!' The consequences of the corona pandemic are clearly visible. There is a significant staff shortage in the Netherlands, employees have to look for a new work-life balance after working from home and more and more young employees are experiencing stress at work. With good mental health, employees experience less stress. But a good condition can also ensure that stress gets less grip. That is why during the Week of Work Stress 2023, attention is paid to mental health and the physical side. These two cannot be viewed separately.

CONCLUSION

Based on the survey and focus group results conducted in five member states, our consortium concluded that although some separate measures have been implemented on organizational and national level, in most countries there has not yet been introduced a comprehensive approach to tackle the issues of work-related stress and burnout. While some companies have already started conducting mental health trainings and providing some benefits such as flexible working conditions or a free access to psychological services, our preliminary survey results suggest that 81% of organizations have no Corporate wellness plan, only 7% report to have received training on stress management more than once per year, while above 70% report that they would like to receive such in the future, and only 3% of survey respondents reported therapy as a stress-coping technique they know of.

At focus groups many attendees stressed on the importance of working on prevention, rather than on correction once the stress was already affecting employees. Other general recommendations from focus groups were more support is needed for employees who experience burnout or work-related stress at the national level, as well as that even where the legal framework has already been established, an extra effort in control is necessary in order to guarantee compliance. Lastly, our consortium recommends more awareness actions targeting the wider population in active working age.

SUMMARY

StressOut project (<https://stressout-project.eu/>) aims to provide tools for stress prevention and stress management on both a personal and business level.

Amongst other activities, included in the project agenda, the consortium behind it, consisting of six organizations from five EU member states, namely Bulgaria, Croatia, Spain, Cyprus and the Netherlands, has created a Policy Recommendation document, based on the following activities:

1. A preliminary survey has been conducted in the beginning of 2023, across the five member states, mentioned above, collecting more than 150 responses in total. The survey is still open for participation and the final version of this document will encompass the latest statistics as of spring 2024.
2. In total 14 focus groups and 5 individual interviews have been conducted across the same member states attended by 96 participants, representing employees, employers and management personnel in order to confirm and elaborate on the results collected from the preliminary survey.
3. National research in the same five member states has been conducted to deepen the knowledge and understanding on the current practices and implemented legal framework.

Based on the survey and focus group results conducted in the five member states, our consortium concluded that although some separate measures have been implemented on organizational and national level, in most countries there has not yet been introduced a comprehensive approach to tackle the issues of work-related stress and burnout.

While some companies have already started conducting mental health trainings and providing some benefits such as flexible working conditions or a free access to psychological services, our preliminary survey results suggest that 81% of organizations have no Corporate wellness plan, only 7% report to have received training related to stress management more than once per year, while 81% report that their organization provides such very rarely or never, and only 3% of survey respondents reported therapy as a stress-coping technique they know of.

Based on the participants' opinions and recommendation from focus groups, our consortium suggests that more focus is being placed on working on prevention, rather than on correction once the stress is already affecting employees. Other general recommendations arising from focus groups are that more support is needed for

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employees who experience burnout or work-related stress at the national level, as well as that even where the legal framework has already been established, an extra effort in control is necessary in order to guarantee compliance. Lastly, our consortium recommends more awareness actions targeting the wider population in active working age.

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