

EMPOWER, the eHealth European platform to promote health and wellbeing in the workplace, has been launched

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A European project aimed to reduce the impact of mental health problems at the workplace has been launched in January 2020. Interface Demography of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel is a partner in the project, which is funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement No. 848180. Coordination & management is in charge of the Spanish Fundació Sant Joan de Déu (FSJD), where the European platform to Promote Wellbeing and Health in the workplace (EMPOWER) will be developed by the research group on "Impact, risk and prevention of mental disorders", led by Dr. Beatriz Olaya from the Parc Sanitari Sant Joan de Déu and part of the Centre for Biomedical Network Research on Mental Health (CIBERSAM).

EMPOWER is a research and innovation effort, with an innovative model of implementation, that focuses on the development and implementation of a novel and low-cost eHealth platform to address mental health in the workplace from a multimodal perspective. It is a collaboration of researchers from psychology, medicine, sociology, public health, economics, ethics, law, and ICT technologies, and will rely on the participation of stakeholder groups, including employers and employees, insurance companies, individuals with mental health problems, unions, and policymakers. The eHealth platform draws on previous national and international research innovation activities of the partners and is linked to other current initiatives.

The objective of EMPOWER is to develop, manage, and evaluate a cultural and gender-sensitive multi-modal and integrative eHealth platform compiling the most feasible, brief, and cost-effective interventions currently available in Europe to promote health and wellbeing and prevent common mental disorders using a variety of strategies to reduce the negative impact of mental health problems in the workplace.

The intensive collaborative approach will design strategies to overcome the barriers that have already been identified for the widespread implementation of programs to promote wellbeing and reduce mental health problems in the workplace. EMPOWER aims to address the increasing burden of mental health problems in the workplace and improve mental health in the EU working population, having a positive impact on productivity. Partners from the consortium are coming from countries such as Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Poland, Finland, the UK, Switzerland, and Australia.

An eHealth platform to reduce the impact of mental health problems at the workplace

Mental health problems cause an enormous burden both for the individual and society. A number of interventions have been developed to promote wellbeing and prevent or treat mental disorders in the workplace. Attempts to implement interventions by means of digital technologies have had statistically significant but minimally positive effects in reducing overall mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, and stress. However, most eHealth interventions focus on a single mental health condition and neglect comorbidity, particularly in the case of the more common mental disorders. Although effective and cost-effective workplace interventions are available, widespread implementation faces a number of barriers. Stigma and discrimination at the workplace have been associated with delayed access to treatment, weakened social support, difficulties in the performance of occupational and social roles, unemployment, and diminished self-esteem. Although anti-stigma interventions targeting the general population and workplace settings have been implemented, there is room for improvement.

Collaboration among stakeholders is essential when developing and implementing effective interventions to reduce the impact of mental health problems at the workplace and evaluate their impact. The organization of work is rapidly changing. This growing diversity of what it means to work makes it clear that addressing mental health issues at the workplace will require ingenuity and flexibility to tailor interventions to the realities of the workplace setting.

The Framework Directive on Occupational Safety and Health, 89/391/EEC, lays down the employers' general duty to ensure workers' health and safety, "addressing all types of risk". Although the Framework does not explicitly address mental health issues in the workplace, it implicitly addresses them since it requires the employer to be aware of and address all types of health-related risks. At the same time, the European Commission's 2008 European Pact for Mental Health and Well-being and the 2016 European Framework for Action on Mental Health and Well-being have clearly raised the issue of mental health as a public health priority across society and the economy, mentioning workplace mental health as one target area. It is incumbent on European employers to adequately identify and address known psychosocial risks.

Due to the fragmented landscape of interventions and related implementation barriers, there is an urgent need for a multi-modal and integrative eHealth platform aimed at reducing mental health problems in the workplace and improving employees' wellbeing, by compiling the most feasible, brief, and cost-effective interventions currently available in Europe. The platform will take advantage of proven cost-effective tools and address the need to reduce stigma, increase help-seeking behaviour, raise awareness about and minimize psychosocial risks, improve self-management strategies, taking into account mental and physical comorbidities, and promote a healthy lifestyle – all while considering gender and cultural differences that impact successful implementation. This is especially relevant for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which represent the majority of all enterprises in the EU but have very limited resources. The development and implementation of a multi-modal and integrative eHealth platform should, finally, be guided and supported by close collaboration with stakeholders, including employee and employer organizations, insurance companies, patient associations, and health professionals.

The kick-off meeting will be held on Tuesday, February 4th in Barcelona, Spain."

For any further information, **please contact:** Christophe Vanroelen
(christophe.vanroelen@vub.be)