

Miles of smiles

Written by Charleen Clarke
Thursday, 13 October 2016 07:09

I have just spent six weeks working in various parts of Europe. Of course I learnt a great deal while there, but the one thing that really sticks in my mind is the emphasis that some German companies, in particular, are placing on their workers ... and keeping them smiling

The management team at Daimler's Gaggenau factory will move the earth to keep its workers happy. "This region has a 2,2 percent unemployment rate. So you really have to pamper your employees; if you don't do that, they will change their jobs," a senior executive confided.

The situation is exacerbated by the fact that Germany's population is shrinking and ageing at one of the fastest rates in Western Europe. According to the German Federation of Health Insurance Companies, the number of employees aged 55 and older increased by a whopping 49 percent from 2000 to 2010, and continues to rise.



Furthermore, the number of Germans aged over 67 will rise by 42 percent by 2040, while those aged between 20 and 66 will shrink by a quarter in the same period. "The average age of the workforce at our plant is 41,69 years, which is a challenge when it comes to health management and ergonomics," he revealed.

A total of 6 500 people (plus about 500 temporary workers) work at this particular factory, producing transmissions, axles and torque converters. The factory was founded in 1894, making it the oldest automotive plant in the world.

The employees are treated like gold – they are truly valued. There is a great deal of emphasis on family life; there is a kindergarten at the plant and there's even a parent/child room, where parents can look after sick children and work at the same time. "We do everything possible to enhance the quality of our workers' lives; we believe that work must be safe and fun; it mustn't be tiring," the executive pointed out.

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The next day, I visited the Mercedes-Benz Wörth factory, which employs about 11 700 people and is the world's largest truck assembly plant (if you're into trucks, you may be interested to know that they produce Actros, Axor, Atego, Antos, Econic, Unimog, and Zetros models and each truck is built exactly according to customer requirements).

We were touring the plant when we met a pretty young lady, who was most bemused when we all started snapping away at her workstation. She is in charge of a mobile health and safety clinic at the Wörth plant; this is just one of many benefits for the workers in that particular factory. As soon as we finished taking photographs, one of the workers hopped into the clinic for some physiotherapy.



Of course, Daimler is not the only European company that is pandering to the needs of its workers. Acknowledging the ageing workforce, BASF has launched "[Generations@Work](#)", an initiative that focuses largely on the changing demographics at its main production facility in Ludwigshafen where, in ten years, the company expects every tenth worker to be over 50 years old.

The programme includes lifelong training, human resource development, health management, ergonomics, work-life balance, flexible working hours and retirement funds.

BMW has even gone so far as to open a section at its Dingolfing plant that has been nicknamed "Altstadt" (meaning "old town"), which is staffed by people who are over 50. The Altstadt was designed by the prerequisite architects and engineers, but also by therapists and doctors who specialise in treating the elderly.

BMW's ratio of workers aged over 50 will rise from 25 percent today, to 45 percent by 2020 – hence the company's decision to look after these people. The British Daily Mail reports that facilities include ergonomic back supports for the monkey-wrench turners, mobile tool-trolleys so that workers do not have to strain themselves reaching for tools and enhanced lighting for the visually challenged.

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“Even the production line, itself, has been slowed down by about one third of the normal pace in other car plants to account for the workforce’s general slowing down in life,” the newspaper reveals.

While some German companies are implementing special measures to cope with older workers, many other companies are focusing on workers of all ages. Take the Adidas Group, for instance. It has a novel building called “Pitch”, located near to its headquarters in Herzogenaurach, which is geared entirely toward adaptive work arrangements.

That means customisable workspaces, whiteboard walls and floors, and collaboration hubs. Employees store their personal gear in lockers, with the option to choose a new spot to sit each day to facilitate collaboration and inspiration from unlikely places.



In keeping with the nature of its products, the company also offers sports facilities to its employees. From a climbing wall, beach volleyball and running trails in Herzogenaurach to a CrossFit box in Mexico and yoga and spin studios at various offices, its employees worldwide are staying active and fit while experiencing first-hand the values of its various brands.

SoundCloud, a global online audio distribution platform, based in Berlin, offers its employees a library, indoor garden, wood-burning fireplace, soundproofed nap room and yoga room. And they’re even privy to freshly prepared meals by local chefs, served in a chic Mediterranean café of course. Oh, and one should not forget about the photobooth-equipped party room, which is just perfect for hackathons and meet-ups with others in the Berlin tech scene.

Also in Berlin, mobile football platform Onefootball offers its staff a running track that winds through its offices ... And, down the road at Haribo, in Bonn, staff members are given free Gummy Bears.

Some German companies take extreme measures to keep their employees happy. Enter a certain German insurance company, which decided a night of sex was the best way to keep

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staff motivated (yes, you read this right).

Back in 2007, it organised an orgy in a Budapest spa to reward particularly successful salesmen. In typical German fashion, the evening was very well organised. “After each such encounter, the women were stamped on the lower arm in order to keep track of how often each woman was frequented,” German newspaper Handelsblatt reported.

The company admitted the event to the BBC, but said that “the organisers have since left the company as this is not the usual way of rewarding our employees”. I would imagine that some employees were rather disappointed with this statement...