

BGW ERGO-COACH: ESTABLISHING ERGONOMIC AND BACK-FRIENDLY WORKING PRACTICES IN ORGANISATIONS

Introduction

Workers in the health and social care (HeSCare) sector are exposed to a wide range of potential musculoskeletal (MSK) risk factors, resulting from the handling of patients, working in awkward positions, repetitive movements, high workloads and related issues, which could cause or worsen existing musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs).

Ergonomics is essential for protecting HeSCare workers' health and wellbeing through the appropriate design and correction of workstations. More specifically, ergonomics is concerned with **all interactions between workers and other elements of the system**,¹ including the physical work environment, the available equipment and the work organisation. Besides the design and adaptation of workstations and the availability of assistive equipment, it is crucial that HeSCare workers are **informed of ergonomics and systematically adopt its principles into their daily work practices**.

This case study zooms in on the **BGW Ergo-Coach programme**, which is a training and awareness-raising initiative, aimed at bringing ergonomic work practices to HeSCare organisations in Germany. By combining consulting and training into a single programme, the Ergo-Coach programme sets out to ensure that ergonomic and back-friendly work practices can be embedded into HeSCare organisations in a more permanent way, which also contributes to their sustainability in the longer run.

This case study is part of a research project² carried out with the aim to provide an overview of research on work-related MSK risk factors and MSK health in the HeSCare sector.

Description of the case

▪ The BGW3

BGW, or the *Berufsgenossenschaft für Gesundheitsdienst und Wohlfahrtspflege*, is the German social accident insurance provider for non-state institutions within the health and welfare service sectors. The organisation is active in 12 locations throughout Germany and has its headquarters in Hamburg. Its main task is the prevention of workplace accidents, occupational diseases and work-related health risks. For organisations in the HeSCare sector, it is mandatory to become a member of BGW and to pay into the insurance system. Currently, the BGW mainly has hospitals, residential care facilities for the elderly, and healthcare and welfare organisations among its members.

Regarding the BGW's activities, in terms of **prevention**, the BGW takes a holistic and human-centric approach, which includes advising HeSCare organisations on all OSH matters, investigating the causes of accidents and diseases, and drafting of rules and regulations as well as active public relations work, providing training in aspects of work safety and measuring harmful workplace emissions. In terms of **rehabilitation**, the BGW takes the required steps to support the reintegration into the working life of HeSCare workers who were injured or ill (e.g. retraining), while covering the costs of therapy, home-based or institutional care, occupational support, loss of earnings during sick leave and retraining, among other costs. In terms of **providing advice** (or consulting), the BGW: (i) offers advice on workplace safety; (ii) investigates the causes of workplace accidents, occupational diseases and work-related health risks; (iii) develops and implements measures to prevent these; (iv) supports the rehabilitation of insured workers in the case of an accident or illness; and (v) engages in dialogue with workers and organisations at exhibitions and events. The BGW further has an extensive **education**

¹ EU-OSHA – European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *Ergonomics*, 2022.
<https://oshwiki.osha.europa.eu/en/themes/ergonomics>

² The full report is available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/musculoskeletal-health-and-risk-factors-hescare-sector-review-existing-information>

³ See: <https://www.bgw-online.de/bgw-online-de>

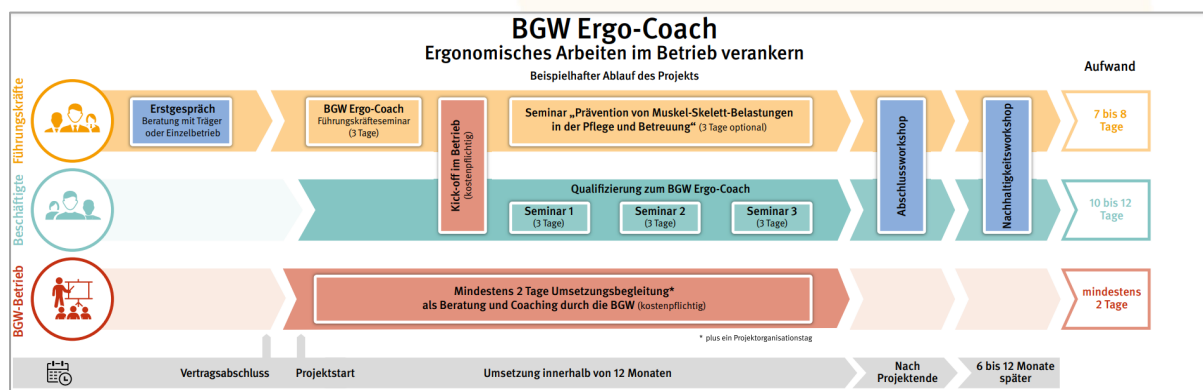
and training programme on accident insurance, prevention and health protections, which it offers at its academies in Hamburg and Dresden. Besides a **website** through which it makes available information and other materials to both organisations and workers, the BGW has an **app** that allows mobile access to these resources and is active on **social media** as well.

Among the BGW's current **actions and campaigns** of relevance to this study on MSK risk factors and MSDs in HeSCare are a project on good working conditions in nursing,⁴ a campaign on violence against emergency services,⁵ a mental health offensive⁶ and an MSK stress work programme,⁷ additional to the Ergo-Coach programme that is further discussed below.

Ergo-Coach – Anchoring back-friendly and ergonomic work practices in the organisation

The BGW Ergo-Coach programme is a **combined consulting and training programme** that aims to bring back-friendly and ergonomic work practices to HeSCare organisations, and to embed them within organisations to ensure their long-run sustainability. An overview of the programme, its key components and timelines are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Screenshot of BGW Ergo-Coach programme, copyright by BGW



The key components of the Ergo-Coach programme are discussed in more detail below. First, the qualification of HeSCare workers as Ergo-Coaches is explained. In the next section, the involvement of management in the Ergo-Coach programme is discussed. Then, the accompanying advice targeting companies is introduced.

■ Qualification of HeSCare workers as Ergo-Coaches through a training programme

A first core element of the programme is **training HeSCare workers to qualify them as Ergo-Coaches**. As such, they can **support colleagues in their own organisation afterwards**, as well as **improve on their own understanding and use of ergonomic and back-friendly work practice**. For HeSCare workers, the training consists of **three seminars**, each lasting **three days** (resulting in nine days of training, as shown by the green arrow in Figure 1). The seminars address a range of topics, for example, the roles, responsibilities and tasks of Ergo-Coaches, the legal basis and risk assessments, communication skills, the idea behind the peer concept and how to apply it, and so on. Between each seminar, there are about six to eight weeks of time so that the Ergo-Coaches can go back to their own organisation and apply or practice the acquired knowledge and skills, and can start working with their colleagues, set up meetings and so on.

⁴ BGW, Gute Arbeitsbedingungen in der Pflege, available at: <https://www.bgw-online.de/bgw-online-de/themen/bgw-im-ueberblick/aktionen-und-kampagnen/gap-pflege-49654>

⁵ BGW, Gewalt gegen Rettungskräfte, available at: <https://www.bgw-online.de/bgw-online-de/themen/bgw-im-ueberblick/aktionen-und-kampagnen/gewalt-gegen-rettungskraefte-95900>

⁶ BGW, Offensive Psychische Gesundheit, available at: <https://www.bgw-online.de/bgw-online-de/themen/bgw-im-ueberblick/aktionen-und-kampagnen/bgw-ist-partnerin-der-offensive-psychische-gesundheit-22870>

⁷ BGW, GDA Arbeitsprogramm MSB, available at: <https://www.bgw-online.de/bgw-online-de/themen/bgw-im-ueberblick/aktionen-und-kampagnen/gdabewegt>

The BGW covers all seminar costs for workers, including travel expenses, accommodation and meals, as seminars are usually organised in the BGW Academy in Dresden. In 2027, the BGW expects to open a new academy in Hamburg, opening up more availabilities for interested workers and organisations.

The BGW works with different types of HeSCare organisations within the Ergo-Coach programme. For **smaller organisations**, **HeSCare workers follow the centrally organised training programme**. In each organisation, typically one to two Ergo-Coaches are trained. The BGW recommends organisations to start with one department, nominating one to two workers to follow the programme. It is also recommended that the Ergo-Coaches cover a maximum of one to two departments, to make sure that the role as Ergo-Coach does not get too demanding in combination with their regular job. For many smaller organisations in the HeSCare sector, staff shortages constitute a major issue, which means that exempting a staff member from work to participate in a training can be challenging in terms of resources.

For **large organisations**, for example, large hospitals where multiple departments would participate in the Ergo-Coach programme and thus a group of eight to ten workers could get qualified as Ergo-Coaches, an in-house project could be launched. In such a case, workers do not participate in the centrally organised training programme but follow it within their own organisation.

▪ Involvement of management in the Ergo-Coach programme – from the very beginning

To ensure the sustainability of the Ergo-Coach programme from the start, external consulting is involved with organisation management and executives from its very beginning (see orange arrow in Figure 1). More specifically, a mandatory **three-day seminar** for executives is held at the start of the programme. Topics addressed at this seminar include the overall concept of the BGW Ergo-Coach, the legal basis and risk assessment, leadership and health, and related topics.

Participation in a **three-day seminar** on the prevention of MSDs in nursing and care is recommended, but not mandatory. This seminar is organised at a later stage as the programme moves forward. For managers or executives who also follow this seminar, the total number of working days devoted to the programme totals seven to eight days.

The BGW offers an **evaluation workshop** for the organisation directly after the Ergo-Coach programme has ended. Six to twelve months after, another workshop is organised, which aims to reflect on the **sustainability** of the measures. At that workshop, the discussion will centre around what happened in the organisation after the programme concluded, in which areas additional support is needed and so on. In Figure 1, this is highlighted by the blue boxes in the orange and green arrows. Importantly, both workers and representatives from the organisation are invited to attend these two workshops.

▪ Accompanying advice – for a firm anchoring in the organisation and ensuring sustainability

The **accompanying consultant** supports managers and future Ergo-Coaches in the implementation of strategic approaches and in the long-term and sustainable anchoring of back-friendly and ergonomic work practices. The number of consulting days required is agreed on a case-by-case basis.

BGW covers the costs of the consultants and lecturers who conduct the initial interviews, final meetings and sustainability workshops in the HeSCare organisation. The HeSCare organisation provides the personnel resources for the respective groups of people and pays for the accompanying consultant for implementation.

▪ Development of the Ergo-Coach programme based on past experiences at the BGW

Prior to the development and rollout of the Ergo-Coach programme, the BGW had **another programme on ergonomics** called **Innerbetrieblicher Praxisexperte** (in-house practice expert) that ran between 2014 and 2017, but this programme **focused only on the training side**. Under this programme, HeSCare workers could be trained to become qualified Ergo-Coaches, and then apply their new knowledge and skills to provide advice to their colleagues in their own organisation on ergonomic and back-friendly work practices.

An evaluation was carried out once this programme had finished and the Ergo-Coach programme was designed taking into account the **strengths and weaknesses** that the evaluation revealed, as well as insights from other BGW projects.

One important area that was further developed in the Ergo-Coach programme was the **consulting element**, targeting not only the Ergo-Coaches themselves but also their **supervisors** and the **organisation**. The evaluation of previous projects had indeed highlighted the key importance of

ensuring that supervisors are aware of the tasks and responsibilities of the Ergo-Coaches, as well as of their own responsibilities towards their Ergo-Coaches (and more generally their responsibilities when it comes to ensuring a healthy environment). Ergo-coaches who are trained by the BGW still remain colleagues who can only provide advice that, moreover, they combine with other work activities. Providing advice to direct supervisors and the organisation's leadership team, and seeing they are accompanied by an external advisor throughout the process, is thus key.

At the same time, the BGW also indicated that previous programmes that had only consisted of consulting efforts towards HeSCare organisations (e.g. in terms of organisational development) were sometimes met with a lack of interest from their members and proved very difficult to bring to the workers later on. When it comes to the Ergo-Coach programme, member organisations report that it is a good approach precisely because it is **very practical and beneficial for the whole organisation**.

What was achieved?

At the time of writing, the BGW Ergo-Coach **programme has not yet been evaluated**. Although the development of the Ergo-Coach programme started in 2021, the programme was only formally launched in April 2023, and then it still took several months before kick-off meetings were planned in participating HeSCare organisations. This is because information days had to be organised to raise awareness among BGW members about the Ergo-Coach programme, contracts had to be signed with participating organisations and so on. The initial months after the programme was launched were also quite demanding on the BGW, as the combination of training and consulting activities within a single programme is also quite new for the BGW. It thus required setting up new structures and communication flows within the BGW to make it work. In addition, since a trajectory lasts around 12 months from the kick-off to the project end (Figure 1), today **none of the participating organisations has fully completed the Ergo-Coach programme yet**.

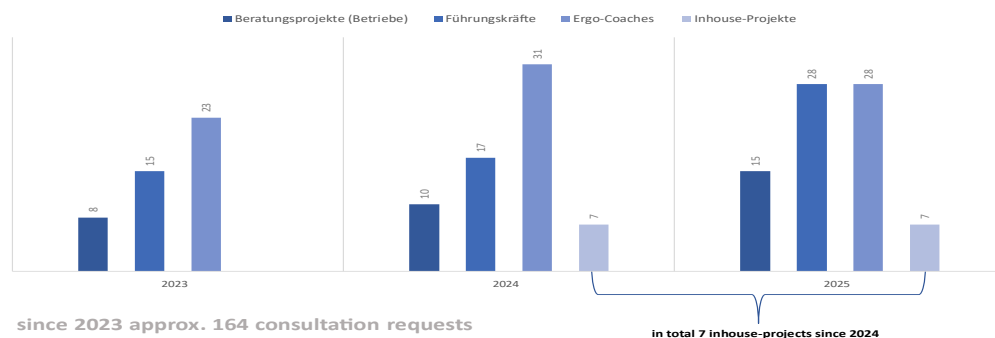
Notwithstanding this situation, in an interview, the BGW reported being satisfied with the **positive feedback** that it has received so far from its member organisations about the Ergo-Coach programme. Apart from organising the information days, the BGW did not carry out a lot of marketing to attract attention to the programme, however the interviewee stated having **sufficient demand** for it from its member organisations and that they were even having to work with a **waiting list** for capacity reasons.

An overview of the **current state of play** concerning the Ergo-Coach programme in terms of the number of participating HeSCare organisations (*Beratungsprojekte (Betriebe)*), supervisors (*Führungskräfte*), Ergo-Coaches and in-house projects (*Inhouse-Projekte*) is available in Figure 2. As the figure shows, in 2023 eight organisations started with the Ergo-Coach programme. In 2025, Ergo-Coach programmes are running in 15 HeSCare organisations (participating in the centrally organised programme), while seven HeSCare organisations have in-house projects ongoing.

Figure 2: Overview of BGW Ergo-Coach programme, copyright by BGW

Overview projects BGW Ergo-Coach

(Stand 23.01.25)



Success factors and challenges

Strengths and success factors of the Ergo-Coach programme:

- The BGW Ergo-Coach programme takes a broad perspective on ergonomics and back-friendly work practices and the work environment, taking a holistic approach composed of both training and consulting activities and targeting workers, supervisors and organisations at large.
- The programme was designed accounting for the lessons learnt from past projects run by the BGW.
- One of the strengths of the Ergo-Coach programme is that it relies on peer-to-peer interaction and support. The Ergo-Coaches are colleagues who remain active in their own workplace and get to dedicate a small percentage (typically 5-10%) of their time to ergonomics. Ergo-Coaches are usually free to decide for themselves how this time is best used to answer the needs of their colleagues.
- With the acquired expertise, Ergo-Coaches can continuously monitor workplace design and work practices, provide inspiration and motivation, and support their colleagues with advice and assistance. This peer concept is valued not only by the BGW but also by the workers and employers in the HeSCare sector.
- A related strength that was highlighted especially by the organisations in the sector is that the Ergo-Coaches programme is very practical, easy to implement and beneficial to the whole organisation. The reliance on workers to share knowledge and insights with their co-workers contributes to this point.
- Building on this, it is also quite straightforward to extend the programme to other workers within the same organisation. It does not present any issue for organisations to send more workers to the training programme after others have completed it.
- The BGW is very transparent about the content of the programme and its cost. Key information on these points is available through its website.
- A final key point of the programme is its focus on sustainability, which runs through the whole programme and is also reflected in the workshop that is organised around the project closure and in the period afterwards.

Weaknesses and challenging factors to the Ergo-Coach programme:

- The Ergo-Coach programme is relatively new (especially in terms of its combination of training and consulting). This presents a challenge to the BGW to set up all the required infrastructure and communication flows as well as seeing that there is a sufficiently large enough staff of external advice providers so that all interested organisations can indeed start with the Ergo-Coach programme. Currently there is a long waiting list.
- Even when there is a strong interest in the programme, it still takes quite some time for HeSCare organisations to move from the information days to signing the required contracts and actually starting the programme.
- Ergo-Coaches combine their new role with their existing tasks, which is an advantage, but also a disadvantage at the same time. While the advantage is that Ergo-Coaches are well aware of the issues and the work context, and also know their colleagues well, the downside is that these new tasks could further raise their workload.

Transferability to other EU Member States

The BGW Ergo-Coach programme could be **scaled up and transferred to other Member States**. The initial target groups of the programme were in-patient nursing homes, hospitals and residential facilities for individuals with disabilities, but this could be extended to other organisations in the HeSCare sector. The logic behind the Ergo-Coaches programme could easily be transferred to other Member States, as long as there is an organisation or actor setting it all up, offering the seminars or organising some type of training academy, making available the required staff and so on. Another point about the BGW case

is that it is mandatory for HeSCare organisations to join the BGW and pay fees, which are then used to develop materials, programmes and so on, benefiting workers and employers in the sector. Similar set-ups, however, do exist in other Member States, which could help to find the resources needed to launch such a project. The Ergo-Coach programme is currently available in German, but this could be addressed as well.

Further information

See: <https://www.bgw-online.de/bgw-online-de/themen/sicher-mit-system/gesundheit-managen/bgw-ergo-coach-78684>

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EU-OSHA – European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *Ergonomics*, 2022.
<https://oshwiki.osha.europa.eu/en/themes/ergonomics>

An interview was carried out with a representative of the BGW to gather key insights into the case.

Author: Sem Vandekerckhove, Karolien Lenaerts (HIVA-KU Leuven), Martin Clarke (Panteia)

Project management: Kate Palmer, Lorenzo Munar, European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA)

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