

Kaunis Iron Takes Part in Research on the Role of the Workplace During Difficult Times

What happens in our personal lives also affects us at work. This is one of the key starting points of the EU-CoWork research project, in which Kaunis Iron is participating alongside Luleå University of Technology. The aim is to deepen understanding of how employers and colleagues can support employees facing challenges such as serious illness, caring for a seriously ill family member, bereavement and grief.

The five-year project brings together workplaces and researchers from several universities in Sweden, Belgium, Austria, Greece and the United Kingdom. Alongside a mine in Austria, Kaunis Iron is one of only two mining operations participating in the project.

Kaunis Iron was selected for the project based partly on its industry and company size. Before making the selection, the researchers also familiarised themselves with the business through sources including the company website and social media.

“When we researched Kaunis Iron, we saw an innovative company with ambitions to be a modern employer. We also felt that the company’s commitment to social sustainability as part of its broader sustainability efforts provided a strong foundation for the project,” says Malin Eneslätt, Senior Lecturer at Luleå University of Technology and facilitator of the co-creation process within EU-CoWork.

For Kaunis Iron, the project forms part of its long-term commitment to the work environment, workplace culture and looking out for one another in everyday working life.

“Work plays a significant role in many people’s lives, so it is natural that employers also have a role to play when someone is going through a difficult time. We are used to making adjustments when, for example, an employee has a physical injury, but we need to get better at responding to challenges that may not be as visible,” says Hans Djurberg, Sustainability Manager at Kaunis Iron.

Support When Life Gets Difficult

Through interviews, workshops and surveys, employees, managers and safety representatives have shared their experiences and perspectives on support, how people are treated and the role of the workplace when someone is going through a difficult period in life. The discussions have considered both the person directly affected and those around them.

Survey responses show that many employees place great value on their colleagues and the sense of community at work in their everyday lives. At the same time, the findings indicate that there are still situations in which both managers and the workplace as a whole need to be better equipped to support people when life gets difficult.

“Everyone’s needs are different, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution. For some people, work can provide a safe haven and a welcome break by allowing them to focus on something else for a while. That is why we need to be attentive and adapt our support to the individual and the situation,” says Hans.

As part of this work, Kaunis Iron has further developed internal guidance materials covering difficult life situations, such as bereavement, the death of a loved one or long-term illness. This includes guidance on maintaining contact with an employee who is away from work for an extended period and providing support in situations that are often both sensitive and complex.

The work also has a clear connection to occupational safety.

“In a mining operation, safety is an integral part of everyday life. Creating a safe and secure working environment also means taking psychosocial factors into account. Going through something difficult in your personal life can affect how you feel and function at work. The workplace should not take on the role of a healthcare provider or therapist, but we can make a real difference as fellow human beings and as an employer,” says Hans.

Learning from Other Organisations

An important part of the project is learning from the experiences and perspectives of other organisations. Participants meet to discuss approaches, challenges and lessons learned in relation to the working environment and support during difficult life situations.

“It has been extremely valuable to hear how others approach these issues and what they have considered. We receive guidance from the research team, but we also gain inspiration and ideas from other companies across Europe,” says Hans.

Continuing the Work

The next step in the project is a follow-up employee survey. The aim is to track developments over time and identify any changes since the initial survey.

The exchange of experiences with other participating workplaces will also continue. Two representatives from each workplace attend regular meetings two to three times a year to get to know one another, share experiences and gain inspiration for their ongoing work.

“These are issues that require both careful consideration and sensitivity. We need to build on what is already working while remaining open to learning and exploring new approaches. This is not something we can simply complete and tick off a list; it is about continuous improvement,” concludes Hans.

[Read more about the research project](#)

Contact

Hans Djurberg

Head of Sustainability, Kaunis Iron

Phone: 070-640 65 89

E-mail: hans.djurberg@kaunisiron.se



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