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Opinions - 03.12.2024 - 08:30

How companies and business can support democracy

What can be done to counteract right-wing extremist tendencies in Germany and other European countries? These questions also concern the business community: What do companies and business organisations think about right-wing extremism? How can they stand up for a free and democratic society? Thomas Beschorner and Antoinette Weibel from the University of St.Gallen analyse the situation.



If we look to Germany, more and more companies and trade associations are gradually taking a stand in favour of a democratic society through campaigns and initiatives. Clear political positions in favour of freedom and democracy can sometimes be observed – and against right-wing extremism. Initiatives were launched and hashtag campaigns sprang up. “A lot of talk.”



Prof. Dr. Antoinette Weibel

The economy and the AfD: “talk and walk”

Initial initiatives were important, but what is the next step? To what extent do companies act beyond public positioning? More precisely: what happens in companies to take measures against right-wing extremist tendencies? After all, a “talk” should always be followed by a “walk”.

These questions have not yet been analysed empirically. However, our impression from observing the discussion is that there is a major gap between public statements and more far-reaching practical measures in companies. The obvious questions are: *Do* companies no longer *want* to commit themselves to a free and democratic society? Or are they unable to do so because they lack a repertoire of actions to take appropriate measures? Thinking further: How can we organise work under the conditions of a civilised market economy that is both economically viable and democratically acceptable?

“Do companies no longer want to commit themselves to a free and democratic society so because they lack a repertoire of actions to take appropriate measures?”

Prof. Dr. Antoinette Weibel and Prof. Dr. Thomas Beschorner



Prof. Dr. Thomas Beschorner

Enthusiasm for work is on the decline

We spend many of our waking hours of our working age in paid work. An estimated 85,000 hours over the course of a lifetime. Our working life therefore also shapes our behaviour, attitude and personality. It is certainly not a new finding from occupational science and organisational research that current forms of work organisation have led to increasing [stress in the workplace](#), which in turn has massive negative consequences: Employees have fewer and fewer of the positive resources that keep them resilient, open and creative.

As a result, what is bound to happen happens: Enthusiasm for work is on the decline. This is shown, among other things, by the annual [Gallup survey](#), according to which 67% of employees in Germany only work to the letter and 19% are even actively disengaged (including small acts of sabotage within the organisation). The aforementioned study also clearly shows an increasing willingness to change jobs, which is fashionably referred to as “conscious quitting” – i.e. the conscious search for “good” work.

All of this costs companies a lot of money. It is therefore difficult to understand why companies treat the topic of labour so

neglectfully, if only out of self-interest, and why companies tend to show their most important “resource” – namely their employees – little appreciation on average.

Labour and democracy

Thinking about a new understanding of work and the reorganisation of work in companies is not just a matter of microeconomic logic. It also offers opportunities for democratic development processes in society as a whole.

The relationship between work and democracy is fundamentally about a living wage: only those who are paid enough have the time and capacity to think politically. It also brings to the fore the forgotten but relevant idea that democratic and participatory organisations are better able to develop meaningful work and democratic skills in workers that are beneficial to a democracy. Karl Schreiber, head of human resources at Bosch in the 1960s, put it succinctly in a keynote speech over 50 years ago:

“The workplace is the central communal experience of working people, and the image they form there serves as a model for their attitude towards the economy and the state. This image not only influences business success, but also the existence of a free state and social order. Seen in this light, company personnel policy is always a part of social policy.”

This addresses fundamental considerations of a connection between work and democracy, which have been discussed since the 1960s and have unfortunately gone out of fashion, but which seem worthwhile for further discussion, especially in view of the anti-democratic tendencies in society. Because whether as an employee or as a citizen, here and there it is about real *participation* and *involvement* in and in social interaction, about thinking, contributing, arguing, about a fruitful “exposure to one another”. And in organisations as in society, it is about giving and taking reasonable arguments and good reasons. We are always called upon to resolve conflicts peacefully and purposefully and to look for joint solutions. For all these reasons, we should therefore urgently get to work. And we should also become more involved in the economy in favour of a free and democratic society.

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