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Keeping a sense of belonging at work: acquired disability and professional identity in a highly-skilled auto-mechanic

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Case summary

This case explores a real-world situation at a small auto service enterprise in Germany after a long-serving auto mechanic suffers a stroke. Set in a skilled technical workplace where professional identity, pride, and belonging are closely tied to manual skill and embodied expertise, the case explores the tensions that arise when physical ability changes, but the person's sense of who they are at work remains the same. Given the limited resources of a small and medium-sized enterprise (SME), the company's owner-manager must decide how to support continued belonging at work without undermining the employee's professional identity or the organisation's operational viability when a valued employee experiences health problems. The case asks learners to examine how SME managers can respond when an employee acquires a disability that challenges their role performance and workplace participation; and to design realistic workplace adjustments that support inclusion, a sense of belonging, and fluent SME operations.

1. When health redefined work

Across Europe, workers who had acquired health-related limitations during their working lives were significantly less likely to remain in

fully paid employment, particularly in physically demanding occupations, despite retaining valuable skills and experience (OECD, 2022). As working lives extended and workforces aged, such situations became increasingly common, especially in small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) where work was organised around physical presence and hands-on skills (European Disability Forum, 2023).

In practice, these health-related limitations often entered the workplace through medical documents. A doctor's note or medical report typically stated which tasks a worker can no longer perform in the same way as before. This situation was referred to as acquired disability, which occurred when a person's physical or functional ability changed during their working life due to illness, injury, or a sudden health event. While medical documents outlined limitations, they often did not address how daily work, team roles, or professional identity could be adapted. Companies and employees, therefore, needed to work together to understand the practical implications of these changes.

These challenges were especially evident in technical jobs, where work was physically demanding and closely related to manual skills and hands-on expertise. In such environments, professional identity was strongly shaped through embodied practices, such as repairing, lifting, adjusting, and problem-solving on the workshop floor, rather than through formal titles or desk-based administrative responsibilities (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

2. Peter's story at Velberg Motors

Velberg Motors GmbH was a small, family-run auto service enterprise located in Germany, employing 12 people who worked closely together in a small workshop. The company provided routine maintenance and mechanical repairs to a loyal local customer base. Like many small firms, it operated with limited margins, informal coordination, and no dedicated human resources function. Decisions about staffing, scheduling, and quality were handled directly by the owner-manager Stefan, who combined operational oversight with personnel responsibility.

Peter,¹ a 48-year-old professional, had worked at the company for more than two decades. Known for his precision, reliability, and calm problem-solving, he was frequently consulted by colleagues and was trusted by customers. His role extended beyond individual tasks; his presence

provided continuity in a workplace where experience and tacit knowledge mattered. Peter's supervisors and peers always appreciated how well his skills aligned with the company's operational needs, but sometimes they seemed to take it for granted.

Peter's stroke occurred over a weekend, outside the workplace. Although it was medically classified as mild, its effects became evident when he returned to work a month later. The main physical issue was that Peter had limited mobility on the right side of his body. While his technical knowledge and cognitive abilities remained intact, activities such as lifting engines, tightening bolts, and working under cars – all of which Peter had previously been able to do with relative ease – now required him to use both hands and to exert considerably more effort.

The company's initial response was marked by uncertainty. Should Peter's working hours be reduced, should his tasks be reassigned, or should his employment eventually be terminated?

3. Workplace reintegration and legal constraints

In Germany, workplace reintegration measures (Betriebliches Eingliederungsmanagement, BEM) were regulated under Social Code Book IX and aimed to support employees returning to work after long-term illness (Federal Ministry of Justice, n.d.). While these reintegration measures applied to employers of all sizes, Velberg Motors, which employed only 12 people, had no prior experience with formal reintegration procedures. Moreover, under German labour law, specifically the Act on Protection Against Unfair Dismissal (Kündigungsschutzgesetz) (Federal Ministry of Justice, n.d.), dismissal or enforced early retirement due to illness was not permitted without strong justification. Employers were required to first consider reasonable workplace adjustments and reintegration options before taking such actions. Nevertheless, while the company immediately applied the general principles of non-discrimination and responsible employment, how to respond effectively on a day-to-day basis within limited resources, while maintaining team morale and service quality, remained unclear.

In the workshop, colleagues adjusted routines informally. Physically demanding tasks were shared without formal discussions, but jobs took longer to complete, and scheduling became less predictable. These short-term adjustments helped maintain daily operations, but they also

disrupted established work patterns in a small team where roles had previously been clearly defined.

The situation also created uncertainty for Stefan, the owner–manager of Velberg Motors, who relied on close coordination and physical reliability to meet customer expectations. While the workshop continued to function, it became clear that informal improvisation could not address questions of safety, workload balance, and long-term sustainability.

4. Identity at work and the emerging dilemma

For Peter, the garage was more than a workplace. It was where he came alive – where the clang of tools, the hum of engines, and the smell of oil marked the rhythm of his days. Over the decades, he had become more than a mechanic. He was the heart of the service centre: the younger staff turned to him for advice, and customers trusted him without hesitation. His workbench mirrored his mind – meticulous, methodical, and masterful.

When he returned after the stroke, he carried with him a quiet hope. However, his right arm, once so sure and steady, now trembled with the slightest effort. Tasks that once took minutes now felt like climbing a hill with no summit in sight. Still, Peter refused to see himself as broken. As the weeks passed, tensions emerged – often indirectly. Although Peter's expertise remained highly valued, his physical limitations gradually reshaped how tasks were organised, creating uncertainty around his role within the workshop.

Realising that informal adjustments did not solve the issue, Stefan, the owner–manager, began to consider relocating Peter to less physically demanding tasks within the garage, and occasionally to work that involved more planning or coordination. While these proposals appeared practical from an operational perspective, they subtly altered the nature of Peter's contribution.

Peter's concern was not about adapting to change but about what it meant for his professional identity. Even when the work remained formally connected to the workshop, shifting away from hands-on mechanical tasks towards administrative ones raised fears that he was no longer being recognised as a mechanic in the full sense of the role. The prospect of spending less time on core technical tasks and more time on supportive

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activities challenged his understanding of his value and place on the team.

For Peter, the proposal felt more like exclusion than support, leading to feelings of resistance. The garage floor, hands-on repairs, and technical problem-solving were crucial to his identity and sense of belonging. He was not looking for sympathy or protection from hard work; instead, he sought a sense of purpose.

His colleagues and the manager understood that safety and service quality were essential in a workshop environment where mistakes could have serious consequences. At the same time, there was a strong sense of responsibility toward a long-serving employee whose experience had shaped the organisation. Customers and younger staff valued Peter's presence but also depended on efficiency, clear accountability, and timely repairs. What had once been an unspoken alignment between individual capability and organisational needs now required deliberate choices.

5. When informal solutions are no longer effective

By early spring, temporary adjustments were no longer sufficient to maintain stability in daily operations. Stefan faced a decision that could not be postponed. While situations like Peter's were not unique among small enterprises, responses varied widely depending on available resources, organisational values, and interpretations of managerial responsibility. In practice, what could be done and what should be done did not always align.

Peter's expertise, loyalty, and strong professional identity argued for continued inclusion, yet the workshop's operational realities required predictable performance, physical reliability, and efficiency. The key question was no longer whether Peter deserved support, but how that support should take shape in everyday practice. Could Velberg Motors adjust roles and responsibilities in a way that allowed Peter to continue working with dignity and a sense of belonging, while still ensuring reliable and safe operations? Or would maintaining performance standards require changes that, even unintentionally, altered Peter's position within the team? In making this decision, Stefan had to consider not only operational needs, but also legal obligations, ethical responsibility, and how Peter himself would experience the company's response.

Questions for reflection

1. How can a small enterprise like Velberg Motors develop an inclusive response to an employee's acquired disability that preserves the employee's sense of belonging, particularly when job identity is already well established?
2. What legal and ethical responsibilities does Velberg Motors have in responding to Peter's acquired disability? Consider how national legislation (such as Germany's Social Code IX – SGB IX) and relevant European Union frameworks (including the EU Employment Equality Directive 2000/78/EC) shape expectations regarding reasonable accommodation and inclusive workplace practices.
3. Evaluate potential adaptive solutions for supporting Peter's continued employment at Velberg Motors by considering their impact on inclusion and everyday work practices in a small enterprise.
4. Discuss how Peter might feel about the way the company responded to his disability. What could have helped him feel more included and supported when returning to work?

Note

1. This teaching case is based on a real-life situation. In accordance with confidentiality requirements, all names have been changed, and certain elements have been fictionalised for teaching purposes.

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