

Understaffed and Overworked: Working realities in Berlin, Germany



Work never stops in an understaffed office

“Don’t become a nurse!” was the beginning of the final statement of one young nurse in the interview. She went on to explain that it might sound very negative and that she actually really liked her work, it was just incredibly stressful. The medical system in Germany is critically understaffed, many workers struggle and Burnouts are a regular occurrence. With staff in the administration being out of touch with the reality of work the situation does not appear to get any better. While workers in health care have been talking about the worsening working conditions for years, with higher requirements for documenting their work taking more and more time of the contact hours with patients and increasing their workload. The high stress of being a healthcare worker during the Pandemic has aggravated this problem even further. And while working with patients can be very rewarding, especially when they get better and can go home, you are confronted with the good and the bad of people every day. As a young male nurse you are asked for the “Schwester” [short for Krankenschwester a common German term for a female nurse] constantly, having to explain, that you are the nurse in charge all the time. Being darker skinned and having a non-German surname one nurse told me how she was told “Oh, your German is so good” often even though she has been to German school since she was a child.

And the medical system is not the only chronically understaffed field in Germany. Another of my interviewees working in a government office enjoyed her job as, but since over a year she and her one colleague have been the only people in their department. Even after talking to their superiors several times, they do not get any additional help. Aside of maybe some trainees a few months, who leave normally just as they get used to the work. But what’s helping her through the tough times is not the hope of it getting better someday, but the trusting relationship with her colleague. They have each other’s back. It’s not a problem to be sick and need some time off, they each take care of the others tasks when necessary.

The importance of a good working relation was also stressed by an accountant in her 50ies. Her team had just changed, and the fun atmosphere was gone. While still not bad work it was different now. This workplace is her longest place of employment in her life, almost 10 years. Being raised and educated in East-Germany first as an accountant she switched between administrative and more social jobs all of her career and all over Germany trying to find a balance between these two poles she was drawn to and find fulfillment in her work. Some of the switches were more voluntary than others. After the reunification of Germany, it took quite some time for her degree to be recognized in the Bundesrepublik, so she started training to be a Child Care Worker. She is content now with her job. It's a good job she told me, no longer searching for some special fulfillment it is now enough for her to have a job with a good working atmosphere and a place to earn money.

When asked for what is necessary for wellbeing most of the participants from Germany talked about the things they were lacking in their life. The nurse that did not have enough time for her work stressed the importance of time, the accountant whose knees hurt all the time, said how important it is to not be in pain. But the one thing that everybody stressed independent of if they stated they had it at work was human connection. Be it a good team at work, friends and a social network in their free time or just time to spend with family, human connection and positive relationships are essential for all the participants.