

Alexander Technique Coaching in the Victorinox Company

A success story

Priska Gauger-Schelbert and Paul auf der Maur

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My first encounter with the Alexander Technique was a lecture about this work. While listening to the story of F. M. Alexander, I felt strongly that with this technique I could find the tools that would allow me to develop a practical and conscious use of myself in my life. Back then, it was of utmost importance for me to live a conscious life, but this was only happening in my head; I was not able to include an awareness of my body. The practicality of the Alexander Technique was what fascinated me.

I immediately began to take lessons in the Alexander Technique in Switzerland. Six months later, I travelled through the USA and I finished my trip by studying the Technique for three months at the Performance School in Seattle. The following year, in 1992, I started my training in Zürich, Switzerland, with Jacqueline Webster.

Even during my training I felt the readiness to teach the Alexander Technique in a larger context than private lessons. This was a strong motivation for me to continue studying the Technique after the training. I attended as many workshops as possible with great interest and pleasure. I was especially interested in learning to teach this work in groups and in developing my own awareness in activity so as to have a real contact with myself and with the person with whom I was sharing this work. I experienced the fact that we are inherently well-made, and this experience taught me that this work is really about stopping interfering and allowing a natural psychophysical-emotional coordination to be freely expressed – to live and use ourselves as we are designed for and meant to be.

I am a trained nurse. Since 1995, I have had my own Alexander Technique practice. I am married and I have four children. They are now between two and eleven years old. In 1999, an employee from Victorinox (the Swiss Army Knife company) came for lessons. She had repetitive strain injury. These lessons' good results made Victorinox interested in bringing the Technique into their workplace.

One day, just after lunch, when I was involved in busy family interactions with small children and guests, the telephone rang. The caller, responsible for human resources at Victorinox, asked whether I would introduce the Technique into the production department. We never know when possibilities to teach the Technique will arise in our life – just be prepared for it!

I accepted the challenge of teaching the Alexander Technique in Victorinox and subsequently in other companies. Since then, I have continually renewed my commitment to do this work. Seven years have passed since this first telephone call, and today I am privileged to be able to choose between requests from different companies.

A REPORT FROM VICTORINOX

by Paul auf der Maur, *project manager for the implementation of the Alexander Technique at Victorinox*, and Priska Gauger-Schelbert

Introduction

Victorinox was founded in Ibach near Schwyz, in 1884 and still manufactures exclusively in this location. With 950 employees (650 in production; 100 in maintenance and tools and mechanical engineering; 200 in administration), ours is the biggest and most up-to-date knife company in Europe. A further 100 employees work for the watch division and 370 in their own branches worldwide. In Ibach, approximately 34,000 Swiss Army Knives, 38,000 other pocket tools and a further 38,000 kitchen and chef's knives are produced daily. 90% of the production goes abroad, to over 100 countries. Over 400 different pocket knives, 600 different household and butcher knives and 700 third-party products are available from stock in Ibach. For Victorinox, high



Fig. 1 Victorinox.

quality, functionality and reliability were always key aims. These and good value remain our main business principles.

Besides customer satisfaction, the well-being of employees is our top priority. Our company realised early on that the human being is the most valuable resource. Victorinox's work rules begin with the sentence 'Health is our main inheritance.' Employees are taught about health matters linked with various work activities.

The situation before the introduction of the Alexander Technique

In lots of Victorinox's workplaces rather strenuous tasks need to be repeated again and again. Especially in product departments with a high level of repetitive tasks, employees were complaining about hand, arm and/or shoulder pains. In the marketing and sales departments, problems in the shoulder, neck and head area also occurred. Sometimes the pains reached such a peak that employees were unable to work and were released from work by their doctors with a medical certificate. In some cases the pains became chronic (say, tendinitis at the wrist). These people could be reincorporated into the daily work process only after a very long time, and then only to perform different tasks.

Headaches are very common in our society, as well as in our company. They can result from tension in the neck and back areas, and can be traced back to wrong or cramped movement sequences performed when working on tasks.

We were helpless. For certain tasks, pain outweighed motivation and employees could not work because of symptoms of wear-and-tear. We had to take action. The following statements summarize the situation.

In physical terms:

- tendinitis at the wrist
- shoulder and arm pain due to tension
- headaches, migraines.

In psychological terms:

- helplessness, vulnerability
- lack of health literacy.

In entrepreneurial terms:

- absenteeism caused by symptoms of wear-and-tear
- various job changes mandated by health-related issues
- employees who could participate in only a limited range of job activities.

We decided to choose the Alexander Technique.

Implementation at Victorinox

Implementing the teaching of the Alexander Technique at our company turned out to be rather difficult. On the one hand, people had to accept something new. On the other hand, it was necessary to strike a balance between performance and personal well-being. The main aim, of course, was to improve employees' health and, at the same time, not lose work efficiency.

After introducing the Technique in one department (from June 2001 until February 2002), we went on to:

- a pilot project in three production departments

- implementation for all departments of the company in Ibach-Schwyz.

Pilot project in four production departments

In March 2002, we launched a pilot project in four production departments. The project ran as follows:

2002 March	Kick-off meeting to plan the implementation of the teaching of the Alexander Technique in four production departments.
2002 April	Preparatory work prior to the implementation. Designing a questionnaire about problems at the work-place.
2002 May	Informing the employees about the Technique. Informal meeting and distribution of the questionnaires to the employees. Launching anatomically designed exercises to relieve strain. Launching private lessons.
2002 Nov.	Group trainings: 'sitting correctly'.
2003 Jan.	Group trainings: 'How do I approach my work?' Distributing questionnaire (second edition).
2003 March	Documentation on strain-relief exercises started.
2003 June	Updating the company's executive board. Introducing the Technique to the heads of departments. Employees were informed personally by the heads of department and as well by an additional letter which was included in their pay slips, about the possibility to have Alexander Technique at their work place and to join the balance-time during their work.
2003 August	Launching the Technique in another three production departments.
2006 August	The Technique is completely launched throughout Victorinox in Ibach.

The employees were introduced to the Alexander Technique through a questionnaire about physical pain. The questionnaire

included questions about well-being at the workplace. The survey was conducted anonymously, on a voluntarily basis, and was evaluated by our Alexander Technique teacher. The number of participants was very high and the results showed clearly the employees' wish to improve their well-being.

The leader of a department has to become aware of how to detect employees' problems early on. Depending on the workplace they can improve ergonomics, change people's ways of working, or shift people to other tasks. They play a crucial role in motivating employees to take part in the Alexander Technique tuition.

Some people suffered from physical pains, and difficult cases were individually treated by our Alexander Technique teacher. The majority of people were looking for an opportunity to relax and to improve body awareness. We found it in the form of balance-time.

Balance-time

We realized early on that it was difficult for our employees to change their habitual movement sequences. Although the motivation to become aware of one's posture and movement sequences – the use of one's body – can be strong, one still falls back into old, acquired posture and movement sequences.

Balance-time is a time for inhibition and for stopping during the work process. This allows time to let go of excessive strain and effort in the body and regain natural coordination.

In brief, balance-time is for:

- conscious inhibition of habitual movement sequences
- pausing and becoming aware of one's own body
- becoming aware of the support of the torso as well as the connection to the ground through the legs and feet, which allows release of tension in arms and hands
- learning to perform certain movement sequences which help to release excessive strain and effort, so that adequate muscle tonus (reduced muscle tension) can emerge in the whole body.

After this conscious pause, the employee can resume work with a new orientation and less effort.

Recently published numbers (BAG (Federal Office of Public Health), 10/03) show that almost 50% of employed people feel stressed in the workplace. Nowadays, stress is considered to be one of the main causes of disease.

What can balance-time contribute to overcome stress? Balance-time gives us the opportunity:

- to pause and re-think how one wants to react to a situation
- to reduce tension patterns
- to recover before becoming exhausted.



Fig. 2 Balance-time.

Performing the balance-time movements (fig. 2) helps to adjust the muscle tonus which has been increased by stress, before it accumulates, becomes chronic, and leads to pain. Continuous application of those movements leads to a clear gain in ‘stress resistance’.

At the beginning of balance-time, we consciously try to be completely in the moment: to forget about the work and worries, to catch a glance through the window into nature, to take some steps, to stretch comfortably, to notice our colleagues, to breathe consciously. Two examples:

- An experienced hiker rests regularly. He doesn't wait until he is so tired that he can no longer go on. By doing this he enables himself to reach his aim.

- A farmer who scythes takes regular breaks to sharpen his scythe.

This change of activity makes it easier to continue to do the work.

Medical studies show that if you take short breaks regularly, you wear out less and can improve your performance by up to 30%.

The heads of departments and group leaders were trained by our Alexander Technique teacher to implement the balance-time movements. During their training, they learned the connection between use and functioning of our body in activity, which became the basic guiding idea throughout the balance-time movements.

In their departments they lead the balance-time two to three times daily.

In addition, a supporting brochure for balance-time was designed. It serves as a guideline for the heads of departments and group leaders, and describes the balance-time movements in greater depth.

Experiences and results

In our company, we had excellent experiences with the Alexander Technique. The helplessness we had with problems caused by repetitive strain injuries has been blown away. If new problems arise or old ones recur, the heads of departments and

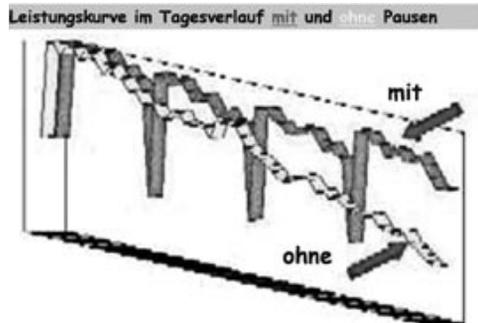


Fig. 3 Performance curve in the course of the day with ('mit') and without ('ohne') breaks.

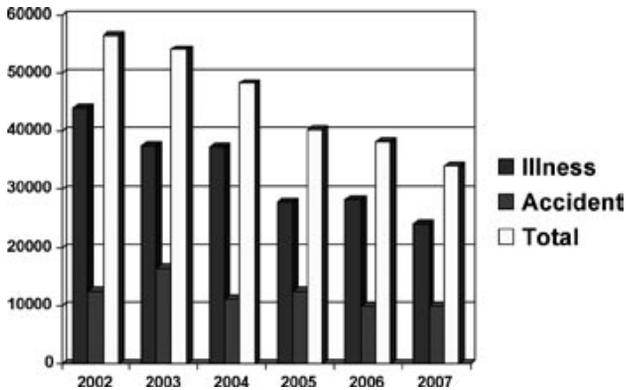


Fig. 3 Causes of absenteeisms 2002-2007.

employees have a professional contact person, Priska Gauger-Schelbert, our Alexander Technique teacher. And:

- balance-time has become a component of our everyday work and we can't imagine working without it.
- the hours of absenteeism have reduced since we brought the Technique into the workplace (fig. 3).

The following examples make clear how the Alexander Technique helped individual employees.

- 1 A long-term employee was scheduled to change her workplace to the Quality Control Department. For years, she had elbow, forearm and wrist pain which led to temporary numbness in her fingers. The employee dreaded the change; she expected her condition to deteriorate because of the new task. Her change of position was accompanied by Alexander Technique sessions: optimal posture for the new task, an understanding of the arm movement sequences, ideas for the reduction of redundant movement and unnecessary effort, improvement of body awareness in action, instructions in becoming aware of the habitual movement, inhibiting unnecessary tension, and allowing

natural coordination. All of this led to a lasting reduction of the pain.

- 2 An employee who was working for the Pocket Knife Controlling Department was thought to be a difficult, inflexible person. Over the years there were continuous extended periods when she did not work because of forearm pain. In the beginning the employee was very skeptical about the Technique. She was told to take Alexander Technique sessions. These continued for a year: in the beginning on a weekly basis, later at longer intervals. After three years she is very grateful, and the situation is as follows. She did not take a single day off work, and became much more adaptable to different control tasks, which she could never have imagined doing before. All in all, she became much more open and pleasant to work with.
- 3 A long-time employee with chronic shoulder pain had work that demanded heavy work performed above head-level. He had many physiotherapy sessions, injections of painkillers in the shoulder, etc. In his case, what accounted for a massive pain reduction was his new understanding of shoulder anatomy and how it functioned in the movement sequences.
- 4 An office worker with tennis elbow and wrist pain also had clearly visible strained bodily movements. By learning how to consciously handle his body for daily office tasks, he became more relaxed and free of pain.
- 5 An employee who has worked at Victorinox for 15 years has to do a lot of lifting objects from the floor. She suffered from chronic knee pain. The application of the Technique led to easier squatting. She became free of pain and much more flexible.

Coaching in the Victorinox Company ~ P. Gauger-Schelbert & P. auf der Maur

Illustrations courtesy of Priska Gauger-Schelbert and Victorinox AG.

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