OSH management in Human health and social work activities—what are European workplaces telling us?

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Human health and social work activities – evidence from the European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER)

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This report examines the main occupational safety and health (OSH) risks for the human health and social work activities sector in Europe, including risks related to COVID-19. It analyses data from the three waves of the European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER). This analysis is complemented by interviews with key OSH experts and stakeholders from the sector.

It provides an overview of trends in the areas of OSH management, with a focus on ergonomic and psychosocial risks, drivers and barriers to OSH management in the sector and worker participation in OSH. The report presents the findings for the sector, providing a comparison between European countries and with other sectors. Based on the analyses and findings, potential learning points to improve OSH in the sector are also given.

Related resources

Twin publications

Executive Summary - Human health and social work activities – evidence from the European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER)
Background to the study

- Human health and social work activities sector is key for ensuring health and well-being of Europe’s citizens.
- One of largest sectors, employing around 11% of workers in EU.
- Sector’s key activities:
  - Human health activities: hospital activities, medical and dental practice activities, other human health activities.
  - Residential care activities: residential nursing care activities, residential care activities for mental retardation, mental health and substance abuse, residential care activities for the elderly and disabled, other residential care activities.
  - Social work activities: social work activities without accommodation for the elderly and disabled, other social work activities without accommodation.
OSH risks for the sector

Workers in this sector are exposed to a range of OSH risks:

- biological risks, including risks related to COVID-19
- chemical risks, such as those from drugs used in treatment of cancer and from disinfectants
- physical risks, such as from noise, slips, trips and falls, and ionising radiation
- ergonomic risks, for example lifting during patient handling
- psychosocial risks:
  - violence and harassment, mobbing/bullying,
  - exposure to traumatic events, dealing with people at end of their lives
  - high workload, multi-task, burnout,
  - shift working, lone working, and lack of control over work
Main research questions

- What are the main OSH risk factors faced by the human health and social work activities sector?
- How is OSH managed in the human health and social work activities sector?
- What are the main factors influencing the management of OSH in the human health and social work activities sector?
- How are workers involved in the management of OSH in the sector?
Methodology

- Literature review.
- Interviews with key informants.
- Advanced statistical analysis (latent class analysis) of ESENER datasets
  - determine typologies of companies in terms of OSH management

Research carried out by Ecorys Europe EEIG
Main findings: ergonomic risks

Risk factors in the workplace, % establishments in the EU27, 2019

- Repetitive hand or arm movements
- Prolonged sitting
- Lifting or moving people or heavy loads
- Chemical or biological substances in the form of liquids, fumes or dust
- Risk of accidents with vehicles in the course of work but not on the way to and from work
- Tiring or painful positions
- Increased risk of slips, trips and falls
- Risk of accidents with machines or hand tools
- Heat, cold or draught
- Loud noise

Q Sector - ESENER 2019
All sectors - ESENER 2019

www.esener.eu
Main findings: psychosocial risks

Over time, psychosocial risks have increased in the sector, with the exception of fear of loss of job - may be linked to increased workload.
Impact of COVID-19

- Significant in many different ways.

- Remarkable rise in stress for those working in the sector:
  - Overwork due to increases in number of patients and staff shortages.
  - Lack of PPE in the first wave of COVID.
  - General anxiety about workers’ own health due to potential exposure to COVID-19 at work, and general health of their families.

- Reduced number of labour inspections
  - shortages of labour
  - restrictions on entering workplaces due to biological risks
Risk assessments

- Higher than average share of sector workplaces report carrying out risk assessments in 2019: 78% vs. 75%
  - decreasing slightly since 2014
- Increase over time in use of internal experts for risk assessment

Reasons for not carrying out risk assessments, % establishments in the EU27, 2019

- There are no major problems
- The hazards and risks are already known anyway
- The necessary expertise is lacking
- The procedure is too burdensome

Base: workplaces in the EU27 reporting NOT carrying out risk assessments, 2019
OSH management measures

- Human health and social work activities sector firms are more likely to engage in OSH management, compared to firms in other sectors.
- They are also more likely to rely on internal support for OSH management, compared to firms in other sectors.

Measures to prevent MSDs, % establishments in the EU27, 2019

- Provision of ergonomic equipment, such as specific chairs or desks
- Provision of equipment to help with the lifting or moving of loads or other physically heavy work
- The possibility for people with health problems to reduce working hours
- Encouraging regular breaks for people in uncomfortable or static postures including prolonged sitting
- Rotation of tasks to reduce repetitive movements or physical strain

Base: all workplaces in the EU27 in 2019 except for (1) provision of equipment to help with lifting (only asked to those reporting presence of lifting people or heavy loads) and (2) rotation of tasks (only asked to those reporting presence of repetitive movements).
OSH management measures: psychosocial risks

- Firms in this sector are more likely to have well-developed psychosocial risk management.
  - Workplace stress: 49% vs 34%
  - Bullying and harassment: 60% vs 45%
  - Threats and abuse from external parties: 75% vs 51%.

Measures to prevent psychosocial risks, % establishments in the EU27, 2019
Health and safety services and the labour inspectorate

Decreasing proportion of firms visited by the labour inspectorate in three years prior to the survey - across all sectors

- scare resources in inspectorates, lack of training on specific risks, and the challenges of COVID
Barriers and drivers in relation to OSH

Major difficulties in dealing with OSH, % establishments in the EU27, 2019

- Psychosocial risks
  - reluctance to talk openly
  - stigma attached to mental health

- The complexity of legal obligations
- A lack of time or staff
- The paperwork
- A lack of money
- A lack of awareness among staff
- A lack of expertise or specialist support
- A lack of awareness among management

Major reasons for dealing with OSH, % establishments in the EU27, 2019

- Fulfilling legal obligation
- Meeting expectations from employees or their representatives
- Maintaining the organisation's reputation
- Avoiding fines and sanctions from the labour inspectorate
- Maintaining or increasing productivity
Worker participation in OSH

- Health and safety representatives are most common form of employee representation
- Higher than average discussions on OSH between employee representatives and the management.
- Health and safety representatives provided with training during working time slightly more often in the sector

Worker participation in psychosocial risk management, % establishments in the EU27, 2019

- Employees involved in identifying possible causes for work-related stress
- Employees involved in the design and set-up of measures to address psychosocial risks

Base: workplaces in the EU27 (1) reporting at least one measure to prevent psychosocial risks (2) employing fewer than 20 people.
The role of digitalisation

- It is likely that AI-based systems will increasingly be used in this sector in the future to automate tasks
- Drivers: increase in demand for staff, ageing workforce
- Opportunities for OSH:
  - reduce OSH risks
  - support OSH management
  - perform strenuous tasks such as patient lifting,
  - perform routine tasks, such as reporting of scans or needle insertion

Digital technologies used for work, Q sector and all sectors in the EU27, 2019

www.esener.eu
Automations through AI: Mapping of current and potential uses

Automation of cognitive tasks

- Human Health and Social Work Activities: 40%
- Education: 18%
- Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities: 13%
- Other: 12%
- Administrative and Support Service Activities: 6%
- Information and Communication: 4%
- Other Service Activities: 2%

Examples:
- Medical Diagnosis via Decision Support Systems (X-ray analysis) / paired with a human radiologist
- Lifting of patients / paired with a human (nurse, physiotherapist, etc.)

The technology only replaces parts of a job

Automation of physical tasks

- Human Health and Social Work Activities: 51%
- Manufacturing: 15%
- Other: 15%
- Transportation and Storage: 13%
- Construction: 15%
- Mining and Quarrying: 2%
- Public Administration and Defence: 4%

NACE sector distribution according to scientific literature
The role of digitalisation

- **Challenges for OSH:**
  - psychosocial risks (working with such systems)
  - fear of job loss,
  - deskilling and lack of appropriate skills

- **Potential impacts of various digital technologies on OSH** were discussed in **28%** of the establishments in the Q-sector (2019)

![Bar chart showing impacts discussed in the context of use of technologies, Q sector and all sectors 2019 (%)](www.esener.eu)
Main learning points

- Crucial to acknowledge psychosocial risks in the workplace
  - Create open culture and reduce stigma of mental health issues
- Mechanisation and digitalisation have an important role in preventing ergonomic risks in the sector
  - Awareness of any potentially negative impacts
- Sector should build on its solid basis of OSH prevention measures, particularly in the area of psychosocial risks
- Sector performs well in terms of providing training and awareness-raising of OSH issues
  - Continue, particularly in non-residential care settings, where environment is less controlled
Main learning points

- Sector also performs well in terms of communication on OSH and involving employee representatives in OSH discussions
  - Should continue to be a focus
- Exchange of good practice examples addressing issues within different subsectors
  - Key for increasing knowledge and awareness of OSH
- Impact of COVID-19 on the sector has been significant.
  - Could be catalyst to improve OSH, based on increased sector profile and strengthened links between the sector and public health policy
THANK YOU!

Q&A

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