



Expert forecast on emerging psychosocial risks related to occupational safety and health (OSH)

Significant changes are taking place in the world of work that bring new challenges with regard to workers' safety and health. These changes lead to emerging **psychosocial risks**. Such risks, which are linked to the way work is designed, organised and managed, as well as to the economic and social context of work, result in an increased level of stress and can lead to serious deterioration of mental and physical health. In 2005, more than 20 % of workers from the 25 Member States of the European Union believed that their health is at risk because of work-related stress (1). In 2002, the annual economic cost of work-related stress in the EU-15 was estimated at EUR 20 000 million (2).

Identifying emerging risks

The Community strategy 2002–06 (3) called on the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work to 'set up a risk observatory' to 'anticipate new and emerging risks'. In order to realise its objectives, the European Risk Observatory has carried out expert surveys, by means of the Delphi method. Under this method, the results of the previous survey round are fed back to the experts for further evaluation until a consensus can be reached. The survey results were supplemented by an analysis of the scientific research on key topics identified by the experts. In this way, emerging risks in the workplace can be identified early and appropriate action can be taken.

The forecast on psychosocial risks reflects the views of experts in the field, who completed three questionnaire-based surveys in 2003 and 2004. The experts, representing 13 EU Member States, the USA and the International Labour Organisation, had at least five years' experience

in the field of psychosocial risks, and the majority worked in psychological research. Literature reviews were used to explore, in greater depth, the main emerging risks identified in the forecast in terms of prevalence, health and safety outcomes, possible preventive measures and need for future research.

What are emerging risks?

An 'emerging OSH risk' is any risk that is both **new** and **increasing**.

New means that:

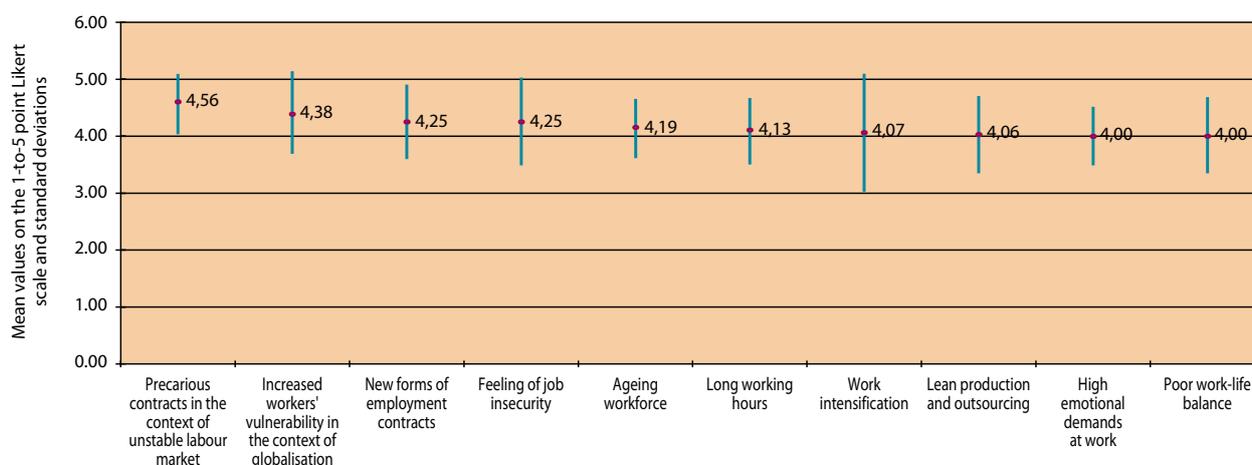
- the risk was previously non-existent and is caused by new processes, new technologies, new types of workplace, or social or organisational change; or
- a long-standing issue is now considered to be a risk due to new scientific knowledge or a change in public perception.

The risk is **increasing** if:

- the number of hazards contributing to the risk is rising; or
- the likelihood of exposure to the hazards is rising; or
- the effects of the hazards on workers' health are getting worse.

Emerging psychosocial risks

The survey and the literature studies reveal that emerging psychosocial OSH risks are often the result of technical or organisational change.



The 10 most important emerging psychosocial risks identified in the survey

(NB: $MV > 4$: risk strongly agreed as emerging; $3.25 < MV \leq 4$: risk agreed as emerging)

(1) European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, Fourth European working conditions survey, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg, 2007 (<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ewco/surveys/EWCS2005/index.htm>).

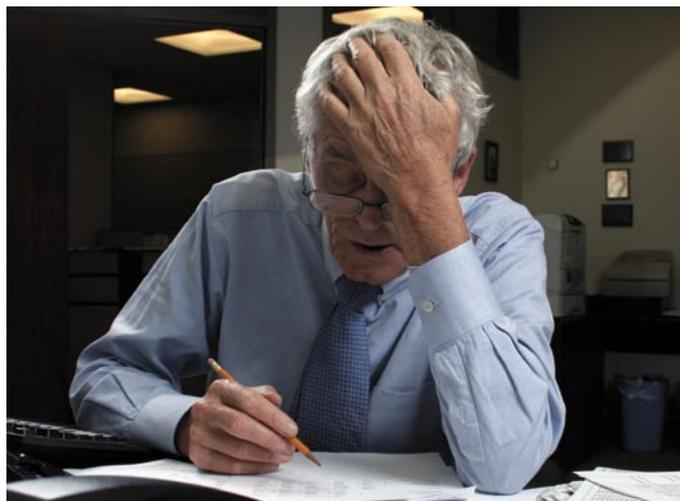
(2) European Commission, *Guidance on work-related stress — Spice of life or kiss of death?*, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg, 2002 (http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/publications/2002/ke4502361_en.html).

(3) 'Adapting to change in work and society: a new Community strategy on health and safety at work 2002–06', COM(2002) 118 final.

Socio-economic, demographic and political changes, including the current phenomenon of 'globalisation', are also significant factors. The top 10 emerging psychosocial risks identified by the experts can be grouped into the following five areas.

1. New forms of employment contracts and job insecurity

The use of more precarious employment contracts, together with the trend towards lean production (producing good and services with less waste) and outsourcing (using outside organisations to carry out work), can affect workers' health and safety. Workers on precarious contracts tend to carry out the most hazardous jobs, work in poorer conditions and receive less OSH training. Working in unstable labour markets can give rise to feelings of job insecurity and increase work-related stress.



2. The ageing workforce

One consequence of an ageing population and higher retirement ages is that Europe's workforce is older. The experts participated in the forecast say that ageing workers are more vulnerable to the hazards resulting from poor working conditions than younger employees. The failure to provide ageing workers with lifelong learning opportunities also increases the mental and emotional demands made upon them. This may affect their health and increase the chance of work-related accidents. In order to promote healthy and safe work during a prolonged working life, good working conditions have to be provided and tailored to the needs of each employee, including ageing workers.

3. Work intensification

Many workers are handling growing amounts of information, and having to cope with higher workloads and greater pressure at work.

Some workers, particularly those employed in new forms of employment or highly competitive fields, tend to feel less secure. For example, these workers may fear having their efficiency and output assessed more closely, and hence tend to work longer hours to finish tasks. Sometimes, they may not be compensated for the increased workload or receive the necessary social support to carry it out. A higher workload and more demands made on fewer workers can lead to an increase in work-related stress and affect workers' health and safety.

4. High emotional demands at work

This issue is not new, but it is of great concern, especially in the growing and increasingly competitive healthcare and service sectors. Bullying at work is identified by the experts as a contributing factor to the increased emotional demands being made on workers. The problem of violence and bullying can affect all occupations and sectors. For both the victims and witnesses, violence and bullying result in stress and may seriously affect both mental and physical health.

5. Poor work-life balance

Problems at work can spill over into a person's private life. Uncertain casual work, high workloads and variable or unpredictable working hours, especially when there is no possibility for the employee to adjust them to their personal needs, can lead to a conflict between the demands of work and private life. The result is a poor work-life balance, which has a detrimental effect on a worker's well-being.



Further information

This expert forecast on psychosocial risks is one of four reports on emerging risks prepared by the European Risk Observatory. The other reports cover physical, biological and chemical risks.

The full report, *Expert forecast on emerging psychosocial risks related to occupational safety and health*, is available at:

http://riskobservatory.osha.europa.eu/risks/forecasts/psychosocial_risks

All the information published by the European Risk Observatory is available at:

<http://riskobservatory.osha.europa.eu>

European Agency for Safety and Health at Work

Gran Vía, 33, E-48009 Bilbao

Tel. (+ 34) 94 479 43 60, Fax (+ 34) 94 479 43 83

E-mail: information@osha.europa.eu

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