

The view from the workplace: Safety and Health in Micro and Small Enterprises in the EU

European Risk Observatory

National Report: Denmark

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1. Description of the national context

The Danish economy is a diverse and mixed economy with a significant share of service economy and high-skilled and high-tech-based companies. The main exports are industrial products including machinery, pharmaceuticals and biotechnology, but also energy. For micro- and small enterprises (MSEs), service sectors such as retail, transport, and hotels and restaurants dominate, supplemented by construction and agriculture.

The labour market is characterised by the strong and central role played by the social partners (Andersen et al., 2014). Hence, many labour market regulations, including wages and most working conditions, are determined in bipartite collective agreements between the social partners mainly at sector level, but typically with substantial local negotiations leading to local adaptations of the framework set in the collective agreements. The Danish state has a more subordinate role in the labour market regulation, particularly regarding wages and working conditions. As wages are entirely negotiated through collective agreements, there are no statutory minimum wages.

However, occupational safety and health (OSH) is regulated through legislation, but with a strong role for the social partners, who are involved in both preparation and evaluation of regulation. In some sectors, certain elements of OSH also play a role in the collective agreements, where the work environment can be an important topic in some negotiations. To understand the Danish labour market regulation, and hence also the OSH regulation, it is key to understand the role played by the social partners as they also played — along with the state — a key role in the historical development of the national regulations on OSH (Jacobsen, 2011).

1.1 National OSH infrastructure and regulatory context

1.1.1 Main actors and institutions

The OSH regulation is based on the current Danish Work Environment Act passed through parliament. The Act outlines the general objectives and requirements of the working environment and is completed by more detailed rules by the Danish Working Environment Authority (WEA; in Danish *Arbejdstilsynet*, AT). These rules are prepared in collaboration with the social partners through the Work Environment Council and more directly through corporatist committees. The social partners also have an important impact in trying to influence and lobby decisions made by the political system, mainly parliament. Parts of the work environment are regulated through collective agreements (Hasle and Petersen, 2004), which gives the work environment a somewhat in-between position between the legislative system and the collective agreement system, which means according to critics that the work environment is somewhat caught in a stalemate between the OSH regulation and governance system and the industrial relations system (Busck, 2014).

The social partners are organised at the sector level in five bipartite Sector Councils on OSH within various sectors such as construction, manufacturing industry and public service, which were established after the 1975 law on the work environment (Jacobsen, 2011: 377-8). The details have been changed over time; the last change was in 2016, when the number was reduced from 14 to 5. The Sector Councils on OSH have a key role in producing guidelines and in participating in shaping regulations aimed at the sector level. In addition, they run extensive information activities.

Furthermore, inspections carried out by the WEA play a key role in the Danish OSH system. The inspectors of the WEA perform — in a comparative perspective — a high number of inspections. Between 2005 and 2012, they executed a screening procedure whereby all Danish companies with employees were visited. This is also reflected in the findings from the ESENER-2 survey, in which 78 % of the micro-enterprises (5-9 employees) and 74 % of the small companies in Denmark (10-49 employees) reported having been inspected over the last 3 years compared with a national average of 79 % of all firms (ESENER, 2014). Since then, the strategy has changed towards risk-based inspections, whereby enterprises carrying a higher risk are more likely to be inspected. The inspections themselves have also increasingly taken on a consultative role in providing guidance for possible solutions, especially towards MSEs on OSH matters. Furthermore, MSEs with fewer than five employees are entitled to receive guidance from the Labour Inspectorate on how to solve the OSH issues identified.

1.1.2 Regulatory context — OSH specific

In general, small Danish enterprises are also covered under the OSH legislation. Among other requirements, Danish OSH legislation includes the need for a written risk assessment and assigns the responsibility for a safe and healthy work environment to the employers. Based on ESENER-2 data, it appears that indeed most micro (5-9 employees) and small (10-49 employees) companies carry out the mandatory risk assessment (95 % and 96 % respectively). This is in line with the national average of 96 % of all companies that do the risk assessment (ESENER, 2014). Another Danish survey on OSH (National Research Centre for the Working Environment, 2015) finds similar figures, with 16 % of companies with 1-9 employees stating they have never conducted a workplace risk assessment, compared with 3 % of the companies with 10-34 employees and 1 % of the companies with more than 34 employees. The only legal exemption in relation to OSH is for micro-enterprises (<10 employees), which are exempted from the obligation to elect an OSH representative in the firm and to establish an OSH committee. So, even if micro-enterprises do not have to have the mandatory worker representation and do not need to establish a formal OSH committee for collaboration between the employer and the employees, the owner-managers of the MSEs are still obliged to cooperate with the employees on securing a safe and healthy work environment according to the OSH legislation. So, apart from the exceptions mentioned, the general rules and regulations regarding OSH apply to MSEs as well.

In Denmark, there is no provision for the use of an OSH service. Its use is completely voluntary and depends on the decisions of the employer. The only exemption is caused by a provision for labour inspection that can issue an order requiring the employer to use a certified OSH advisor, but, as this provision is rarely used, the coverage of such services for MSEs is therefore very limited (Hasle et al., 2016).

As regards national policies or national OSH programmes, there are initiatives mainly aiming at improving the work environment in MSEs as well as programmes aimed at specific sectors with a high share of MSEs (for example construction); however, these do not cover all MSEs. Many of these initiatives are coordinated by the sector-based bipartite work environment councils, so the programmes are mainly (or in some cases exclusively) aimed at companies that are members of an employers' association or where a large share of the workforce is unionised.

1.1.3 Other regulations that may affect the OSH situation

In addition to the WEA, Danish companies are inspected regularly by numerous authorities, in general based on sector and firm specifics. These inspections from other authorities do have some but generally only limited and very specific OSH impacts; for example, food handling is also related to workplace safety. On the other hand, particularly authorities such as the Chemical Inspectorate among the Danish environment authorities have a substantial OSH impact, since they inspect storage, handling and potential use of substances designated hazardous. Other inspections with relevance are inspections of pesticides, transport equipment and machinery as well as fire inspections. Finally, if sectors are producing or working with food products subject to frequent food controls by the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration, these checks occur several times a year. Yet another type of regulation includes specific sectors such as electricians and plumbers, which need to be certified by the authorities and are thus subject to inspections, which also include aspects of safety and health.

1.1.4 National OSH programmes targeting MSEs

The national OSH strategy in place to 2020 adopted by the Danish parliament recognises the special needs of MSEs and mentions this explicitly. The political agreement says there are 'many small enterprises in Denmark, and they may at times find it difficult to comprehend the vast number of rules and informative materials concerning occupational health and safety' (Political agreement, 2011: 3). However, the direct activities targeting MSEs are limited in the political agreement, although there are a few, including the possibility of differentiation of fines, coordination of inspections between authorities and labour inspections adjusted to the MSE (meaning more guidance than for larger companies). The main national programmes besides these are based in the bipartite work environment councils, which cover specific sectors (see section 1.1.1 above). Furthermore, there have been examples of more comprehensive programmes as the 'prevention packages', which aimed to improve specific OSH

aspects in MSEs in certain sectors (Kvorning et al., 2015). This programme has, however, been terminated, mainly because of financial limitations.

1.1.5 Industrial relations and worker representation

Wages and working conditions in Denmark are mainly regulated through collective agreements, with 84 % of all Danish workers being covered by a collective agreement. In practice, even more work under terms set in those arrangements, since the companies can choose to follow the terms without signing their own agreements. In comparison with other countries, organisation rates in Denmark are very high, particularly unionisation rates, which are around 65 %. However, there are significant variations between sectors when it comes to unionisation and collective bargaining coverage (Rasmussen et al., 2015). The coverage and inclusion of smaller companies are especially problematic (Refslund, 2016a), since there are no statutory wages or extension mechanisms, and unions have a limited presence in this group. So levels of collective agreements, worker representation and union presence are lower in smaller enterprises, and, while more than half of all Danish companies have a union presence at the workplace level, this is the case only in fewer than a quarter of micro-companies (ESENER, 2014). This is particularly true in sectors where workers' organisation is traditionally weakly implemented, such as agriculture, small-scale retail and cleaning, which are thus more vulnerable to poor wages and working conditions (Refslund, 2016b).

1.2 Characterisation of the MSEs in Denmark

1.2.1 Economic profile of MSEs

The Danish economy has often been described in public discussions as characterised by a high share of small and medium-sized enterprises. However, looking at the European figures in detail (for example manufacturing and services) it may be more accurate to say that there are only fewer large (>250 employees) companies in Denmark (see EU-OSHA, 2016: 24-7). When it comes to company sizes, Danish companies appear to be close to European averages in most aspects. Altogether, 62.3 % of all employees in Denmark work in a company with more than 100 employees (for all statistical information in this section, see Statistics Denmark, n.d.). Sectors with higher shares of MSEs include, for example, agriculture, where 68.4 % of all workers are employed in a company with fewer than 10 employees. In addition, sectors such as construction and the hotel, restaurant and catering trade (HORECA) are characterised by small and medium-sized companies: 58.3 % of all construction and 71.2 % of all HORECA workers work in a company with fewer than 50 employees, while the national average for companies of this size is 30.7 %. Healthcare also has a high share of MSEs. On the other hand, public services are almost completely dominated by larger enterprises (>100 employees), which also affect the national averages in an upward direction.

When looking at exports and investments, their impact declines with firm size: the smaller the companies are, the less impact they make. Nonetheless, the MSEs still constitute a substantial share of the Danish economy (Table 1).

Table 1: Micro- and small enterprises in the Danish economy

	Number of employees		
	1-9	10-19	20-49
Percentage of overall employment (full-time employees)	14.1	7.1	9.5
Number of companies	118,285	11,390	6,903

	Number of employees		
Percentage of total number of companies (total = 299,800)	39.5	3.8	2.3
Percentage of overall exports (2010 figures)	6.3	6.0	8.0
Percentage of overall investments	9.4	6.1	7.9

Source: Register-based data from Statistics Denmark, 2014 figures².

1.2.2 OSH profile of MSEs

Data on the OSH outcome and performance in Danish MSEs are scarce. However, there are two main data sources, which are the Danish Working Environment Authority's statistics on accidents and work-related injuries and diseases and the National Research Centre for the Working Environment's monitoring of the work environment. But these are in general not broken down according to company size. Hence, it is beyond the scope of this report to say whether or not the OSH outcomes on accidents and injuries in Danish MSEs deviate much from the overall European averages for MSEs, but the general tendency of higher rates of accidents and exposure to risks in MSEs than in larger enterprises is also found in Denmark (Sørensen et al., 2007), and this has also been found in international research (EU-OSHA, 2016).

The frequency of labour inspections in Denmark in MSEs is relatively high. It is partly due to the strategy mentioned above of visiting all companies with employees, and because sectors with many MSEs such as construction, agriculture and HORECA are considered high-risk sectors and therefore inspected more frequently.

2 Description of fieldwork and the sample

2.1 General remarks on the fieldwork and the methods

The fieldwork for the Danish sample was conducted between February and June 2016. Except one interview, all interviews were done on site. In one case, the worker had got stuck in traffic, so he had to be interviewed by phone afterwards. All Danish case companies were recruited via the list of contacts provided by TNS/Gallup, which contained companies that had participated in the ESENER survey. All the companies involved were contacted directly by phone by the researcher. Some of the companies were removed from the sample because they were subsidiaries, which was detected using a Danish register of firm data. Others had shrunk so they had no employees, which we found out only after contacting the company by phone. In general, there were only minor problems with recruiting the case companies. All in all, six companies rejected being part of the project and nine others were busy when we contacted them first, but agreed to be contacted again. Out of these nine, two ended up among the final 10 companies in the sample. Most of the rejections and busy companies were in construction and manufacturing, and some in HORECA. On the other hand, the agricultural enterprises were easy to approach.

In general, we also succeeded in having access to workers; we encountered some problems in only one company, where the owner had chosen his own daughter as the interviewee, which we found out only upon arrival. Since the production site was very far away (the travel was almost five hours), we decided to proceed. The daughter also had a standard employment contract, lived in a different city and reflected a great deal on the importance of the family relationship vis-à-vis a traditional employment relationship.

2.2 Description of the sample

The sample consisted of 10 establishments, four in agriculture and two each in manufacturing, construction and HORECA. There was an adequate geographical distribution across Denmark and, since the country is rather small, it was easy to travel for the interviews. The economic sector categories are quite broad, but the case companies are 'typical' of their respective sectors, performing tasks and work that are characteristic of the four sectors.

There are many small companies in the overall manufacturing category that mainly do service and maintenance and do not have any production of their own. We therefore included a company in the sample that specialised in maintenance. In general, we have tried to cover some of the sectoral variety in the sample, for example by choosing two different types of construction firms rather than two of the same trade, for example two carpenters.

The agricultural sector is also diverse and we managed to get this reflected in the sample; there is a farming company, a horticultural producer, a forest company and an agricultural service (mainly machinery) supplier in the sample. Table 2 summarises the case companies.

Table 2 : Company sample, sectors and size classes, Denmark

Case no	Number of employees	Type of enterprise	Main business functions
Manufacturing			
DK1	Small (10-19)	Independent (B2B)	Dairy robot service
DK2	Small (10-19)	Independent (B2B)	Ventilation system producer
Construction			
DK3	Micro (5-9)	Independent (B2C)	Electrician
DK4	Small (20-49)	Independent (B2C)	Carpenter
Accommodation and food services			
DK5	Micro (5-9)	Independent (B2C)	Hostel
DK6	Small (10-19)	Independent (B2C)	Inn
Agriculture			
DK7	Micro (5-9)	Independent (B2B)	Agricultural service supplier
DK8	Small (20-49)	Independent (B2B)	Horticulture producer
DK9	Micro (5-9)	Independent (B2B)	Pig farm
DK10	Small (10-19)	Independent (B2C)	Forestry company

B2B, business to business; B2C, business to consumer.

Despite a selection bias¹, we are confident that the data and the sample can provide solid and interesting insights into how micro- and small Danish companies manage, organise and handle their work environment.

¹ Because of the limited number of companies in the Danish sample, it is not representative of the Danish situation in MSEs. Furthermore, it is our clear assessment that the case companies in our sample represent the better end of the spectrum of MSEs. In our assessment, there may be an overrepresentation of well-performing companies with a high level of attention to the work environment as well as companies embarking on a 'high-road' strategy rather than a 'low-road' strategy (EU-OSHA, 2016). The sample companies appear in general to have an above average interest in OSH, and high-road firms also appear to be overrepresented, when we look at the companies' competitive and business strategies. The companies first agreed to take part in the ESENER-2 survey, second they agreed to be contacted again and finally they agreed to our visit; this may have

3 Analysis

The key data source for this national report consists of 10 establishment reports. The establishment reports were written after the systematic coding of the data gathered through interviews with both owner-managers and employees of the respective case companies. Through comparing the results, findings were validated and patterns across the data were highlighted. In the following analysis, we include quotations from the interviews whenever these quotations are illustrative of the key findings and help to substantiate them, but also where some of the findings from the data reported deviate from existing knowledge or from what we were expecting, for example based on findings from the first research phase of the SESAME project (EU-OSHA, 2016).

The national report follows the lines of the structure of the establishment reports, so each category is addressed here.

3.1 Risk awareness

All the case companies had a relatively high level of risk awareness, particularly when dealing with the obvious and acute risks such as falling, slipping, cutting and other accidents. The interviewees (both workers and owner-managers) appeared in general to have a relatively substantial understanding of the risks present, but again with a stronger emphasis on the most obvious risks. However, most of the case companies (with some variation) also had a good understanding of psychosocial risks, including bullying, psychological strain, fatigue, the risks of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) and other risks such as the risk of accidents while driving a car in connection with work. The understanding of these risks, however, varied from the understanding of the more obvious risks; for example, some of the case companies had a less nuanced approach to tackling the MSD risk factors in their industry. Some owner-managers to some extent considered that long-term wear and tear was inevitable, and some employees shared this understanding. For example, one of the interviewed owner-managers in a restaurant perceived some of the injuries following physical strains as part of the industry: 'We all get worn down one day' (DK6). However, in our sample, the potential OSH problems in the MSEs do not appear to be based on a lack of knowledge of the risks present.

We found only a few examples of discrepancy between the workers' and the owner-managers' risk understanding, and in most of these the owner-managers had a more developed understanding of the risks present in the company than the workers. The workers more often expressed an understanding that the risk of, for example, MSDs is just a 'natural' part of working life, but most of the workers also acknowledged both MSD risks and psychosocial risks.

The case companies of this sample could be described as being in general aware of the risks present in their company and in the industry. However, this does not per se lead to good control of these risks. For instance, in a restaurant the owner-manager talked a lot about risks of tripping and falling when carrying dishes or bags. Nonetheless, they stored a broom on the staircase to the basement, which constituted a clear risk, but they did not take any action to eliminate the risk. While the case companies have identified the risks, in many cases they did not act upon reducing all the identified risks, which were typically attributed to the lack of necessary resources (time, financial, managerial).

3.2 Company OSH organisation and risk management practice

All case companies are characterised by a lack of a systematic approach to managing OSH risks. While the case companies are generally able to recognise and identify the risks, they are not systematic when it comes to controlling these risks; for example, they do not note near-misses or develop plans to eliminate the risks, or, if an accident occurs, they do not take systematic actions to avoid it from occurring again. The case companies rely rather on an ad hoc approach, whereby the companies mainly react if, for instance, an accident happens or if they receive a notification from the labour inspectorate. The ad hoc approach often results in different measures taken in different situations, which further reinforces the unsystematic approach. The same unsystematic approach applies to the OSH committee with election of OSH representatives and organisation of meetings. The overall OSH approach can thus be

led to a selection bias. It is therefore most likely that the selected companies are more interested in OSH matters than the average firm.

described as chiefly ad hoc, whereby the MSEs mainly solve whatever problem comes up. Although the OSH approach is reactive in cases where accidents happen or when inspectors visit the company, the OSH approach can also be more proactive when, for instance, employees raise an issue, especially if the issue raised is something that obviously needs to be taken care of (for example lacking personal protective equipment). So the overall OSH management approach in the case companies contains elements of both reactive and proactive measures. However, the management approach does vary among the companies, so that some companies are more proactive while others are mostly reactive. Although three of the case companies had an OSH representative, they did not have any OSH meetings as such (not mandatory in SMEs) or a formalised OSH committee.

The lack of a systematic approach to OSH cannot be explained by a lack of awareness or unwillingness to improve the work environment. In everyday work practices, the core tasks of the company are given priority over OSH matters and other administrative tasks. For example, the owner-manager in an agricultural company (DK7) explained that, although all the administrative tasks — including OSH matters — landed on his desk, he would prefer to work in the field instead, so OSH matters end up having a low priority. So, all in all, the work environment is not high on the agenda in the case companies — in particular not in the everyday operations, since there are so many other tasks the companies need to handle, so that no one has the time and resources to look after the work environment sufficiently. This was stated broadly by all the interviewed owner-managers, but with a slightly different picture in companies that had an OSH representative. These helped raise the awareness of OSH issues as well as risk management.

The business vulnerability and the competitive pressure as reported by the companies vary markedly across the case companies, but this does not seem to affect the OSH activities as much as expected based on the findings of the first research phase (EU-OSHA, 2016). One potential explanation for this could be that, despite variations, all the selected case companies were assessed as having a 'high-road' or 'middle-road overall strategy, in which companies mainly rely on high-quality products or niche markets and do not see wages as a competitive measure. None of the investigated firms engaged on a 'low-road' strategy, which relies more on price competition in products and wages (see EU-OSHA, 2016 for discussion of these types). However, based on the findings here, it seems that even companies that face strong competition and high business vulnerability do not necessarily embark on a low-road strategy regarding employment relations and work environment.

3.2.1 Practices of acquiring OSH knowledge

The practice of acquiring OSH knowledge varies greatly, with some case companies rather actively seeking knowledge and information while others basically do not seek any knowledge at all.

In manufacturing and construction, the companies mainly used the WEA to acquire OSH knowledge. Support was obtained from its website, which they found very useful, but they also called the WEA and asked for guidance. The owner-manager from the electrician company (DK3) even talked about 'our guy' among the inspectors. The hostel (DK5) also reported using the inspectors quite a lot. This indicates that case companies in these sectors have experienced regular contacts with inspectors for many years and that there is a relatively high information level. However, we have found some variation across sectors in OSH culture and approach to the work environment: companies in the agricultural sector did not report having the same tradition of turning to labour inspectors. To address this issue, the WEA has taken on a more counselling role in recent years.

Some of the companies identified the sector-based work environment councils (see section 1.1) and their websites as the main sources of knowledge and OSH information; this was widespread in agriculture, but owner-managers from other sectors also mentioned the sector councils as important sources of OSH knowledge. The councils are in general assessed as having a positive impact on the companies, and several companies mentioned positive experiences with them.

Yet another group of companies does not actively try to get knowledge on OSH matters or OSH regulation. This was particularly the case for the forest company (DK10). The interviewees could not relate to the question, and they saw OSH knowledge not as something specific that could be singled out

and investigated separately, but rather as an integrated part of their company. Two other companies, the inn (DK6) and the pig farm (DK9), have delegated the responsibility to an external OSH consultant, who was asked to ensure that they met the minimum requirements of the legislation and that they were not missing some new legislation. For these firms, the main aim of the information was to comply with the minimum requirements to not get sanctioned by labour inspectors.

Some other sources of information with less relevance were mentioned, including employers' and industry associations, the industry newspaper (in agriculture) and some online databases, for example on chemicals (agricultural service supplier, DK7). The companies actively seeking information (seven out of 10) generally stated that they found that their information level was sufficient. They felt that they could find the required knowledge on OSH if they needed to, particularly on the internet. As one owner-manager stated, 'I know the knowledge is out there, I just have to find it' (DK3).

3.2.2 Risk analysis practice

In Denmark, a written risk assessment is mandatory for all companies with employees regardless of size, and checking the existence of a written risk assessment is always included in inspections (see section 1.1.2). All the case companies reported having filled out the mandatory written risk assessment. However, apart from these, there are only few — if any systematic — risk analysis practices in the case companies. Some of the case companies are more systematic than others when it comes to risk analysis practices. One of the case companies (the horticulture company, DK8) uses the written risk assessment proactively as a tool to minimise risks, organising small teams in charge of solving problems discovered through the written risk assessment, and two other companies also use the written risk assessment as an active tool, although to a lesser extent than the horticulture company. However, most of the case companies (seven) do not actively use the written risk assessment once it is conducted. In many of the companies, the interviewees stated that the written risk assessment most likely needed to be updated. This again reflects that risk assessments are not seen as part of the companies' core task, and as an owner stated: 'This is not what we really like doing about our jobs, but it [risk assessment] has to be done' (DK7).

Although most of the case companies do not use the written risk assessment as an active tool, the process of conducting it in the first place may in some cases help raise awareness of the work environment. The owner-manager of an agricultural company (DK7) said that he considered the risk assessment a good way to go through the workplace and also as a chance to discuss some of the OSH issues 'that they probably wouldn't have talked about if they didn't have to fill in the [risk assessment]'. Another owner-manager from the electrician case company (DK3) said that he was actually happy when it became mandatory to do the written risk assessment, since this forced them to identify and discuss OSH issues. Others mainly conduct the risk assessment to fulfil the requirements of the authorities. The interviewees in the carpenter company (DK4) did not even feel the written risk assessment suited their needs, and they have changed over to what they call 'individual safety talks'. However, almost all interviewed persons could still see its relevance and, in several cases, the risk assessment had initiated actual changes in the companies.

Other than the written risk assessment, OSH risks do not seem to be assessed systematically in most of the companies, but are rather based on the ad hoc approach described above. Both owner-managers and workers explain that risks are assessed and controlled in a rather informal daily manner, based on the workers' professional planning and performance of the work processes. This leaves much of the daily risk evaluation to the individual worker, and many of the workers have considerable autonomy in planning and carrying out their daily work processes. However, it is also our impression that, even if the interviewees said so, this daily practice is mainly implicit and many risks were seen as part of the daily work.

We can conclude that the compulsory written risk assessment secures a minimum of risk assessment in the companies and, although most of the companies do not use the written risk assessment as an active tool, it still helps to attract attention to risk awareness in the companies. However, subsequent control actions are still typically performed on an ad hoc basis.

3.2.3 Risk communication practice

Risk communication practices are mainly informal and oral, and this applies to all case companies. Risk communication as well as general communication/information on OSH appears not to be very systematic, like most other OSH elements in the case companies. Almost all companies also appeared to have a lack of any reporting of near-misses, and subsequently a lack of action once a near-miss has occurred.

Other than the written risk assessment, most of the case companies have little if any written communication on risk or OSH matters. However, many of the companies report having written information which comes with chemicals, tools and machinery they purchase, but this information is not OSH specific, and is reported not to be used much in daily practices. However, the information on chemicals and other substances was used frequently in several case companies. In some companies, a written risk communication appears to be a misguided approach to the employees, as several of them are not very used to written material, and some of the employees are probably also poor readers or foreigners not familiar with the Danish language (for example in some of the agricultural companies). In the forest company (DK10), the owner-manager was much more action-oriented, dealing directly with an issue rather than discussing it first and having meetings, so the potential for improvement of communication was not utilised in this firm. One of the case companies (DK5) has a newsletter sent out to all employees, but OSH matters are only rarely included.

The overall risk communication practices are highly oral and tend to be based on experience, rather than on a systematic or analytical approach to risk communication. The same is true when it comes to instruction of new employees. It generally appears to be limited to oral and somewhat un-systematic information. Some companies did, however, seem to have a more regular induction scheme for new employees, particularly in manufacturing, and most strongly in the traditional manufacturing company producing ventilation systems (DK2).

3.2.4 Routines ensuring safe and healthy work

It is a shared characteristic across all case companies that they lack a systematic approach and understanding of OSH matters, which is also reflected in the routines ensuring a safe and healthy work environment. There are in general few formalised routines, so the routines are mainly based on ad hoc solutions and the owner-managers' and the workers' professional experience in performing their job. In the sectors where the work processes and work sites often shift, the responsibility for the operational routines is mainly left to the workers. OSH and the work environment are not seen as anything specifically separate from work processes, and routines for ensuring a good work environment are integrated in the everyday work practices of the workers. Some workers have been working in the same company for more than 20 years, so they have some traditional ways of handling OSH issues developed with that firm. Hence, the OSH routines are typically not seen as something separate from general work routines.

Again, this also varies across sectors, employees and companies. Workplace safety is more integrated in some companies, but the risk perception also differs between workers. Many interviewed workers talked about looking after oneself as an important part of their job. In some jobs, it is seen as highly integral; for example, in the electrician company (DK3) there are only a few routines focusing on OSH topics per se, but these are integrated in everyday work to ensure high-quality and safe work, for example when working with high voltages of electricity. That being said, most owner-managers said that they were looking into securing that the everyday practices in the company were performed in a safe and healthy manner, but many of them also felt that they could be better at this; for example, the owner-manager in the agricultural service supplier company (DK7) said 'I am sometimes a bad example in terms of the work environment.'

Because there is a general lack of systematic approaches, it is often up to the workers and their own judgements and decisions to make the work environment safe in daily work, especially in professions where the workers have a high level of autonomy and work alone or in teams on varying work sites.

Hence, the practices of reducing OSH risks are personalised and often depend on the workers' professional background and training (and in several cases these lack OSH elements, especially for the older workers).

3.2.5 Use of external OSH expertise

Three of the case companies use an external OSH service provider to give guidance on OSH issues, and two of these are merely interested in meeting the minimum requirements in the OSH regulation, mainly in regard to the written risk assessment. There seems to be a clear understanding between the service provider and the company that the main aim is merely to meet the minimum requirements, and that the company does not want any substantial counselling on OSH matters. The owner of one of the companies using the external service providers stated that, since they have this external service, 'we do not have to familiarise ourselves with all the details of this [written risk assessment and the general demands in the legislation]' (DK6). Only one company (DK5) seems to take a genuine interest in working with the external service provider. Hence, some of the companies that use external service providers may actually have a lower level of OSH awareness and risk management, since they are leaving the written risk assessment to the external service provider, and since they do not take any genuine interest in improving the work environment based on this service. When an owner-manager of a company not using an external private service provider was asked why they did not use the private companies offering these services, he replied, 'They are just cash machines, these OSH service companies' (DK10).

3.2.6 Motivation of company OSH practice

One key driver for the case companies which were trying to improve the work environment appears to stem from the owner-managers' own perceptions and values. All the owner-managers emphasised in general that a safe and healthy work environment was of great importance to them, although they would act very differently on this. This normative starting point was reported by most of the owner-managers. However, there were also strong economic and coercive elements driving the owner-managers' motivation. Several employers mentioned the economic costs of having employees absent because of work-related issues. Others mentioned the reputation of the company; if they had a lot of accidents or a bad work environment it might affect business and would also make it more difficult to attract skilled workers. Finally, the coercive element of risking a penalty imposed by the labour inspectors also affected motivation in most cases. The case companies generally tried to meet the regulatory standards, in order not to be fined by the labour inspectors if inspected.

In contrast, only a few owner-managers mentioned requests from employees as an important motivation for OSH practices. This was mentioned only in manufacturing, where both the case companies had elected OSH representatives, so this may indicate that an elected OSH representative can increase the attention to employees' wishes and requests.

Although the owner-managers in general wanted to secure a safe and sound work environment, they also felt they did not have the resources to prioritise improving the work environment. Rather other everyday tasks, mainly the core business tasks, but also other administrative tasks they must handle, postponed or blocking most work on OSH matters as well as the systematic approach to the work environment. Therefore, while the owner-managers may have a strong desire for a good and safe OSH setting, they do not prioritise the resources for this to materialise.

When it comes to the responsibility for OSH, most of the owner-managers acknowledge that they have the ultimate responsibility, but half of them also place some of the responsibility on the workers. These owner-managers often emphasised that they cannot keep the workers under observation all the time, so the workers need 'to think for themselves'. When the workers were asked the same question, they most frequently stated that the responsibility was their own. Some of the workers interviewed, particularly in agriculture and a worker with a foreign background at the inn (DK6) stated that the main responsibility was with the workers themselves. This understanding followed the argument that the employer could not oversee all work, so if an employee made a bad decision or, for example, did not bother with the safety equipment, this was not the fault of the owner-manager.

3.2.7 Workers' participation in the practice of OSH risk prevention

It seems in general difficult to get the workers engaged in the work environment and in OSH or committee. Apart from the three companies that had elected OSH representatives, there were few formal or informal practices of including the workers in the OSH committee. By law in Denmark, the workers have to be involved in the preparation of the written risk assessment, which seemed to happen. However,

in other cases, OSH was mainly handled on an individual level, for example employees approaching the owner-manager with an OSH suggestion or a problem. Nonetheless, the owner-managers in general expected the employees to engage in the work environment and to take part in the daily OSH management actively. In particular, they expected the employees to come forward if they encountered any issues or problems, but whether or not this actually happened was not reported in the interviews.

The workers in the case companies did not in general seem to take much interest in the OSH committee. In some of the case companies with more than nine employees, where they should according to legal obligations have an elected OSH representative, the main reason for not meeting this legal requirement was that no one wanted to take on the position. This was often stated by the owner-managers, whereas some employees said that the informal social relations would make it awkward with an elected representative. Nonetheless, most interviewed workers supported the general claim that no one wanted to take up the position, and two out of the three OSH representatives said that no one else wanted to take the position, so they volunteered. Nonetheless, both took a real interest in the position. The OSH representative in the carpenter company (DK4) had also taken over most of the functions of the shop steward, which in the Danish context is closely related to OSH representation and the general representation of workers at company level, since the previous shop steward left the firm. The third OSH representative also took an interest in the position, but he did also think about the job security associated with the position (it is difficult and costly to fire elected worker representatives in Denmark). Overall, it seems difficult to motivate the workers to engage in work environment activities in MSEs.

There were a few good examples of worker involvement. In the carpenter company (DK4), they did not feel the written risk assessment matched their needs, so they had started having individual 'safety talks' with all the employees, where both the OSH representative and the owner-manager would participate to unravel potential problems. It also involved potential problems in the work teams; for example, if some workers had bad social relations, they would not be put in the same team. This approach was also better suited to the carpenters, according to both the owner-manager interviewed and the OSH representative, since most of them were not keen to write, but would rather prefer to talk about these issues. In the horticulture company (DK8), they encouraged the workers to come up with solutions to some of the identified risks, which were often identified in the written risk assessment. Then a small taskforce of two or three persons was delegated to solve the identified problems.

In general, the employees reported a high level of autonomy and decision latitude in regard of the work processes and work organisation in the case companies. Many of them work in small teams or alone (for example the craft workers or technicians). The owner-managers in general expected the workers to be independent and take the main decisions themselves. It was only in the inn (DK6) that the owner wanted to be in charge of all managerial aspects, which resulted in basically nothing happening in specific areas such as OSH, since he could not handle all managerial tasks in the company. But this was the only example of a highly owner-manager-dominated firm (cf. Hasle et al., 2011). The overall picture of high levels of workers' discretion matches very well with the general finding that Danish employees have a comparatively high level of teamwork, job autonomy and decision latitude (Gallie, 2007).

3.2.8 OSH management practices and good OSH practice

For most of the case companies, the level of risk control was assessed as high or medium, and only one of the case companies had a low level of risk control. However, this somewhat high level of risk control seems to be more embedded in individual characteristics such as the owner-managers giving the work environment a high priority, rather than any systematic approach to managing the work environment. Hence, it is more dependent upon individual workers and owner-managers. If there is an engaged OSH representative or owner-manager, the work environment approach may be more comprehensive and the company more attentive towards the work environment. Therefore, the OSH outcome becomes more unsystematic in the MSEs than in bigger companies, where it is easier to set up a systematic approach to the work environment as well as a functioning OSH management system. In general, it is the researchers' assessment that we cannot talk about OSH management as such in the Danish case companies. The scale and scope are simply too small to talk about a separate OSH management system or practices.

The work environment can rather be described as integrated in the general organisation of work processes in the case companies. The companies with a more successful OSH setting appeared better

able to integrate safety measures and matters in their daily work organisation. This can be explained as based on the trade or job traditions and to some extent on a common-sense understanding of how to ensure a safe and healthy work environment, rather than on a systematic OSH system or practices.

The owner-managers in our study know very well that their knowledge on OSH issues and OSH regulation is somewhat limited and often not up to date. However, they feel they have neither the time nor the resources to stay up to date with the developments in the field of OSH.

Despite the lack of OSH management and OSH systems, there were numerous good examples of good practices as well as examples of firms changing the work organisation with the aim of improving the work environment, for example by introducing tools and machinery (such as cranes) to reduce heavy lifting and strenuous positions. This included both practical measures such as adjustable tables as well as work organisation such as changing work teams or the ordering process to reduce workloads in the order-handling department.

These changes were initiated in various ways. Some of them were suggestions made by workers and others by managers. Some were initiated by new technologies being made available, and others initiated after accidents in order to avoid future accidents, but only a few were based on near-misses, since these are often not registered. Another common source of improvements in many case companies was requirements or suggestions made by labour inspectors.

3.2.9 Classification of company OSH strategy

As shown in previous sections, the overall company OSH strategy in the Danish case companies can best be summarised as an ad hoc style. The companies deal with OSH issues when they have time or if something happens which makes OSH important. It is not just reactive, although there are some elements of a reactive approach, whereby companies only react when something happens such as an accident, a near-miss or an inspection, or other requests are placed upon them. There are also proactive elements, whereby the work environment is improved without any problems necessarily being previously encountered. Often, the main constraint is that other tasks are prioritised instead of OSH tasks. This is particularly the case when core business functions are involved. If the owner-managers need to prioritise between an OSH-related task and other business tasks such as replying to a customer or sending a bill, the work environment is basically never given the priority — especially if the OSH measure is not compulsory, as opposed to the obligatory written risk assessment, or the labour inspectors cannot impose a sanction.

The companies' OSH strategies are very informal, often implicit and in practice mostly embedded in their daily work organisation and work routines. Companies often do not make any distinction between OSH and daily work, and OSH is not seen as something to address separately. Having a safe and healthy work setting is typically seen as part of performing their job in a good and viable manner. So there are few — if any — formal elements such as OSH meetings in the daily work.

While there is clear variation among the case companies, they do not in general have a systematic approach to OSH. This can mainly be explained by their size, since it is difficult for the owner-managers to assign the task of handling the work environment to a specific employee or manager; the same problem may also occur in larger companies, but there it is typically easier to delegate the task. In addition, the presence of an OSH representative (which is more common in larger firms) can help to raise the attention given to the work environment. Often, owner-managers must handle all managerial issues including OSH, although they do not have the resources to do so. Administrative and managerial tasks such as OSH are perceived to be of less importance to the business and thus given a low priority, in some cases simply because the owner-managers give priority to other tasks, and in other cases reinforced by a general lack of interest in the issue on the part of the owner-managers.

There are elements of a participatory approach among the MSEs, since the majority of the owner-managers in the case companies state that they would like the workers to play a more active role in the work environment in the company. They expect the workers to contribute to a safe work environment in their daily routines, but they also expect the workers to come to them with suggestions for improvements. However, it does not necessarily mean that they will follow these recommendations, although they most often claim to do so. In general, the owner-managers expect the workers to be rather independent regarding OSH in the same way as in their daily work, for example when meeting the customers.

Some of the companies reported strong competition and were assessed by the researchers to have a high level of business vulnerability, but this did not seem to have a strong and direct impact on the work environment in the analysed firms. This is contrary to our expectations based on findings in the literature and the first research phase of the project. The vulnerable companies in our sample have apparently been able to reduce the vulnerability and competition negatively affecting their OSH, either through targeting niche markets, giving them more room for manoeuvre, or through active choices not to compete on low OSH standards but rather to work to ensure a safe work environment (or combinations of these). The same goes for the few case companies (three companies, DK5,6 and 8) employing migrant workers and temporary workers, who in general are more prone to have bad working conditions, including poor OSH (EU-OSHA, 2016; Hopkins, 2015; Quinlan et al., 2001; Rasmussen et al., 2015). However, this vulnerability could not be confirmed in the Danish case companies analysed here. Again, it may have to do with the somewhat biased sample of companies.

3.3 Mechanisms

3.3.1 Determining factors

▪ The role of legislation and sector-level regulation

In general, the owner-managers had somewhat mediocre knowledge about OSH legislation. Many of them were aware that there had been some changes in the law, but they were not fully able to explain the changes relevant for them. They were all aware that they did not have the full overview of the legislation but, as one owner-manager said, 'We ideally need to have the full overview, but this can be very difficult for such a small firm' (DK10). However, the majority could provide a broad overview of the most important regulations. While basically all the owner-managers stated that they wanted to comply with the regulation, the emphasis they would put on compliance varied. For some, the main goal was simply compliance to avoid sanctions by the labour inspectors, while others took an intermediate approach, emphasised the OSH outcome and would rather follow a common-sense approach to the work environment, which they would then assume to be following the regulation. One owner-manager said, 'It is more important for me that it made sense [than complying with the law]. And if it seemed wrong then it is probably also wrong according to OSH legislation' (DK6). Some companies referred to the sector-based councils on OSH, where they could find the specific knowledge they needed.

▪ The role of the Labour Inspectorate and other public authorities

The rate of inspections from the WEA is higher in Denmark than most other European countries, including when it comes to MSEs. As part of a political agreement, the WEA visited all Danish companies with employees between 2005 and 2012, including MSEs, but most of the case companies reported more frequent as well as more recent visits by labour inspectors: all the case companies had been visited within the last 5 years, and more than half of them had had more than one visit. This is partly explained by the industries in the sample, since these are assessed to be high-risk industries, which have more frequent inspections, while industries with a lower risk are visited less frequently.

The inspections by the WEA play an important role in regulating OSH in Danish MSEs and this opinion was clearly stated by most of the owner-managers. Although many of the owner-managers did not feel the inspections made a specific difference in their own firm, they acknowledged that the inspections play an important role in safeguarding the work environment, particularly in smaller companies. So the owner-managers ascribe an important role to the labour inspectors. An example can be given from the horticulture company (DK8), where the manager stated they were complying with the legislation and also outperforming the standards set there, and he felt that regulation was somewhat annoying, but at the same time he acknowledged that regulation is necessary, since 'we are not the only company in the world' (DK8). Hence, the inspections and compliance with the regulation become part of the OSH setting in the MSEs and inspections are a significant part of the owner-managers' motivation for being attentive to the work environment and OSH management. For example, an owner-manager stated that without the regulation and labour inspections the obligation to prepare written risk assessment would fail: 'They would probably not get it [the risk assessment] done' (DK7). Because the company had had visits from the labour inspectors before, it knew what to work on and where it needed to improve. Hence, overall, legislation combined with regular visits by the Labour Inspectorate is considered an important driver for concrete OSH management in this company.

Because the inspections sometimes lead to sanctions or changes, the mere risk of being inspected can raise the firms' attention towards the work environment and OSH practices. Just the fact that all the case companies had done the written risk assessment, which is very easy for the labour inspectors to check, shows that there is an indirect effect of the inspections, as the main motivation for doing the written risk assessment was compliance in the first place, as stated by all the case companies.

Although the labour inspectors' visits in the companies are limited, they also have a role as a benchmark for OSH standards. As an owner-manager explained, he would typically address OSH issues by asking the employee: 'How do you think the Labour Inspectorate would assess this?' (DK7). The WEA has developed the role of the inspections into a more counselling one, especially regarding MSEs. The labour inspectors give warnings and counselling more than fines. The case companies appreciate that, especially since some breaches of the rules are mainly due to a lack of knowledge. The Labour Inspectorate usually announces its visits — the most frequent type of inspection, 'the risk-based inspection', is announced 4 weeks in advance, but not with specific information about date or time — so that the firms have a chance to improve the work environment before they are actually inspected. Other types of inspection, such as investigation of accidents or complaints, are normally unannounced.

The owner-managers as well as the workers all in all had a positive perception of the WEA and its inspectors, although their practical experiences did vary. Some felt that the visits (as well as the counselling) were unnecessary, somewhat time-wasting and not really leading to anything, while others were very positive about the Labour Inspectorate's role and reported that they received good feedback and support from the inspectors, especially in the construction sector.

Although some of the owner-managers did not ascribe much significance to the inspections in their own companies, throughout the interviews we could identify numerous OSH improvements which were initiated by visits from the Labour Inspectorate. Particularly for the inn (DK6), contradictory experiences could be examined, as the owner claimed that the inspections were not very fruitful in his company, but nonetheless, during the guided tour, he showed the adjustable tables in the kitchen which had been installed by demand of the Labour Inspectorate. Furthermore, he had a ventilation system installed on the dish washer to prevent mould and steam, which was evidently an improvement he was quite happy with. This system was also based on a demand by the Labour Inspectorate. However, he did not make this connection himself during the interview. There were other examples from other companies of ventilation being installed following an inspection. Other examples included a safety lock, so employees could not be trapped inside the large-scale freezer, and a reorganisation of water hoses to prevent trips and falls.

All in all, the inspections carried out by the WEA play a significant role in safeguarding minimum compliance and reducing risks in Danish MSEs, especially since this would most likely not have got the same attention if inspections had not been carried out. Even though our sample must be expected to be among the best performers, there were still several improvements initiated by the inspections. Especially in the case company that performed worst on OSH (DK6), the inspections initiated several improvements. In the agricultural service supplier company (DK7), the owner expressed a positive approach towards securing a safe and healthy work environment and cared a lot about his workers, but he reported that he preferred being out in the fields working rather than dealing with OSH issues such as training and risk assessments. The inspections can thus be perceived as encouraging him to pay attention to the work environment.

Almost all the companies were inspected by other authorities such as the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration for the hotels, restaurants and food-producing companies, or environmental authorities for companies dealing with chemicals and the like. There were inspections of machinery such as flatbed trucks as well as authorisation inspections in licensed trades such as electricians. These had a positive effect, for instance on the handling of chemical substances, which also potentially affects the work environment positively. However, it would typically be on only rather specific issues regulated by those other authorities and therefore such additional inspections are not sufficient to ensure a good work environment. Here, the role of the Labour Inspectorate is much more central.

▪ Value chain effects on company OSH management

Suppliers and clients have only a few and minor OSH impacts on the case companies. These include the positive example of the sizing of bags of flour in the hotel and restaurant sector, where reducing the bag size helped make carrying them less strenuous for the staff. While these have implications for the

work environment, they were considered rather minor issues, so the value chain effects on OSH are in general not very substantial.

However, there are two companies that are affected more, both of them by their position as subcontractors, where they are working under conditions they do not control themselves, which can be a problem. The first one is a dairy robot producer and installer (DK1). Since the technicians must work on the customers' (local farmers') sites, they are not able to control the work environment themselves, but are dependent on the farmers and how they handle the work environment, which can vary a lot. There is also variation in whether or not the farmers fence off the animals while the technicians are working, but the owner-manager would not demand that the customers fence off the animals. The technicians were also affected by customers having a poor work environment including uncleaned and hence slippery hallways, dusty stables and untidy work areas. The other company is the carpenter company (DK4), which is often a subcontractor with the employees working on construction sites, where many elements of the work environment and particularly the work organisation and planning are beyond their control.

So the negative effects of the value chain are mainly due to the case companies performing work on other companies' premises, and not due to demands or pressure in the value chain as such.

There may be other negative risks associated with dealing with clients in the hostel (DK5), which potentially include abusive or drunk guests. However, this is understood as not part of the value chain effects, but rather a specific risk in that industry.

▪ **The role of management style and social relations**

In general, the companies described their social relations as good, which is in line with the researchers' general assessment. Both employees and owner-managers explained how MSEs have a shorter distance between management and employees. Some employees even talked about the co-workers and management as 'an extended family'; for example, the interviewed worker in the inn (DK6) used this term. This illustrates how the relations are more informal and personal in MSEs. In some case companies (for example the forest company, DK10) the workers stated that it would be odd to have a formal OSH representative since the social relations are generally informal. With one exception, all the companies can be described as having a non-hierarchical work organisation. This also reflects the non-hierarchical Danish labour market (Esser and Olsen, 2012; Gustavsen, 2007). The inn (DK6) was a slight exception from this, with a work organisation more dominated by the owner-manager.

All the owner-managers expressed the view that the employees could always come to them if they had any queries, including regarding OSH matters. Many employees stated the same, but whether or not this possibility was actually used by the employees could not be verified through the researchers' assessment. It is likely that some workers do not dare to complain and that the good social relations restrict the discussions on OSH improvements in some firms, since the good social relations may make it more difficult to strongly oppose management, for example if the request or suggestions for OSH improvements are declined. However, depending on the sensitivity of the issue it may also work the other way round, so that the informal setting makes it easier to complain or bring attention to OSH issues. In the three companies which had OSH representatives, the employees stated that in the event of OSH concerns they would either approach the OSH representatives with issues or sometimes go directly to the owner-managers. In a manufacturing company producing ventilation (DK2), the OSH representative thought that the informal setting in the small firm made it easier to improve the work environment: 'If there is an OSH problem, I just walk into the manager's office to discuss and solve it; this may be different in a bigger company'. Nonetheless the fact that the workers could also approach the OSH representative made it easier for them to raise difficult issues, since they did not have to address management directly.

▪ **Other factors**

It seems obvious that company size has a positive impact on the possibilities for organising the work environment activities in the case companies, for example in allocating managerial resources to OSH issues. But the size of the company can also be a constraint. In a manufacturing company (DK2), the owner-manager pointed out that it is difficult for them to buy expensive technical solutions such as machinery and lifting cranes, which both employees and the owner-manager agreed would be a good idea, whereas it would be easier for a bigger company.

Another factor which we found to have an impact on the Danish case companies is the culture of the sector. Some of the sectors investigated in this project have a quite strong traditional culture of the industry, especially agriculture and construction, but also hotels and restaurants. In some of the agricultural companies as well as in the carpenter company (DK4), it appeared that certain risks were to some extent considered a natural part of the work which cannot be eliminated. For instance, the owner-manager in the inn (DK6) stated that the risk of musculoskeletal disorders is just an inherent part of the industry. The same opinion was stated by the owner-manager of the pig farm (DK9), who described the risks with the animals as something inherent to the industry, and thus something that could not be changed. Employees also expressed this opinion; for example, the OSH representative in the carpenter company (DK4) stated that his co-workers do not report near-misses, because the culture is that employees are supposed to have everything under control. It is the OSH representative's impression that, if something happens, they do not tell him about these incidents. The workplace culture therefore acts as a barrier to the proper control of certain risks, which are perceived to be part of the job.

While the workplace and industry culture may affect the OSH outcomes, the culture may also be subject to change, as younger workers and apprentices tend to put more emphasis on ensuring a good work environment. This was indicated in several of the case companies. An owner-manager of a manufacturing company (DK1) said 'the [OSH] culture has changed a lot since I was an apprentice' and he went on to emphasise how the younger workers are more attentive to OSH.

Yet another factor not addressed in great detail so far in this report, which may affect the general setting in the case companies, is the industrial relations settings. All the case companies except two agricultural companies (DK9 and DK10) had collective agreements regulating wages and working conditions. Companies with collective agreements are overrepresented in the sample compared with MSEs in general and especially within the agriculture and HORECA sectors (Rasmussen et al., 2015).

3.4 Summary and key findings

This research project has investigated the OSH setting and organisation in MSEs in Denmark. The previous sections have presented the results based on various analytical categories, but here we highlight the key findings. The problems we have identified in these companies are likely to be present in most other MSEs.

In general, the interviewed companies had a high level of awareness of OSH matters, and the majority of the owner-managers indicated that they found the work environment and securing a good and safe work environment equally important. This was motivated by their own values about a safe work environment, but other motivational factors also played a role, including the economic incentives, showing an attractive business model to customers and being able to recruit future workers. However, their motivation was also affected by coercive incentives from inspections and the risk of being sanctioned.

While the case companies were in general motivated to improve the work environment, they reported having difficulty to find the time and resources to give priority to the OSH work, especially when they had to choose between undertaking their core business functions and OSH matters. Administrative tasks were also reported as hindering strategic OSH work, attending OSH courses and other more systematic elements of OSH organisation. Some of the companies also lack the managerial capacities to do so, even though they would like to work more systematically.

Overall, a lack of a systematic approach to the work environment and to the handling of OSH issues was observed in the Danish case companies. The work environment is treated in rather an ad hoc manner. The limited systematic approach is often replaced by a more common-sense approach, with the risk of under- or overestimating risks or neglecting risks, due to the lack of systematic thinking about the issue.

Despite these limitations and restrictions, the majority of the case companies actually managed to ensure a relatively safe work environment. This is to be explained by the attention given by the owner-managers and OSH representatives, rather than by the organisational setting of the work environment in the case companies, which often are rather weak. The consequence is that MSEs without personal attention (as was seen in a company in the hotel and restaurant sector) may have a worse work environment due to the lack of both attention and systematic approaches.

In the understanding of both owner-managers and employees, OSH is mainly addressed through integrating OSH improvements into the everyday work, where OSH is seen as an integrated part of the trade or industry as well as the company. This understanding may have some advantages in that certain ways of working safely are carried out as part of the daily routine, but the consequence is also that many risks are overlooked or neglected because they are perceived as being unavoidable. It was quite difficult for some of the case companies to separate OSH from the daily work organisation. This may leave the workers and firms more vulnerable, since there are no OSH systems and only a limited systematic approach to secure that all workers are working in safe and healthy conditions. It may also trap the case companies into doing what they have always done, regardless of whether this is functioning well or not. To underline this, the OSH representative in the carpenter company (DK4) stated: 'We often tend to do things the way we always have.' In the researchers' assessment, this appears also to be true when there would be better and safer ways to do things. One consistent finding where all the case companies are more systematic is securing the existence of the mandatory written risk assessment. All companies have done this, and it helped some of them to think more systematically about their work environment. But in other companies it was rather seen as a piece of paper to show to the labour inspectors, although almost all companies reported some positive input from the written risk assessment.

The workers in the case companies did not in general participate in the OSH activities, except for a few OSH representatives, whereas in the horticulture case company (DK8) the owner-manager did successfully engage the workers in suggesting solutions as well as carrying out the actual implementations. The attention given to the work environment was above average in the companies that have OSH representatives, illustrating that the existence of an OSH representative can help to increase awareness of the work environment among workers.

The inspections by the WEA ensure compliance and play an important role in safeguarding the minimum settings, as well as in securing a certain level of attention and priority to the work environment. The inspections had initiated several improvements in the work environment, and the case companies in general assessed the labour inspectors as important for the work environment. This might especially be the case for companies with a lower level of intrinsic motivation for improving the work environment.

All in all, the findings from the Danish company studies show that there is no 'magic solution' that can solve all OSH issues in MSEs. It is rather a mixture of various tools and solutions adjusted to the needs of each individual company, in which OSH representatives and the labour inspectors play an important part.

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