

## FOP seminar on the Future of Work, 12<sup>th</sup> November 2021

After being one of the last seminars held physically in 2020, the focal point seminar on the Future of Work articles in 2021 was decided to take place online and in autumn instead of beginning of the year as usual. Nevertheless, participation was great and the discussions active. Two new expert articles were presented and discussed. The first article on 'The future of working in a virtual environment and OSH' (Stavroula Leka), and the second on 'The development of dynamic risk assessment and implications for OSH' (Coen van Gulijk) have been presented by the authors.

The PPT's of the presentations have been included.

Group discussions were organised to discuss the two expert articles.

### ***1.1.1 Results of the group discussions: "The development of dynamic risk assessment and implications for OSH"***

Business and organisations change rapidly because of technological and societal changes. This has led to the need for Risk Assessment (RA-) tools that include and support these changes, as well as to the need for solutions more quickly. In this context we speak of tools for Dynamic Risk Assessment (DRA). In the field of process safety this concept is quite well developed, however in the field of OSH this development is at the moment behind. For OSH the COVID pandemic could be a trigger to accelerate the development of the necessary tools to support the assessment of OSH risks in times of change.

The OSH world can learn from the process safety perspectives on digitalized tools for DRA, however it is clear that especially for small companies there is a lack of funds and time to support this rapid evolution. Here a role could be for branch organisations to stimulate and initiate harmonisation, for example in the co-finance of the necessary software. As well, experiences could be shared within sectors and industries to learn as a whole. Collaboration and cooperation within the sectors is of critical importance.

Another issue is related to limited availability of skills. Investments are needed to anticipate on the skills for the future, for example skills in digitalisation and the analysis and sense making of data (also in relation to health data), as well as to the development of less traditional instruments for RA, e.g. by the use of Virtual Reality, Chatboxes, Sensing and the use of Artificial Intelligence. Most important is that the new technologies do not take over the Risk Assessment tools but that the process of Risk Assessment is a participative process in which the people of the workforce are involved in personal contact. As well it is important that software developers understand the questions and needs of the companies to enhance the Risk Assessment process, and here in particular for the smaller companies and their specific needs in relation to organisation, interaction and budgets.

One initiative was mentioned from Estonia, showing the role of the Labour Inspectorates, in sharing and cooperation in providing a Risk Assessment tools with companies.

In general there is a responsibility for national Governments, employers and OSH specialists to be informed, knowledgeable and so assertive enough to invest and co-develop new tools for Dynamic Risk Assessment to be prepared for the future. As a final message for OSH professionals, author Coen van Gulijk concluded by saying and emphasizing "not to sleepwalk into the future!".

### **1.1.2 Results of the group discussions: “The future of working in a virtual environment and OSH”**

Working in a virtual environment is increasing and so is the attention to this topic. It is good to see and hear about the variety of examples of research and tool development in the Member States, however there are more examples on home-based work than on hybrid work.

The discussion showed that the COVID pandemic has increased the focus on health and well-being at work. However, a number of challenges were mentioned, for example in relation to:

- a lack of regulation addressing the specific challenges of such new ways of working;
- the challenge of carrying out workplace risk assessment and inspections in homes;
- as well as issues about ethics and responsibilities.

In many Member States, neither employers nor the Labour Inspectorate can enter private premises/homes of remote workers without their permission. A potential way forward to address this issue is to increase workers' ability to do their own risk assessment. For example in Cyprus, the Labour Inspectorate developed a guide on telework for workers and employers together with the University. It includes how to identify risks at home workstations (available at [www.telewosh.com](http://www.telewosh.com)), and also aims at increasing workers' knowledge so that they are able to do their own risk assessment and get a report that they can share with their employers. The German BAuA also published many useful resources on telework. And so did Latvia.

However there is a risk that such checklists empowering workers to do their own risk assessment could lead to a dilution of employers' responsibility. A further issue is that the risks that can be addressed in such checklist are limited and in general the checklists provided to teleworkers for self-risk assessment at home do not consider psychosocial risks adequately.

There is also a need for a more individual approach as there are workers with different risk profiles, not only the “traditional” vulnerable groups such as pregnant women but also workers at higher risk of COVID for example.

Other important notes from the discussion:

- It is key to translate properly complex research into user-friendly Risk Assessment tools that make sense. The importance of motivation has to be considered from the beginning of the development - at the design stage- for the tools to be effective and used. Tool development should be based on human sensitive design. Important questions to consider are: Does the design take into account human factors adequately? How to engage different stakeholders in tool development?
- In general, digital technologies and AI contribute to increase productivity and profit, and not OSH. Some risks mentioned are increased due to long working hours, stress and MSD's associated with teleworking, which is not taken into account. There are as well issues associated with lack of communication, and with lack of trust from employers towards their workers. Co-habitation at home with other teleworkers (partner) and children is challenging, this may be a new psychosocial risk. There is a need for more studies on how workers deal with these situations.
- Migration from urban to rural areas, and even between countries (in fact some countries even try to attract workers) could be an opportunity to increase quality of life for workers. In particular in the context of the pandemics, this gives workers the possibility to move away from confined areas. On the other hand this could complicate the issue of risk assessment.

- Generational differences: for younger workers there are increasing issues associated with isolation and lack of communication, while older workers may have increasing difficulties to cope with the technology.
- Skills of middle managers should be improved to manage a remote workforce. Managers need to be much more in contact with their workers.
- Teaching programmes: OSH courses are very obsolete, and often taught in a very traditional way that does not fit to the new and future ways of working. Universities need to update their courses for future OSH managers to have the adequate skills. On the other hand, HR courses already integrate new trends in HR management such as data analytics/people analytics but from a managerial perspective and miss the OSH perspective.
- VR may be a solution to support risk assessment at home.

To conclude, we can say that both presentations were food for dynamic discussions on the future role and the work area of OSH professionals. The new digital developments show two sides of the coin. There are opportunities in fast connectivity, sustainability, inclusiveness and flexibility. Especially there are challenges in relation to skills and for SME's. As well there is a need for standardisation and (cyber)secure processes.

As mentioned, it is important for OSH professionals to be well enough informed, skilled and knowledgeable and organized cooperatively to be assertive in managing the new tools and new developments: don't go sleepwalking to the future.