

Managing psychosocial risks in European micro and small enterprises:

Qualitative evidence from the Third European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER 2019)

Country Report (The Netherlands)

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1 Introduction

This report presents the country study for the Netherlands in the framework of the study: Management of psychosocial risks in European workplaces - qualitative evidence from the Third European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER-2019).

In this report we present the outcomes of three data sources:

- A desk study about the legal and policy context in the Netherlands of the management of psychosocial risks in the workplace. The findings of this study about the legal and policy context can be found in the next chapter.
- An analysis of the ESENER 2019¹ survey results of the Netherlands, in order to provide a picture of key national trends concerning the inspection regime, reasons for compliance, employee representation methods and the approach of establishments to psychosocial risk management. The findings of this analysis can be found in Chapter 3.
- A qualitative study among management and employees in micro and small companies. We did 41 in-depth interviews with 30 managers and 11 employees in 30 different companies. The results of our qualitative study are presented in Chapter 4. The fieldwork of the qualitative study took place between December 2020 and June 2021. Therefore, the fieldwork was highly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This will be explained more in section 4.1.

This report was researched and written by Menno Wester and Indra van der Valk, Ecorys Nederland.

2 Legal and policy context

This chapter provides an overview of the national policy context concerning the:

- main laws and policies;
- existence of any objectives, targets, monitoring and evaluation approaches;
- inspection regime concerning micro and small establishments (MSEs) and psychosocial risks;
- specific policy initiatives targeting MSEs on the issue of psychosocial risks;
- training and courses on psychosocial risk management;
- public awareness campaigns; and
- sector or collective bargaining initiatives that have a focus on psychosocial risks management.

2.1 Overview of the legal and policy context

In 2018, The Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment initiated the programme 'Fair, Healthy and Safe Work', which aims to stimulate all employers to provide and maintain good employment practices. Such practices include, for example, offering appropriate remuneration or providing a safe working environment in which the risks of occupational hazards are reduced. The programme focuses on risk prevention and promoting behaviour of employees that contributes to their own and their colleagues' vitality and stimulates a (social) safe working space. And as such, it aims to contribute to the governmental agreement that focuses on supervising and monitoring as well as enforcing legal compliance. The purpose of the programme is to stimulate, facilitate and support industries, social partners and companies to become actively involved in fair, healthy and safe work. Activities organised by the programme focus on raising awareness and prevention.

While the concepts of healthy and safe work focus on the physical and psychosocial aspects of work, the concept of fair work may be less clearly defined. According to the ministry, fair work includes the following:

¹ See: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/facts-and-figures/esener>

*'Work executed in accordance with current social and labour legislation and to which specific attention is paid in order to create and maintain a level playing field in terms of labour conditions, compliance with collective bargaining agreements and the implementation of decent employment practices.'*²

The current programme builds upon a programme initiated by the ministry in 2014 that was titled 'Self-regulation Healthy and Safe Work'.³ Its purpose was to appeal to employers' and employees' feelings of responsibility in order to trigger a sense of urgency and commitment to organise and foster a healthy and safe working environment. The ministry focused on providing intrinsic motivational factors rather than external incentives (such as issuing penalties to compel industries to comply with legislation). For example, the programme focused on inspiring industries to implement decent employment practices, stimulating and facilitating good employer initiatives and practices, as well as sharing successful industry initiatives. The ministry created a separate agency that supported a selection of social partners and companies with their initiatives, which included the following industries:

- healthcare (mainly hospitals);
- bakery and confectionery;
- chemical;
- construction;
- transport and storage;
- waste;
- temporary employment; and
- removal and disposal (with a specific focus on disposing of asbestos).

In addition to these programmes, in late 2018 the Dutch Parliament (Tweede Kamer) appointed the Committee Regulation of Work.⁴ The committee's purpose was to investigate the current dynamics in the Dutch labour market and to what extent the current labour legislation still provides the desired outcomes, now and in the future. It concluded that the current legislation and regulations will not meet employers' and employees' needs in the future, and that as a result, economic and social progress is not secured. It suggested the following five measures for implementation:

1. **Improve internal and reduce external flexibility**, by adjusting certain legislation such as shortening the payment duration during sickness absence of employees, relaxing dismissal legislation, increasing the minimum wage and shortening the *ketenregeling*.⁵
2. **Create a clear system of contract types**, by limiting the number of variations of the type of contracts to a maximum of three: self-employed, permanent and temporary, which should enhance enforcement.
3. **Enable workers to continue developing their competencies**, by providing them with a personal development budget that can be spent on retraining. A regular career check should motivate workers to use their budget.
4. **Promote equal treatment when imposing fiscal legislation and provide basic income security for all workers**, by reducing differences in the taxation of labour.
5. **Implement stimulating and inclusive labour market policy**, by providing individual guidance and support to prevent workers from permanently exiting the labour market due to, for example, the inability to find appropriate work when becoming unemployed.

² Please note that the description has been translated from Dutch (p1):

<https://www.arboportaal.nl/binaries/arboportaal/documenten/rapport/2019/09/23/eindrapport-onderzoek-initiatieven-eerlijk-werk/190923+Eindrapport+Initiatieven+op+Eerlijk+Werk+-+Bureau+Bartels.pdf>

³ See: <https://www.rie.nl/programma-zelfregulering-gezond-en-veilig-werken-ministerie-van-szw/>

⁴ In Dutch, the 'Commissie Regulering van Werk' under supervision of Hans Borstlap, henceforth informally known as 'Commissie Borstlap': <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2020/01/23/rapport-in-wat-voor-land-willen-wij-werken>

⁵ Regulation that limits the number of consecutive temporary contracts employers can offer their employees. When the limit is reached, employers are obliged to offer their employees a permanent contract (or let employees go): <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/arbeidsovereenkomst-en-cao/vraag-en-antwoord/wanneer-verandert-mijn-tijdelijke-arbeidscontract-in-een-vast-contract>

The concept of fair work was again highlighted when the Dutch Parliament launched its 'Broad Societal Reconsiderations',⁶ which aimed to prepare effective policy measures to mitigate the next economic recession. An independent team of different policy officers, representing many different fields within the collective sector, prepared the report 'Fair work – a matter of decency'.⁷ The report identified both employers and employees in vulnerable positions in the labour market, such as employees in certain (highly competitive) industries, those who are self-employed and those at the bottom of the labour market, as well as labour migrants. These employers and employees are at risk of experiencing poor labour conditions due to unfair competition, increasing international competition, non-transparent legislation and inefficient enforcement. In this report,⁸ 12 solutions are proposed that can be implemented by:

- **adjusting current laws and legislative standards**, such as implementing a minimum wage, improving housing facilities or reducing legislative loopholes;
- **improving collaboration among legal, enforcing and supervising institutions**, to enhance the flow of crucial information and to make it easier to sanction non-compliant employers; and
- **improving transparency**, such as setting up a public platform and undertaking awareness-raising activities.

In 2020, the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) published 'Better work. The new societal contract'.⁹ This report is particularly important for psychosocial risk management since having/regaining autonomy and having a say about one's work is central to all messages this council advice on to policy-makers. The council signals that the future of work and the quality of this work are affected by three trends:

- **New technology, for instance:** robots, the use of algorithms, or digital platforms such as Uber and Airbnb.
- **Flexibilisation:** in the Netherlands, a third of all employees has a temporary contract. Having a temporary contract affects the relation and the sense of responsibility between employer and employee.
- **The intensification of work.** Almost 38% of the workforce experiences high workload.

The council signals that these trends will affect not only the quantity of work and the skills and qualities needed to obtain work, but also the quality of work. According to the WRR, too little attention is paid to this issue of quality of work, which nevertheless significantly affects the physical and social wellbeing of workers. Therefore, the council makes nine recommendations for the Dutch government, divided into three categories:

The council advises that citizens should have more control over their income

- The council advises the government to prevent unfair competition between workers with different contract types.
- A system of contract-neutral basic insurance and facilities for all citizens should be developed, and this should fit the new world of work.
- Active labour market policy should be renewed, including through more attention to personal guidance.
- The council also advised that the government should provide work for people who are dependent on social security benefits and have little chance of entering the labour market (for instance, at a social workplace).

⁶ In Dutch, the 'Brede Maatschappelijke Heroverwegingen':

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2020/04/22/rapporten-brede-maatschappelijke-heroverwegingen>

⁷ See: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2020/04/20/bmh-4-eerlijk-werk-een-kwestie-van-fatsoen>

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ WRR (2019) *Het betere werk De nieuwe maatschappelijke opdracht* Den Haag: Wetenschappelijke Raad voor Regeringsbeleid <https://www.wrr.nl/binaries/wrr/documenten/rapporten/2020/01/15/het-betere-werk/R102-Het-betere-werk-de-nieuwe-maatschappelijke-opdracht.pdf>

The council advises that citizens should have control over their work

- It recommends that the government develops a programmatic approach to defining and stimulating 'good quality of work' in companies and institutions.
- The council also recommends strengthening the position of workers within labour organisations.

The council advises that citizens should have control over their life

- It recommends creating more options to let people choose how many hours they want to work. The council thinks that it is therefore important to provide good childcare and care for the elderly and make it easier for people to work more hours.
- The council recommends that the government provides arrangements for long-term, collectively paid care leave and gives workers more control over their own working hours.

'Good quality of work'

- The last advice of the council is to make these three conditions of good work (more control over income, over their own work and over their own life) and how everyone in the population can benefit from this as one of the cornerstones of government policy and to follow this in the annual Monitor of Broad Prosperity.¹⁰

Key legal requirements, and recent legislative proposals and revisions

On 28 May 2019, the Senate (Eerste Kamer) of the Dutch Parliament adopted the *Labour Market in Balance Act*,¹¹ which came into force in January 2020. Its purpose is to reduce the differences between the costs, risks and labour conditions of permanent compared to flexible staff.

In order to reduce these differences, the law included revisions of three existing laws:

- The Act Distribution of Employment by Intermediaries (effective as of 1998);¹²
- The Act Financing Social Securities (effective as of 2005);¹³ and
- The Act Work and Certainty (effective as of 2015).¹⁴

While these existing laws aimed to reduce barriers on the part of employers to provide permanent contracts, some of their provisions eventually became counterproductive. For example, as costs to dismiss permanent employees rose, employers became more reluctant to hire permanent staff. In addition, the flexibilisation of labour offered employers cost benefits. When hiring staff by means of bogus self-employment contracts,¹⁵ employers do not bear responsibility for paying pension or sickness benefits. As a result, the labour market offered employers possibilities to abuse this flexibility, which led to the worsening of labour conditions and to reduced employment security for workers.

The Labour Market in Balance Act revised legislation in the area of flexible labour, dismissal legislation and unemployment benefits in order to reduce the barriers to hiring permanent staff. The most relevant measures that have been implemented are as follows:

- it is now less costly and easier for employers to dismiss permanent staff and more costly to dismiss temporary staff;
- the *ketenregeling* has been extended to a maximum of three temporary contracts within three years;

¹⁰ In Dutch, 'Monitor Brede Welvaart', which is published annually since 2018.

¹¹ In Dutch, 'de Wet Arbeidsmarkt in Balans': <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/arbeidsovereenkomst-en-cao/plannen-kabinet-voor-meer-balans-tussen-vast-werk-en-flexwerk>

¹² In Dutch, 'de Wet allocatie arbeidskrachten door intermediairs': <https://www.inspectieszw.nl/onderwerpen/wet-allocatie-arbeidskrachten-door-intermediairs>

¹³ In Dutch, 'de Wet financiering sociale verzekeringen': https://www.eerstekamer.nl/wetsvoorstel/29529_wet_financiering_sociale

¹⁴ In Dutch, 'de Wet Werk en Zekerheid': <https://www.arbeidsrechter.nl/de-wet-werk-en-zekerheid-wat-was-de-bedoeling-en-wat-volgt-er-nu>

¹⁵ In addition, sham constructions were also addressed by the Law Approach Sham Constructions or in Dutch 'de Wet Aanpak Schijnconstructies': <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/aanpak-schijnconstructies/maatregelen-tegen-schijnconstructies>

- employees who work in a payroll construction¹⁶ now have an equal legal position and equal labour conditions compared to permanent staff as well as pension benefits; and
- on-call workers now have minimum notice of at least four days in advance, and have the right to receive a fixed number of working hours after working 12 months as an on-call worker.

Although it is too early to thoroughly evaluate the effects of the law, the first signs seem promising. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment has conducted a quick scan of these signs and found (among other findings) that one temporary employment agency has provided 2,500 temporary employees with a permanent contract.¹⁷

Finally, when work is psychosocially demanding to the extent that it poses a risk to employees' mental wellbeing, employers are required by Dutch labour law to mitigate these risks as much as possible. For example, employers are required to conduct a risk assessment and to evaluate (RA&E in Dutch)¹⁸ whether company policy indeed minimises psychosocial risks and other risks relating to the working environment. Employees also bear responsibility for their own health and safety as well as for that of their colleagues.¹⁹

2.2 Psychosocial risk management policy objectives, targets, monitoring and evaluation approaches

Currently, a third of absence cases from work in the Netherlands is due to psychosocial stress. Mental disorders due to work-related stress (for instance, burnout) are the most common occupational disease in the Netherlands.²⁰ There is also an upward trend; the share of long-term absence (longer than six weeks) due to psychosocial stress increased from 30% in 2016 to 37% in 2020. Further, the average number of days an employee remains absent due to psychosocial stress (burnouts in particular) has increased substantially, from an average of 167 days in 2016 to 290 days in 2020.²¹ The most recent statistics on absenteeism caused by work-related stress are causing concern and, as such, the government aims to reduce the risks of work-related psychosocial stress as much as possible.

In 1998, the Dutch Senate adopted an additional section of the general labour law²² that focuses on the psychosocially encumbered part of work. This includes disproportionate workloads, bullying, aggression, violence, (sexual) harassment, intimidation, discrimination, work-related depression, burnouts and post-traumatic stress disorder.²³ The section requires employers to issue and maintain company policy that should address psychosocial risks and also aim to raise awareness among employees. In 2017, this general labour law²⁴ was updated and every relevant risk must now be included in the risk assessment.^{25, 26}

Under Dutch labour law, every employer is required to provide proof of an RA&E, and a plan of action based on the outcomes of the RA&E. The Dutch Labour Inspectorate supervises and monitors whether

¹⁶ A payroll construction is a special form of hiring staff. The payroll company employs the payroll employees who work for a company. It is a bit comparable to an employment agency, but there are some differences between a payroll company and an employment agency. The payroll company provides employees on loan and another company borrows them as it were as their client. The other company recruits the payroll employees itself, determines their salary and has complete supervision. The payroll company takes all the employers' administrative duties out of the hands of the company. It takes care of the labour contracts, annual income statements, salary administration, pension and so on. See:

<https://business.gov.nl/regulation/payrolling/>

¹⁷ The quick scan can be found in Dutch here:

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2020/06/05/kamerbrief-met-quickscan-naar-effecten-wet-arbeidsmarkt-in-balans>

¹⁸ In Dutch, the *risico inventarisatie en evaluatie* (RI&E) <https://www.inspectieszw.nl/onderwerpen/rie>

¹⁹ See: <https://www.arboportaal.nl/onderwerpen/themas/psychosociale-arbeidsbelasting> and

<https://www.inspectieszw.nl/onderwerpen/algemeen-werkstress-en-psychosociale-belasting>

²⁰ See: <https://www.arboconcern.nl/blog/wat-zijn-de-oorzaken-van-ziekteverzuim>, <https://www.arboportaal.nl/documenten/vragen-en-antwoorden/wat-is-een-burn-out> and <https://www.arboned.nl/wat-u-moet-weten/verzuim-verlagen/psychisch-verzuim>

²¹ See: <https://www.arboned.nl/wat-u-moet-weten/verzuim-verlagen/psychisch-verzuim>

²² In Dutch, the Arbowet.

²³ See: https://www.volandis.nl/media/3379/20001995_advies-psa.pdf

²⁴ In Dutch, the Arbowet.

²⁵ See: <https://www.arboportaal.nl>

²⁶ See: <https://www.zelfinspectie.nl/zelfinspecties/gezond-en-veilig-werken?sessie=84d10262ae30b223d543beee4b15e3a3>

employers do indeed carry out and maintain an RA&E and plan of action within their company. When these are considered incomplete by the Labour Inspectorate, it can force employers to provide these under threat of penalising sanctions.

2.3 Inspection regime for MSEs with a focus on psychosocial risks management

Irrespective of the size of the company in terms of number of employees, every company is required to maintain an RA&E and a plan of action. The RA&E forms the basis for effective company policy, it aims to provide employers with additional policy measures, procedures and/or protocols. Employers can hire certified policy officers to conduct the RA&E within their company, however they may also conduct it themselves.

When employers employ more than 25 people, the RA&E must be tested by a certified policy officer. Companies with fewer than 25 employees may use a recognised industry-wide RA&E, which does not require additional testing by a certified policy officer. When an industry does not have a recognised RA&E, companies with fewer than 25 employees are obliged to meet the same requirements with respect to the RA&E and plan of action compared to companies with more than 25 employees.

When the RA&E provides insufficient information for employers to form appropriate company policy, employers can conduct an in-depth investigation of the company's working environment.²⁷

The Dutch Labour Inspectorate is also focusing on occupational safety and health (OSH) risk management in different 'high-risk' sectors, for instance the educational sector, security sector, sector of collection agencies²⁸ and universities.²⁹ During the pandemic, for example, the Dutch Labour Inspectorate focused on OSH risk management for employees working at home in the banking sector.³⁰

2.4 Specific policy initiatives targeting MSEs and psychosocial risks

Under Dutch labour law, every employer is required to join a certified health and safety service. These services are independent organisations that seek to make profit. They sell their services for a certain price and are certified by an institution that is recognised by the Dutch government as a 'certifying institution'.³¹ Governmental supervision over such a certification process helps to maintain and improve the high-quality standards of the services that are offered to employers.

Some of these health and safety services specifically focus on helping and guiding small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs)s, such as ArboNed.³² ArboNed aims to provide SMEs with very specific information and practical tools, targeted as much as possible to solve the psychosocially related issues an SME may have. One practical tool is, for example, the easily accessible, preventive medical examination that can be taken online. The purpose of this online examination is to make physical and mental health risks related to work become more apparent, which facilitates employers' ability to tackle them and to implement preventive measures.³³ However, there are also limitations stemming from the privacy legislation (GDPR³⁴).

²⁷ See: <https://www.arboportaal.nl/onderwerpen/risico-inventarisatie---evaluatie/wat-zegt-de-wet-over-rie>

²⁸ Inspectie SZW. (2017, November 13). *Meer maatregelen nodig in risicosectoren om psychosociale arbeidsbelasting tegen te gaan*. <https://www.inspectieszw.nl/onderwerpen/algemeen-werkstress-en-psychosociale-belasting/nieuws/2017/11/13/meer-maatregelen-nodig-in-risicosectoren-om-psychosociale-arbeidsbelasting-tegen-te-gaan>

²⁹ See: <https://www.inspectieszw.nl/onderwerpen/algemeen-werkstress-en-psychosociale-belasting/nieuws/2021/07/08/arbobeleid-universiteiten-nog-onvoldoende>

³⁰ Inspectie SZW. (2021). *Hybride werken vraagt om actualisering RI&E Kennissynthese PSA en fysieke belasting in relatie tot thuiswerken*. Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid. <https://www.nlarbeidsinspectie.nl/binaries/nlarbeidsinspectie/documenten/rapporten/2021/08/26/hybride-werken-vraagt-om-actualisering-rie/Thuiswerken%2C+benoem+de+risico%27s+in+de+RI%26E.pdf>

³¹ For example, the 'Stichting Beheer Certificatieregeling Arbodiensten' is one of the certifying institutions: <https://sbca.nl/over-sbca/>

³² See: <https://www.arboned.nl/>

³³ Information about the medical examination can be found here: <https://www.arboned.nl/diensten/preventief-medisch-onderzoek-pmo>

³⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016R0679&from=EN>

2.5 Training and courses focusing on psychosocial risks

Generally, the Dutch government does not seek to fulfil the role of trainer and educator, but rather a role as facilitator to provide publicly accessible information based on thorough research. However, it has initiated the RA&E support office to help employers with their risk assessment and evaluation and their plan of action. Employers can find information and educate themselves about the RA&E and its support office on the RA&E website,³⁵ on which a wide range of information is published.

The Dutch Labour Inspectorate has also launched a number of websites that cover the different psychosocial risk topics, on which a wide variety of information is published. The Labour Inspectorate has also developed online tools³⁶ so that employers can 'inspect' themselves.

2.6 Public awareness campaigns

In 2013, a public awareness campaign on psychosocial risks was launched by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment in cooperation with social partner occupational health services (OVAL), which led to the organisation of the annual 'week of work-related stress'.³⁷ Since 2019, OVAL has been organising this week without the help of the ministry. The campaign's aim was to prevent absences due to work-related psychosocial issues, as well as to enhance the mental resilience, job satisfaction and labour productivity of employees. The campaign first focused on breaking the silence about absence related to psychosocial issues and alerting everyone to this. Subsequently, it focused on facilitating and stimulating employers and employees to start addressing psychosocial risks within their working environment. The campaign further specifically focused on encouraging corporate culture in which it is better accepted to speak out about psychosocial risks during an early stage rather than later. Sequentially, over the course of a certain time period, attention was focused on a specific psychosocial subject, starting with excessive workloads, followed by bullying, aggression and violence, discrimination and sexual harassment. The subject of work-related stress recurred annually.

National activities organised by the campaign initiators mainly involved formal group meetings and forms of media communication. In order to organise the group meetings, the initiators sought collaboration with social partners, industry organisations and educational fundraisers.

2.7 Sector or collective bargaining initiatives that have a focus on psychosocial risk management

The education sector is one example of a sector in the Netherlands in which collective bargaining initiatives are focused on the management of psychosocial risks. This sector is highly segregated: primary, secondary, tertiary and higher education are organised with different social partners. In these educational sectors, requirements to prevent and mitigate psychosocial risks have been included in collective bargaining agreements (in the sectors of primary and secondary education this has been an issue for many years, and in most recent years this is also more of a focus point in the other educational sectors). For example, employers (schools) are required to devise and implement policy to address psychosocial risks and to raise awareness and provide information around these issues. In addition, they are required to evaluate the effectiveness of their policy on an annual basis, and to make adjustments where necessary. They are further required to appoint an independent counsellor who can act as mediator in cases of misconduct.³⁸

³⁵ The website can be found here: <https://www.rie.nl>

³⁶ Such a tool can be found here: <https://www.zelfinspectie.nl>

³⁷ See: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2019/12/31/gezond-en-veilig-werken>

³⁸ See: <https://www.arbocataloguspo.nl/>

3 ESENER 2019 country-level results

This chapter provides an analysis of the ESENER 2019 survey results of the Netherlands, to provide a picture of key national trends concerning the:

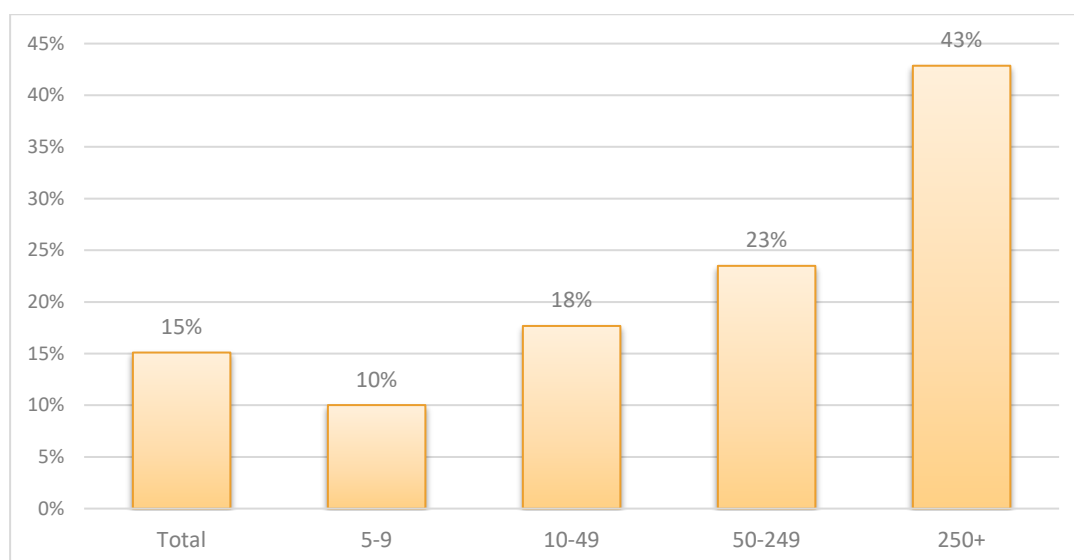
- inspection regime and reasons for compliance;
- employee representation methods; and
- establishment-level responses to psychosocial risk management.

3.1 Inspection regime and reasons for compliance

Frequency of inspections

Figure 1 shows the percentage of companies that reported they had a visit by the labour inspectorate in the past three years. The larger the company, the more companies answered that they have been visited by the labour inspectorate in the last three years. Companies with more than 250 employees reported to have been visited almost twice as often as companies with 10-49 employees and almost four times as often as companies with 1-9 employees. Compared to ESENER2014, however, the total reported visits have decreased.

Figure 1: Establishments reported being visited by the labour inspectorate in the last 3 years – by company size (% of establishments)

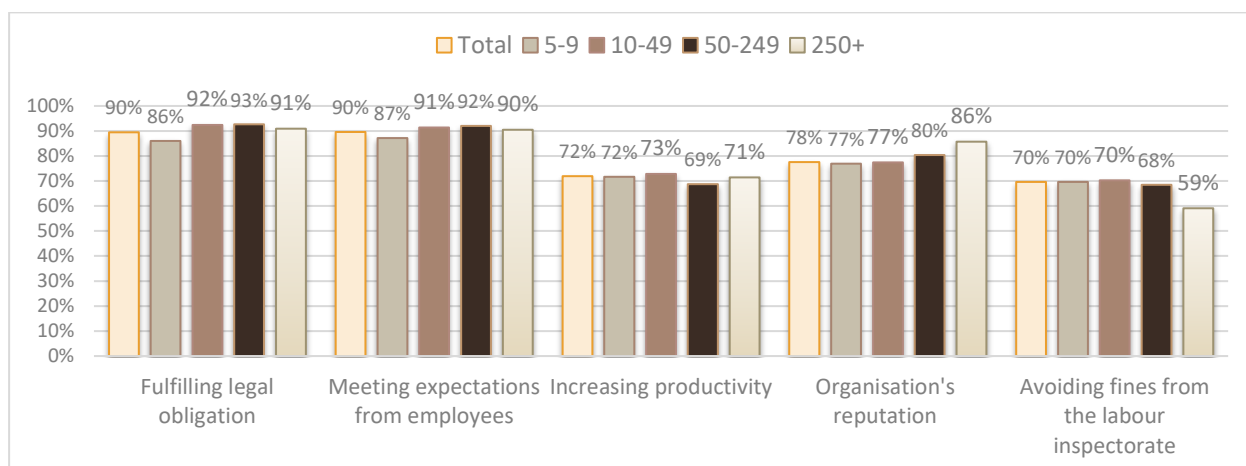


Source: Ecorys analysis of ESENER 2019 results

Reasons for compliance

The most common reason for companies of all sizes to address health and safety is the fulfilment of legal obligations and meeting expectations from their employees. This is followed by maintaining the reputation of the organisation. The larger the company, the more common the reputation of the organisation is given as a reason to address health and safety. The least common reasons reported by all companies are to increase productivity and to avoid fines from the labour inspectorate. The smaller the company, the less common the reason is to avoid fines from the labour inspectorate.

Compared to ESENER2014, the overall percentage has increased for the total of Dutch companies that answered 'Fulfilling legal obligation' (increased from 79% to 90%) and 'Meeting expectations from employees' (increased from 85% to 90%) as reasons for addressing health and safety. The number of companies that cited 'Maintaining or increasing productivity' decreased since ESENER 2014 (from 77% to 72%). Specific 'reasons for addressing psychosocial risks' were not included in the ESENER 2019 survey, but the previous waves of ESENER showed that drivers for psychosocial risk management largely mimicked those for OSH in general, therefore Figure 2 is still interesting.

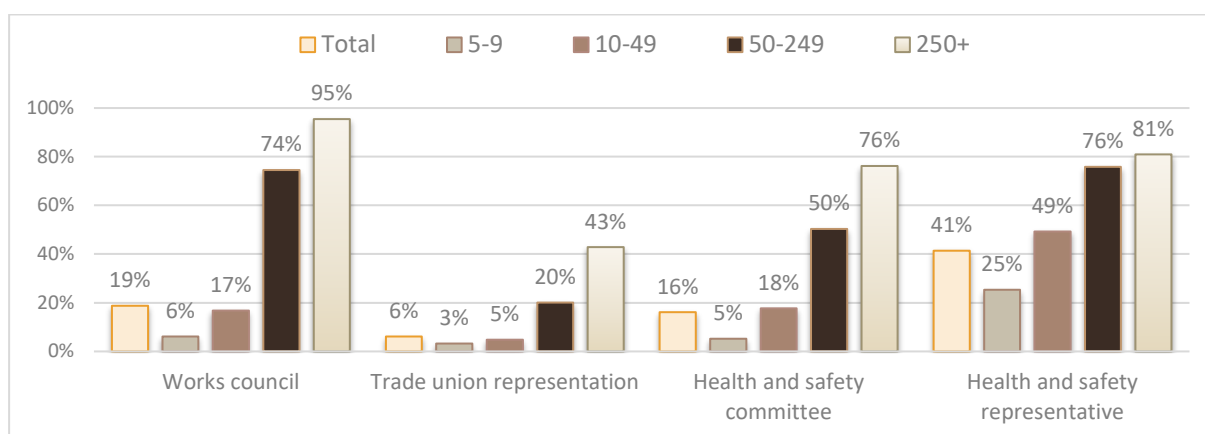
Figure 2: Reasons for addressing health and safety in establishments – by company size (% of establishments)

Source: Ecorys analysis of ESENER 2019 results

3.2 Employee representation methods

Forms of representation

As shown in Figure 3, the larger the company, the more likely it is that all forms of representation exist (works council, trade union representation, health and safety committee, health and safety representative). This is logical, since larger companies are obliged to provide this. Almost all companies with more than 250 employees have a work council and a health and safety representative.

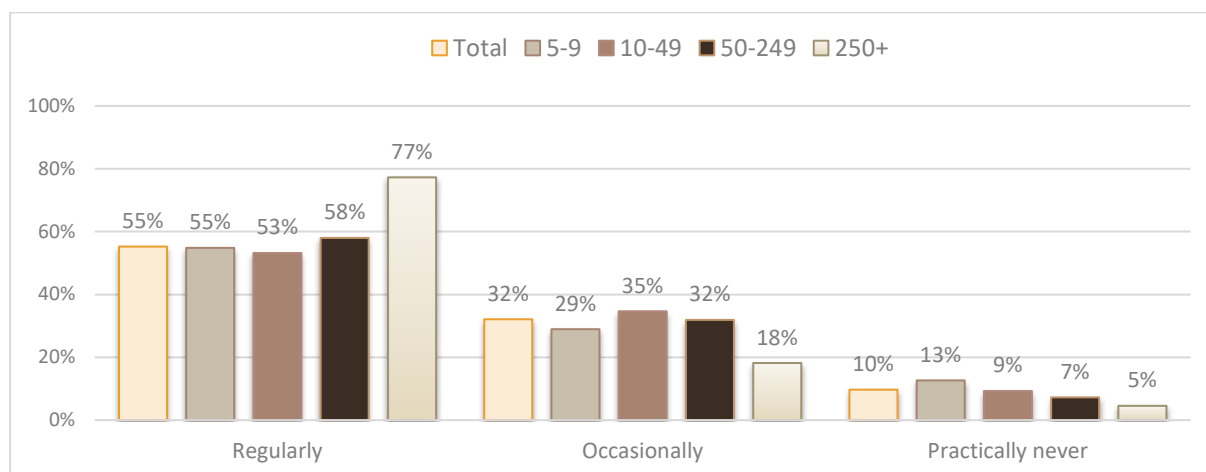
Figure 3: Forms of employee representation in the establishments – by company size (% of establishments)

Source: Ecorys analysis of ESENER 2019 results

Frequency of discussions

The companies in the Netherlands answered mostly that they regularly discuss health and safety matters between employee representatives and the management, as shown in Figure 4. Almost 77% of the companies with 250 employees or more answered they do this regularly; for companies with fewer than 250 employees, this is the case for slightly over half of them. The larger the company, the less likely it is that health and safety matters are practically never discussed between employee representatives and the management. These outcomes have not changed significantly since ESENER 2014.

Figure 4 : Frequency of discussion of health and safety matters between employee representatives and the management – by company size (% of establishments)



Source: Ecorys analysis of ESENER 2019 results

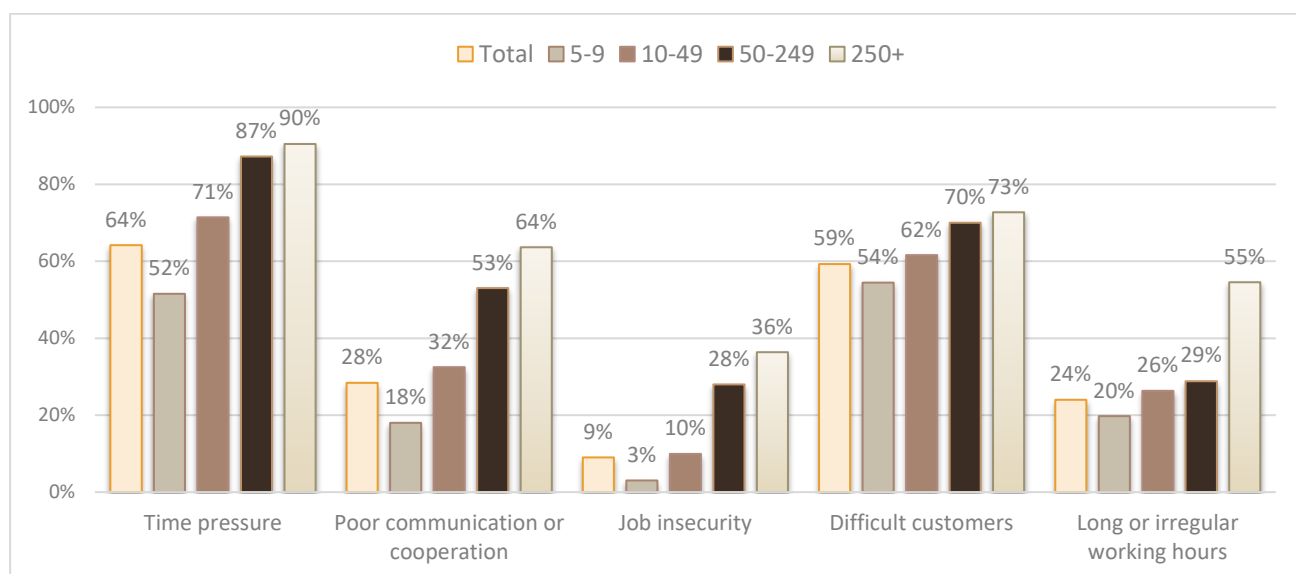
3.3 Establishment-level responses to psychosocial risk management

Identification of psychosocial risks

The larger the company, the larger the percentage of companies that identified psychosocial risks in their establishment, as shown in Figure 5. This could be explained by the fact that the more people work in an establishment, the higher the chance they will report psychosocial risks to their manager. The percentage of companies that reported the risk of working long or irregular working hours is almost twice as high in companies with more than 250 employees than in companies with fewer employees.

Time pressure and dealing with difficult customers are the most often reported risks by companies. While 64% of the Dutch workplaces reported 'time pressure' as a psychosocial risk, this is well above the EU average of 44%. Compared to ESENER 2014, there is a small increase for time pressure (from 62% to 64%) and dealing with difficult customers (from 58% to 59%).

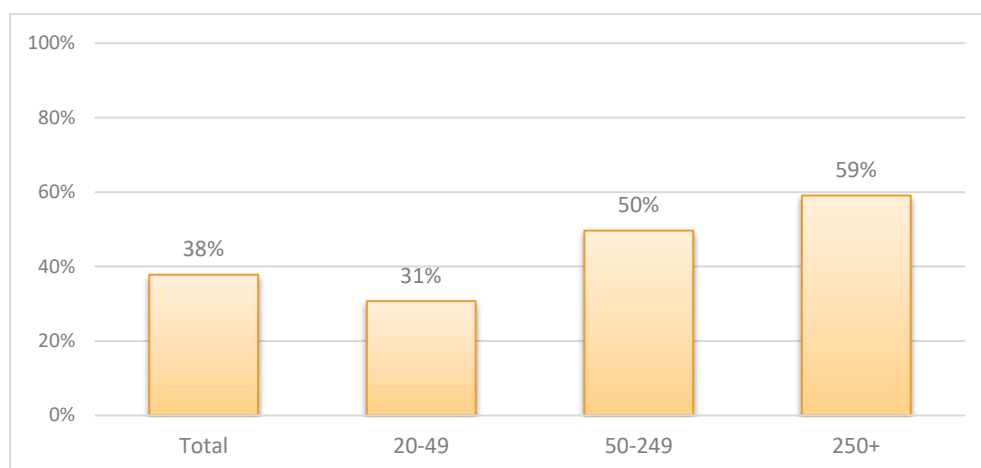
Job insecurity is the least often mentioned psychosocial risk by the Dutch companies that participated in the ESENER 2019 survey.

Figure 5 : Psychosocial risks identified in the establishments – by company size (% of establishments)

Source: Ecorys analysis of ESENER 2019 results

Introduction of action plans to prevent work-related stress

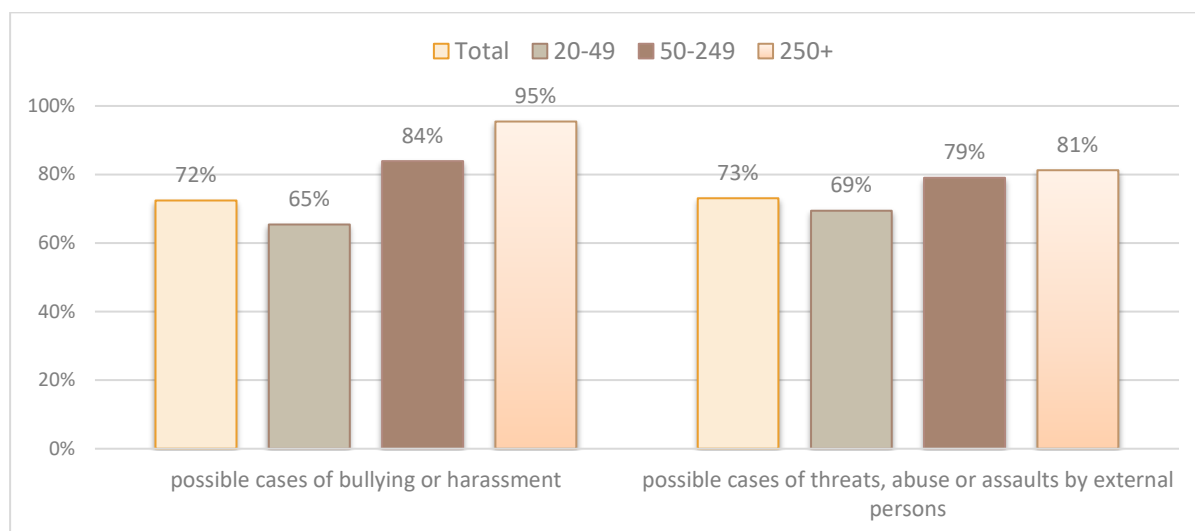
As shown in Figure 66, the larger the company, the higher the likelihood the company answered that they have an action plan available to reduce work-related stress. In general, this has increased by almost 10% compared to ESENER 2014.

Figure 6 : Introduction of action plans to reduce work-related stress in the establishments – by company size (% of establishments)

Source: Ecorys analysis of ESENER 2019 results

Introduction of procedures to deal with harassment and violence

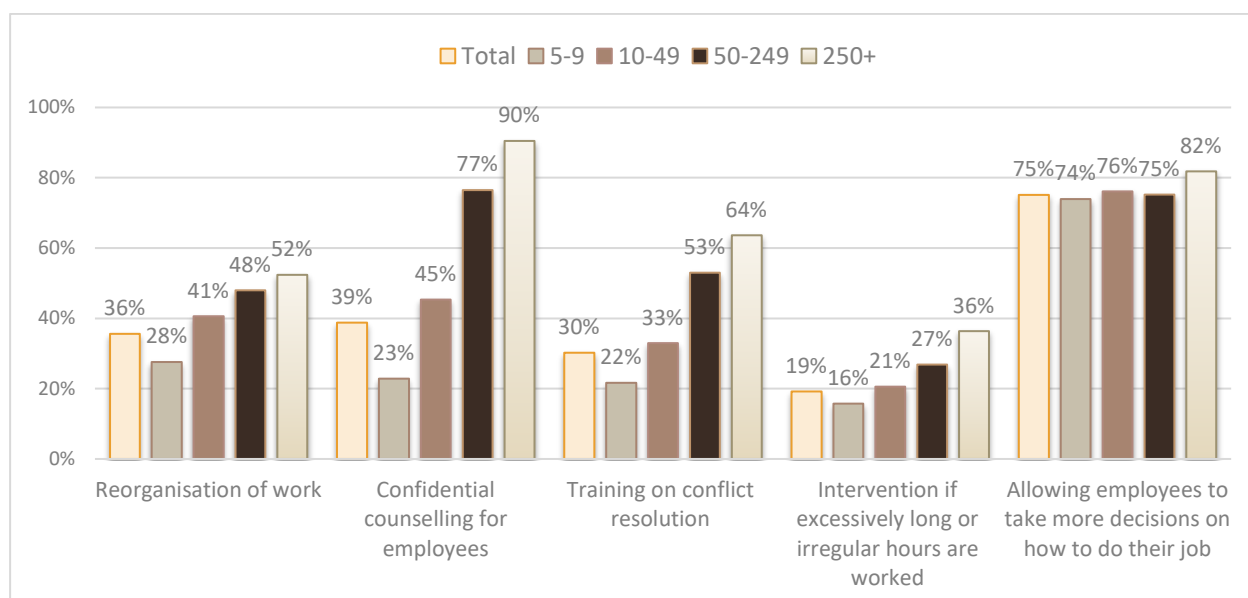
As shown in Figure 7, the larger the company, the more likely it is that the company has procedures in place for dealing with possible cases of bullying or harassment and for dealing with violence by external persons (for example, threats, abuse or assaults). This has increased since ESENER 2014.

Figure 7 : Establishments with procedures for dealing with possible risks – by company size (% of establishments)

Source: Ecorys analysis of ESENER 2019 results

Introduction of measures to manage psychosocial risks

Figure 8 shows that, overall, most companies answered that allowing employees to take decisions on how to do their job is used as a measure to manage psychosocial risks. This does not differ greatly accordingly to company size. For the other measures, Figure 8 shows that the larger the company, the more likely it is that the company has implemented this measure. For example, almost all companies with 250 employees or more reported that they have a confidential counsellor for employees (90%), but this measure is less likely to be in place (23%) in a company with 5-9 employees.

Figure 8: Measures for psychosocial risks used in establishments – by company size (% of establishments)

Source: Ecorys analysis of ESENER 2019 results

4 Main findings from the qualitative study

This chapter provides an analysis of feedback from establishments, considering common views reported by both managers and employees, and areas where key differences can be detected. The key areas assessed are:

1. the links between workplace culture, productivity, absenteeism and presenteeism and approaches to psychosocial risk management.
2. awareness level of psychosocial risk factors and obligation to manage them;
3. the links between psychosocial risk management and overall management commitment to OSH;
4. extent of psychosocial risk management and procedures in place;
5. dedicated resources and degree of worker participation; and
6. barriers and drivers to psychosocial risk management and support needed.

4.1 Sample of in-depth interviews

The fieldwork

For this study, we carried out 41 interviews in 30 different companies. The fieldwork took place between December 2020 and June 2021. During this period there was a lockdown in the Netherlands due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the fieldwork was highly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic for three reasons:

First, the study was impacted by COVID because there wasn't an opportunity for on-site data collection. Face-to-face interviews weren't an option in the lockdown. Therefore, we did almost all interviews with online video calling; only two interviews were done by phone.

Second, we had a low response to our requests for interviews during the lockdown. To solve this low response issue, we interviewed three companies that did not provide input to the ESENER2019 survey. When the Dutch government announced for the first time some relaxations in the lockdown, it became easier to plan the last batch of interviews.

The third way in which COVID impacted the fieldwork was that many companies declined our request to interview an employee. Most of them gave lockdown-related reasons for declining the interview; for instance, some managers did not want to disturb their employees with an interview while they were in lockdown. Further, not every manager wanted an employee spending an hour interviewing while they could be doing productive work. This meant that there was a low response rate for employees, with 11 included in the sample.

The interview sample

As stated above, the fieldwork resulted in 41 interviews in 30 companies. We carried out 11 double interviews, in which we contacted both the manager and an employee, resulting in 22 in-depth interviews and 18 single interviews with just the company manager. Of the 11 double interviews, we carried out three interviews with employees in micro companies and eight interviews with employees in small companies. For an overview of this sample, see Table 1.

All interviews we carried out were with small or micro companies. As seen in the table, 10 of the 30 companies we interviewed had fewer than 1-9 employees. Of the companies with 10-49 employees, the number of employees was mostly between 10 and 30 (not shown in the table). One of these companies (from the sample of the ESENER 2019 study) was a business unit that was part of a bigger organisation, but had independent responsibility for the care of its employees. At its business unit it had less than 50 employees, even though the overall organisation has more than 50 in total.

Table 1: Interviews by size class and sector

No	Sector	Firm size	Double interview
1	Architect	1-9 employees	x
2	Bakery	10-49 employees	
3	Chemical industry	10-49 employees	
4	Cleaning	10-49 employees	
5	Corporate training	10-49 employees	x
6	Creative branch	10-49 employees	
7	Design industry	1-9 employees	
8	Electronic retail	1-9 employees	x
9	Employment agency	10-49 employees	
10	Employment agency	10-49 employees	
11	Food service industry	10-49 employees	x
12	Food service industry	1-9 employees	x
13	Gardening	1-9 employees	
14	Gardening	10-49 employees	
15	Healthcare	1-9 employees	x
16	Hotel	10-49 employees	
17	Industry	10-49 employees	
18	Insurance	10-49 employees	x
19	IT	1-9 employees	
20	Petrochemical inspection	10-49 employees	
21	Petrochemical industry	10-49 employees	x
22	Pharmacy	1-9 employees	
23	Primary education	10-49 employees	
24	Primary education	10-49 employees	
25	Public transport	10-49 employees	x
26	Publishing	10-49 employees	x
27	Security	1-9 employees	
28	Telecom	10-49 employees	x
29	Transport	10-49 employees	

4.2 The links between workplace culture, productivity, absenteeism and presenteeism and approaches to psychosocial risk management

Company culture

In general, managers in this study had an informal approach towards employees and would have liked to be viewed as approachable and equal to their employees. The only difference compared to employees is that managers take the final decisions. Also, employees in general stated that they can easily go to their manager when they have issues that they need to discuss. Most of the companies in this study were relatively flat and had an open and informal culture. Whether this is biased by the fact that these were employees who were allowed to talk to us by the employer is unclear.

Employees stated that they go to their managers when it is needed and that they talk to their manager as well as their colleagues about issues. Managers signalled that employees talk to their colleagues often before they come to their manager. Some employees also mentioned that their manager supports them when they experience difficulties in dealing with clients, which they appreciate. These can, for example, be issues related to unrealistic deadlines or dealing with misunderstandings with the client about products that have been delivered.

Absenteeism / Presenteeism

Absence rates in the companies we interviewed were low overall, particularly in the case of short-term absence. It was, however, sometimes the case that people were absent for a longer period of time because of burnout. Most companies mentioned a few such cases although they said that they did not consider these absences as fully work related, but rather due to stress connected with their private lives. One of the managers (10-49 employees) explained it in this way:

Manager in a small firm

'If you have problems in your private situation, it doesn't help if you have a bit of stress at work, so evidently a private problem becomes a work-related problem.'

Working when sick is also seen to be an issue in some cases, mainly in micro companies. Here, interviewees said that if employees call in sick, they will immediately burden their colleagues because the absence is more keenly felt in an organisation that is micro. Most interviewees from the micro companies who described being at work when sick explained that this is a result of solidarity with their co-workers.

Productivity

Almost all companies regarded focusing on and managing psychosocial risks as important. They shared an opinion that employees who feel well are more productive, and that this also has an impact on the way employees behave towards their colleagues. They care more for their colleagues and make sure that they are doing well. It also happens that employees give a signal to human resources (HR) or their managers when they feel that a colleague does not feel well. Further, clients also benefit from employees who are satisfied and happy in their job. As one employer (10-49 employees) said: *'Someone who goes happy to the office will do their job better.'*

4.3 Awareness level of psychosocial risk factors and obligation to manage them

Risk identification

Most managers stated that there are not that many psychosocial issues to deal with in their workplaces. Both employers and employees feel that they can share issues with their manager or colleagues easily. However, stress, because of working under time pressure, is recognised as a risk that can cause psychosocial issues, potentially leading to full burnout. Some organisations work with clients, which can also lead to stress. The clients sometimes have high demands or they do not understand how to deal with products that have been delivered. Issues related to bullying and intimidation are addressed as a risk to a lesser extent. It is difficult for employers and employees to indicate whether these are issues

because the line between when something is bullying and when not is deemed to be blurred. This was the opinion of one manager (10-49 employees):

Manager in a small firm

'The boys from my team are always making a lot of fun about each other. We always try to have a good time at work and make jokes. But one day, one of the boys complained: he didn't feel like they were making jokes but he felt bullied by the rest of the team. A pity it turned out this way, because the team did accept him, they didn't know it was regarded as bullying. So we invited an external counsellor and had a long and constructive team meeting with each other to talk about these things.'

The influence of the COVID-19 crisis differs according to sector, based on whether someone's function allows them to work from home and the financial effect of the crisis on the organisation. Some organisations were doing very well economically, while others had to let people go, which caused stress and insecurity for workers. Some people also find it easier to work from home than others. Both managers and employees have experienced communication as being more difficult during the COVID-19 crisis, due to a lack of personal contact. Therefore it was felt that it was harder to pick up signals of potential psychosocial issues. The managers tried to keep in contact with the employees who were working from home, for example with video calls, or they arranged 'office days' so that (a part of) the team could work on specific days in the week at the office.

Legal awareness

Most employers we spoke to stated that they were not aware of the legal framework regarding psychosocial risks, although they thought that they fulfil their legal obligations. For instance, some said that they have an (external) HR advisor or HR staff member who manages the legal aspects related to OSH and they all mentioned they make use of an occupational health and safety service.

They also stated that it is especially important to think logically and will only look up the legal framework when they think that it is necessary. About two-thirds of the employers said that they conduct a risk inventory (RA&E) but that this is not specifically focused on psychosocial issues. For instance, one interviewee explained that one of the RA&E aspects also focused on how to increase the satisfaction of customers.

Most employers answered that they have an external health and safety agent and confidential counsellors. Others are SCC certified³⁹ but have outsourced this to another organisation. However, this SCC certificate mainly focuses on physical safety, and it is seen more as a certificate on environmental risks and not so much as a certificate on psychosocial risks. Overall, the picture is of managers acting on what they feel: if something is not going well, the manager acts on this. This is something that was particularly common in micro companies; this was the opinion of one of the owners of a micro company (fewer than 10 employees):

Owner of a microenterprise

'We act when psychosocial risks happen, because we are too small to create a plan to prevent every potential psychosocial risk. I know all my employees very well, I know they are not susceptible for some potential social risks.'

The employee interviewees were also not aware of the legal framework regarding psychosocial risks, although they did assume that their employers know about the legal requirements. However, they said that they do look up the rules when they are (for instance) sick.

Psychosocial awareness and response

Almost all managers in this study were aware of psychosocial issues and stated that they act on this by trying to stay in touch with people, having regular conversations, team meetings and trying to encourage people to open up about their issues in a timely way. The goal is to solve potential issues and make sure that these issues do not escalate. Most managers told us they have not changed anything in the last years in terms of how they deal with psychosocial risks, because they saw no reason to change

³⁹ SCC is a certification often used in the Netherlands. It stands for 'Safety, Health and Environment (SHE) Checklist Contractors'. See: <https://www.vca.nl/home>

anything. The main explanation they mentioned is that most people know each other very well and so if a problem arises, this is noticed immediately.

From an employee perspective, during the COVID-19 crisis people struggled with working from home. Some employees were offered the opportunity to work in the office one or two days a week and overall companies tried to find out what employees needed and offer solutions. An external confidential counsellor was hired in some companies as a direct result of COVID-19. This was the opinion of one manager (10-49 employees):

Manager in a small firm

'I wanted that all employees talked to an external confidential counsellor to discuss what they thought about the measures we took as a company against COVID-19, if they felt safe about working at the office, if they preferred to work at home or perhaps preferred to come to the office. I wanted that they talked about this with an impartial person, like an external confidential counsellor, because I guessed the lockdown would endure a couple of months and it's important that they felt safe.'

Awareness campaigns

We found scant evidence of awareness of campaigns related to OSH. Only one employer said they were aware of a campaign on bullying at work. More companies are enrolled with a specific association to receive information and to stay informed about new OSH-related developments. Employees are not aware of any government campaigns in the field of OSH.

Role of inspectorate

We found no evidence of visits paid by the Labour Inspectorate that were connected specifically with psychosocial risks. The employees who mentioned that visits were carried out said that these visits focused more on ergonomic safety, material safety and physical safety.

4.4 The links between psychosocial risk management and overall management commitment to OSH

OSH management organisation

Most companies we spoke to did not put their way of dealing with psychosocial risks on paper, and this was particularly the case for micro companies (1-9 employees).

The managers who did have procedures or a policy in place to prevent or to deal with psychosocial risks were all part of a bigger organisation; for example, they lead a department, are a company that is part of a franchise, or are companies with 30-49 employees. These managers told us that they have some written policies, for example, in relation to intimidation and bullying. Their employees are not generally aware of these policies on a day-to-day basis but are referred to them if necessary. However, some managers stated that it might be necessary to remind employees of the written policies so that if it is necessary employees can find out about them.

Nevertheless, if a company does not have a procedure or official policy to prevent or deal with psychosocial risks, that does not mean that they are not doing anything in relation to these issues. For example, a practical approach is more common. This was the opinion of one manager of a transport company (10-49 employees):

Manager in a small firm

'Our truck drivers can have sometimes difficult jobs with lots of stress: long routes so you can't go home and have to spend the night sleeping in the cab, difficult clients and now with COVID-19, almost no place allowed where they can go to the toilet. If one of our truck drivers has a difficult stressful route at the beginning of the week, we ensure he has an easier route the rest of the week and will be at home on time. Besides this, every Friday we have a beer with all employees after work. So at the end of the week we can talk and hopefully laugh about the week and nobody goes home with stress.'

In our interviews this happened often: they said that they do not take any action to mitigate psychosocial risks and do not have a policy, but if we asked more questions, then there was someone in the company who did make sure that they looked after the social wellbeing of all employees. One interviewee (1-9 employees) explained this 'practical approach':

Manager in a small firm

'We won't write procedures down: if we think it's important, we do these things.'

One manager pointed out that he makes a round on the work floor every day to talk with everybody and see how everyone is doing. Other examples given to us of this practical approach are companies that try to prevent psychosocial risks by having regular talks with the team, one-on-one talks with employees, drinks at the end of the working week, meetings with the team or making sure that the schedule of work tasks is manageable.

One manager explained that the managers divide the difficult tasks between people. Another manager explained that they do not schedule all hours of the week full of work, so they have 'spare time' if one job takes more time than foreseen.

External OSH services

The majority of companies in this study said that they had a health and safety service, but that they did not use external OSH services focused on psychosocial risks. However, during some interviews the managers explained that they used a confidential counsellor. Other examples of external OSH services that interviewees used include an external occupational doctor, coaching advisors, HR advisors and social workers.

In the interviews, interviewees mentioned three main reasons why they use external OSH services. Firstly, some said that they adopted these external services after there was a reason to use them. In these cases there was a problem (for instance, an employee felt badly treated by a client, experienced aggressive customers, had difficulties in the team or experienced burnout) and they hired a service to help them solve the problem. The interviewees said that they acted on these problems by using external OSH services when there was a need for them. After this, the external OSH services stayed in the HR options that the companies provided and can be hired again if there is need for it.

Secondly, another reason that was often mentioned is that companies hire external OSH services because this is more efficient than doing it themselves. For example, an external HR advisor is hired because it is cheaper than expanding their own staff.

Thirdly, if interviewees hire an external confidential counsellor, the main reason they give is because they want to give their employees the opportunity to talk with a neutral person when the issue concerns a confidential topic. One of the interviewees (1-9 employees) explained:

Manager in a small firm

'Normally I had also the role of the confidential counsellor for our employees. But then we realised this could be a bit awkward for the employees, since my husband owns the company. Therefore it is better if they can talk to an external counsellor, someone who is more impartial.'

Another manager (1-9 employees) said:

Manager in a small firm

'We are a small company, we know each other well. So if something happens, it's better that they can talk with somebody from outside the company.'

Risk assessments

The majority of organisations do not perform risk assessments in relation to psychosocial risks, although most of the companies said they carry out an RA&E. Sometimes they said that psychosocial risks are also a part of the RA&E, but that they use the RA&E mainly to find traditional safety or health risks.

Only two of the few interviewees (from the educational sector and the pharmaceutical industry) that do perform risk assessments explained that they include psychosocial risks in this. The risk assessments are considered effective and any recommendations that come out of the assessments are seriously considered. The risk assessments focus mainly on safety in the workplace, for example, operating heavy machinery, or working with electricity and proper clothing at the workplace. Besides these two interviewees, there were also five employers who mentioned they organised an employee satisfaction survey to inventory psychosocial risks.

The employees were usually not involved in the risk assessments, but the manager was usually involved. The general opinion of the managers was that risk assessments are useful, even when they result in no recommendations. The lack of recommendations serves as confirmation that they are doing their job well.

4.5 Extent of psychosocial risk management and procedures in place

Actions to prevent psychosocial risks

The prevention of psychosocial risks is considered a difficult task. One manager explained that since the extent of exposure to psychosocial risk also depends on an employee's private life and their character, it is very difficult to prevent psychosocial risks:

Manager in a small firm

'What might be a joke for one person is considered a harassment by another.'

Another manager we talked to gave a similar example:

Manager in a small firm

'Not everyone will get the same amount of work-related stress from the same workload.'

The managers stated that their main action of prevention is to keep an eye on their employees. They do this by, for example, organising debriefings after work and regularly having coffee or lunch together, so they know how their employees experienced their working day. In section 4.4 there are also examples of these kinds of activities and actions being carried out in order to prevent psychosocial risks. Other examples of prevention actions for the wellbeing of their employees include: the availability of flexible hours, discounts at the gym, fruit at the office and hiring a legal colleague to help with debt problems.

Some organisations stated that they do not take any action to prevent psychosocial risks. The size of the interviewed organisations played a role in this. Actions on prevention are considered unnecessary in organisations with sizes as small as theirs (1-49), and as described in section 4.4, they can also opt for a more practical approach to psychosocial risk management.

Whereas some managers could list several actions taken for the prevention of psychosocial risks, the employees of the same organisation could not list any. The employees did notice when action was taken once a problem occurred, but they did not view those actions as prevention strategies, but rather as action being taken when it was necessary.

Training

The majority of employees interviewed did not know of any training available on psychosocial risks. In some cases the manager could list several, but the respective employee was unaware of them. Examples of trainings that were listed by managers are: an awareness training, a first aid training, a training on dealing with difficult clients and an Insights Discovery training.⁴⁰ This is a training about reflection (insight) into one's personality and about working together with different personalities in a team. This training stimulates team development and cooperation. However, these Insights trainings are not organised on a yearly basis. An example of this was a training on dealing with psychosocial risks, which was organised four years ago.

In cases where employees were unaware of any available trainings, they were asked about trainings that they would consider to be useful. In general, they replied that they consider trainings on psychosocial risks, such as time management and communication, to be helpful, but they do not prioritise them. They stated that they would rather learn important things on the job or follow trainings that are tailored to their needs.

⁴⁰ See: <https://www.insights.com/products/insights-discovery/>

Effectiveness of procedures

Procedures that are considered effective by managers include a practical approach to psychosocial risk management. This includes both companies that have a written procedure or policy and companies that do not but which have a practical approach to psychosocial risk management (as explained in section 4.4).

The managers we spoke to stated that they felt that maintaining a good relationship with their employees was the best way to prevent psychosocial risks. The employee answers were consistent with this: they stated that it is important for them that they feel that they can go to their managers when a problem occurs. They also felt that the manager needs to care for their employees and give them personal attention.

Procedures against bullying

In some organisations there are company rules on bullying, for example, a manual or ethics charter, and procedures in place for dealing with bullying. If someone is bullied, the procedure states the manager will talk with both parties. If there are company rules or a procedure against bullying, the managers know about this, but employees did not always know of the existence of these rules and where to find them.

In other organisations there is no information about this at all. If bullying occurs, managers have a conversation with the employees it concerns. A good example of such a situation was given by an interviewee who told about a coaching trajectory they started after an employee who was seconded to them by an employment agency complained about being bullied. After this trajectory, the bullied employee obtained a permanent position at that firm.

4.6 Barriers and drivers to psychosocial risk management and support needed

Main drivers

For employers, the main reason to be aware and act on signals of psychosocial issues among employees is the wellbeing of the workforce. Making sure that employees feel well leads to the prevention of short- and long-term non-attendance and as a consequence productivity increases. In the case of companies that have to deal with customers, it was stated that happy employees will lead to happy customers. Some companies have dealt with a few employees who suffer or have suffered from a burnout. Most employers find it important to stay in touch with these employees, support them and give them time to recover so as to prevent recurrences in the future.

Main barriers

The employers interviewed mentioned that the largest barrier for managers is knowing and being aware of what is happening to employees and what they are dealing with in their lives: some employees find it easier to share thoughts and feelings than other employees. The majority of managers interviewed consider not being informed about employee experiences to be the main barrier for dealing with psychosocial risks and supporting employees who need this. This was the opinion of one manager (10-49 employees):

Manager in a small firm

'If the employees don't tell you what's going on, you don't know it and you can't help them.'

Some managers are conscious of this and really try to pay attention to signals and stay in touch with employees. Every day or week they try to conduct informal conversations with all their employees and this helps them to see how everyone is doing. They also look to other signals: for instance, a manager of a transport company explained that if a truck driver has more fines than usual, that is a signal that something is going on with the driver.

The COVID-19 crisis has created an extra barrier to the management of psychosocial risks because it has been more difficult to find out and know how people are because of working (partially) remotely. Employees said that it was more difficult to stay in touch with colleagues and to know how everyone is doing.

Some managers experienced a lack of time or money as a barrier. For example, in a micro company it puts a lot of pressure on productivity when all employees have a team meeting. Further, the manager of a bakery said that this company does not have time during working hours to engage in team building or meetings. They cannot close the bakery for customers, and because they are open six days a week, they have working shifts and the whole team is never working at the same time. According to the manager, the only option for a team meeting or for social drinks with all workers would be a Saturday evening. Therefore, the prevention strategy of this manager for psychosocial risks was one-on-one conversations with employees while they are at work in the bakery.

According to the employers we spoke to, the mitigating solutions that were highlighted to overcome these barriers included building trust and creating a connection with employees, so that they feel comfortable talking to their manager. The employees we spoke to also mentioned this. Another mitigating solution cited by employers was creating a good atmosphere in the team, so people also share issues with each other. For example, most companies have team meetings to share issues that are content-related or about work pressure. Other activities included organising team drinks or team-building activities. Some companies have organised a training session about working together with colleagues or customers who have a different character.

Government or sectoral responsibilities

Almost all employers were not aware of and did not make use of governmental initiatives to organise the management of psychosocial risks. They stated that even if there were approaches available, they would probably not make use of them because there is no need. Some companies were enrolled in a sectoral organisation for relevant information, including about psychosocial risks. One company followed seminars of the occupational health service that they experienced as interesting. Most companies had the feeling that large, formal approaches from, for example, the government are not relevant to them because they are a micro or small company. Employees were not aware whether their employers use governmental initiatives.

Measures introduced

Many companies stated that they have introduced an internal or external confidential support person so that if people have issues they can contact this person. A few companies chose to hire a counsellor/social worker during the first wave of COVID-19 to offer people an extra possibility to talk to someone. However, most people stated that they do not make use of a confidential person, because they want to talk to someone they know and have a connection with. This is, for example, a colleague, a manager or HR person.

Some companies faced conflicts between colleagues in the same department or the exclusion of a colleague. This led to the organisation of talks with the whole team or team-building activities. Another example is the organisation of one day that was fully about sharing issues with each other and overcoming barriers to share issues. Some companies also helped with other problems that employees have, for example related to money or drugs, referring them to a financial coach or rehabilitation clinic.

Other external measures

In general, the company interviewees thought that there is no need to use external OSH measures. Companies stated that maybe in the future when the company grows, there may be a need for more rules and stricter regulation to keep the overview and to make sure that employees find their way in the company. However, for now, they thought that this was not necessary.

In terms of actual measures, employers mentioned measures such as playing sports or having a room to relax in at work. They also mentioned extra training on the development of employees, which could also be broader than dealing with psychosocial risks.

5 Conclusions

This chapter provides the main conclusions for each of the main topic areas explored via the interviews.

5.1 Awareness level of psychosocial risk factors and obligation to manage them

Most employers stated that they were not aware of the legal framework regarding psychosocial risks. They said that it is especially important to think logically and that they will only look up the legal framework when it is necessary. Managers acted on what they feel: if something does not go well, the managers act on this by trying to stay in touch with employees, having regular conversations, holding team meetings and trying to encourage people to open up about their issues. These actions are also taken to prevent psychosocial issues.

Time pressure is the most recognised psychosocial risk in the ESENER 2019 study. Therefore, it is not surprising that work-related stress due to time pressure is mentioned as the most prevalent psychosocial risk here. In the ESENER 2019 study, 'difficult customers' is a close second risk. This is also mentioned in the interviews with establishments that have regular contact with 'customers', for instance the establishments that are active in healthcare, primary education, public transport or shops.

5.2 The links between psychosocial risk management and overall management commitment to occupational health and safety

The majority of companies in this study said that they had a health and safety service, but that they did not focus on psychosocial risks. External OSH services were put in place after there was a reason to use them. Overall, they did not hire these services to prevent something they consider to be of low risk of occurring.

The majority of organisations did not perform risk assessments on psychosocial risks. The risk assessments that have taken place related to safety in the workplace, for example, operating heavy machinery, working with electricity and appropriate protective clothing at the workplace. Most companies had an RA&E, and some of these companies were aware that psychosocial risks are also a part of the RA&E. When companies have more than 25 employees, the RA&E must be tested by a certified policy officer. Since we mostly spoke with companies that have fewer employees, it was expected that most companies would report that they carried out the RA&E themselves. In the Netherlands, psychosocial risks are often catalogued within a job or work satisfaction survey. But surveys are not so frequent (and useful) in MSEs or SMEs.

5.3 Extent of psychosocial risk management and procedures in place

The smaller the company, the less likely it was that they had procedures or policy documents in place in relation to managing psychosocial risks. This is also seen in the ESENER 2019 survey: the larger the company, the more likely it is that the company has procedures in place for dealing with possible cases of bullying or harassment and for dealing with violence by external persons. About two third of the companies with 20-49 employees has these procedures.

Overall, the small and medium companies we've interviewed tended not to put their way of dealing with psychosocial risks on paper, but preferred to use a practical approach by having regular talks, drinks and meetings with the team. Small companies often did have some kind of policy, but it was not known by the employees in the organisation. Most of the time, they had someone (often the manager) who looked after the wellbeing of the employees and referred to these documents if necessary.

Based on the abovementioned results, we conclude that in companies with only a practical approach, there is a risk that if the person who looks after the wellbeing of the employees leaves, the activities to prevent psychosocial risks also stop. However, this is no different in companies with a procedure or policy documents: someone must always feel responsible for implementing this policy. However, having a procedure or policy documents is beneficial in terms of being able to hand over this task, and employees have something to fall back on if these activities decrease.

Overall, the most effective procedure in managing psychosocial risks is considered to be maintaining a good relationship with employees. This was confirmed by both the manager and employee interviewees for this study.

5.4 Barriers and drivers to psychosocial risk management and support needed

For employers, the main driver to be aware and act on signals of psychosocial issues among employees is the wellbeing of employees. Making sure that employees feel well leads to the prevention of short- and long-term non-attendance and in turn an increase in productivity.

The most important barrier for managers is to know and to be aware of what is going on with employees, because some employees find it easier to share thoughts and feelings than others. The mitigating solutions to overcome these barriers are to build trust and a connection with employees so that they feel comfortable talking to their manager.

In the interviews it was noted that both managers and employees experienced a lack of personal contact due to the restrictions related to COVID-19. For managers it was therefore more difficult to notice the signs of potential psychosocial issues. Since (according to the managers) the main barrier for the management of psychosocial risks is considered to be not being informed by the employee of a problem, they found this lack of contact difficult. Therefore, the managers tried to keep in contact with the employees who were working from home, for example via video calls.

Almost all employers said that they do not make use of governmental initiatives to organise the management of psychosocial risks. They stated

that even if there were approaches available, they would probably not make use of them because there is no need, in their view. In general, there is also no need among employees for external measures. A few employees mentioned sport/providing a relaxing room during working hours.

5.5 The links between workplace culture, productivity, absenteeism and presenteeism and approaches to psychosocial management

Most companies are relatively flat and have an open and informal culture. This might be an aspect of the Dutch working culture, as there is generally a low level of hierarchy in the workplace. Managers in the Netherlands are often seen as co-workers rather than as a boss who is higher in hierarchy. In general, managers told us that they have an informal approach towards employees: they would like to be viewed as approachable and equal to their employees.

Presenteeism in terms of employees working when sick does occur, mainly in smaller companies due to a form of solidarity. If employees call in sick, they will immediately burden their co-workers because the absence will be felt in the organisation.

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