

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 (Poland)

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1 Introduction

This report presents a qualitative follow-up study to the Third European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER 2019) in Poland. It encompasses four key sources of information: primary data collection among management and employee representatives in micro and small companies (a total of 25 companies consulted with a total of 46 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between December 2020 and March 2021); ESENER 2019 dataset; review of relevant policy and legal framework governing psychosocial risk management in Poland; and semi-structured interviews with representatives of key national institutions and social partners.¹ Three data collection efforts were integrated to provide a picture of the key approaches, challenges and trends in managing psychosocial risks among the Polish companies employing between five and 50 people.

Research for the report was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited opportunities for on-site data collection (initially planned interviews and visits to the enterprises) and allowed for timely capturing of the impact this public health crisis had on the companies. While the original data collection methodology assumed interviewing representatives of the companies that provided inputs to the ESENER 2019 survey in 2019, low response rate within this group (prompted in part due to lockdown and the dire economic situation provoked by the pandemic) led to the adjustment of methodology and inclusion of other micro and small entities. A sampling of the additional group followed the general methodology initially defined for the study. It must be acknowledged that adjustment of the data collection methodology has impacted the results. Conducting interviews over the telephone rather than in person has reduced their depth and scope. The inclusion of 13 non-ESENER 2019 respondents made the comparison of the qualitative data collection with the survey responses insufficient on the level of individual companies for arriving at meaningful conclusions.

2 Legal and policy context

This chapter provides an overview of the Polish 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

The legal and policy context of psychosocial risk management in Poland is part of the broader occupational safety and health (OSH) framework, consisting of national stakeholders and corresponding laws. The Ministry of Economic Development, Labour and Technology is the main body responsible for legal regulations around individual labour law, including regulations on health and safety and coordination and monitoring of the Chief Labour Inspectorate and Central Institute for Labour Protection – National Research Institute (CIOP-PIB). While the Ministry of Health is accountable for coordinating and monitoring the Chief Sanitary Inspectorate, its relevance to psychosocial risks is limited as the occupational diseases list does not involve any stress-induced diseases. The central monitoring body for occupational health, the Chief Labour Inspectorate, monitors workplaces and their compliance with labour law and offers training and informational programmes concerning psychosocial risk management. Along with 16 district labour inspectorates, the organisation is the primary contact point for employees in case of violations. Labour inspectorates are also the primary entities responsible for the prevention

¹ The list includes interviews with representatives of 1) Central Institute for Labour Protection – National Research Institute (CIOP-PIB); 2) All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (OPZZ); 3) NZSS 'Solidarity'; 4) one district labour inspectorate; and 5) Chief Labour Inspectorate and the Ministry of Economic Development, Labour and Technology who provided written inputs by email dated 18 May 2021.

programme. Lastly, the Social Dialogue Council, a tripartite body composed of representatives of employees, employers and government representatives, includes a unit dedicated specifically to psychosocial risks.

The essential legal and policy framework for OSH in the country is contained within the Labour Code;² specifically, section X and the National Strategy for Occupational Safety and Health implemented since 2008 as the Multiannual National Programme, currently in Stage 5 (2020-2022).

There are still some challenges in regard to execution of standards of physical safety and health at work in the country, and according to representatives of trade unions and labour inspectorates consulted for this report, psychosocial risks are still not considered a priority. Some of the regulatory challenges include the fact that the Labour Code does not explicitly speak of 'psychosocial risks' but instead includes them in all work-related risks,³ meaning that there is not enough emphasis on stress, poor communication and excessive workload. Second, the main supervising body – the Chief Labour Inspectorate – is believed to be under-resourced. Along with the other 16 district labour inspectorates, the organisation is the primary contact point for employees in case of violations. Labour inspectorates are also the primary entities responsible for the prevention programme.

2.2 Key legal requirements, and recent legislative proposals and revisions

Management of psychosocial risks is governed by the 1997 Labour Code⁴ and the corresponding Ministerial Order issued by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy in September 1997. Some articles of the Labour Code, *inter alia*, Articles 15, 78-86 and 129, define and regulate several areas crucial for maintaining a healthy psychosocial environment, such as working conditions, time and wages. Several provisions revolve around the issue of psychosocial health.

Firstly, under Article 207 of the Labour Code, employers must provide a safe and hygienic environment for employees.⁵ Employers must prevent risks, eliminate their causes and adjust working conditions to the abilities of the employee.⁶

Secondly, under Article 16, an employer shall, according to their abilities, satisfy the social and cultural needs of an employee. Moreover, the Labour Code⁷ prohibits mobbing and discrimination. Under art. 94⁽³⁾⁸ of the Labour Code, an employee who has experienced mobbing has a right to claim damages and seek financial compensation from the employer. However, although employers are obliged to counteract mobbing, their duty in this regard remains unregulated. The Labour Code does not impose any particular responsibilities on employers in terms of counteractions, such as anti-mobbing training awareness-raising activities, or special units to whom mobbed employees could report. Discrimination is covered in Articles 11 and 94, stating that discrimination in the workplace is prohibited and employers must prevent discrimination practices. However, the Labour Code does not provide any further preventive measures other than informing employees on legal regulations concerning equal treatment (Article 94).

Lastly, as per Article 207 (2) in point (4) of the Labour Code, employers – while preparing a policy on eliminating workplace injuries and work-induced diseases – should consider social relations as one of the elements responsible for a healthy working environment. An essential component of every OSH onboarding process is the risk assessment. While the Polish legal framework obliges an employer to conduct a risk assessment of each work process, there is no specific mention of psychosocial risk

² Labour Code available in Polish at: <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU19740240141/U/D19740141Lj.pdf>

³ Ibidem.

⁴ [Labour Code](#) (in Polish).

⁵ [Labour Code](#) (in Polish).

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Article 94 of the Labour Code.

⁸ Polish Labour Code has some articles indexed, hence the upper numbering.

components.⁹ The scope of the risk assessment can vary depending on the enterprise and specific job position, and the employer carries it.¹⁰

The Labour Code is accompanied by a ministerial order, which provides basic OSH rules. The underlying theme of the regulation is that employers are obliged to provide a safe and healthy environment for employees.¹¹ Apart from the provisions mentioned above, the Labour Code does not directly refer to psychosocial components nor does it define psychosocial health as such.

Over the years, European autonomous framework non-binding agreements, concluded by the EU-level cross-sector social partners, have provided an incentive for organising employees and employers on a range of OSH-related issues. One example is an autonomous agreement on work-related stress (2004)¹² and an agreement on harassment and violence at work (2007),¹³ both being a platform to deliver common recommendations on psychosocial risk. Social partners have voiced the need to include the definition of psychosocial risks and provide clear coverage of psychosocial risks in the Labour Code. Other proposed solutions included psychosocial risk in employee individual risk assessments and introducing obligatory psychosocial components in OSH employee training.¹⁴

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought changes to the working environment, calling for more safety measures, expanding teleworking and shift work. The 'Act on special solutions related to the prevention, counteraction and combating of COVID-19, other infectious diseases and crises caused by them' focuses mainly on preventive regulations and protective measures against spreading of COVID-19.¹⁵ However, this document has introduced a new – remote – form of work and obliged employers to provide a safe and hygienic environment while working remotely.

Due to the pandemic, the wide application of remote work has prompted the Ministry of Economic Development, Labour and Technology to work on regulations on remote work for inclusion in the Labour Code. The draft obliges employers to prepare an occupational risk assessment dedicated to remote work involving work-related psychosocial risks. In 2021, the ministry planned to direct inter-ministerial consultations, opinions, and social consultations on the proposed changes. The ministry anticipated further changes to the Labour Code addressing such issues as cyberbullying and other psychosocial risks. Another anticipated change should lead to covering these risks in OSH training.¹⁶ As of March 2022, the Ministry of Social Policy and Family¹⁷ website mentioned that changes to the Labour Code were being consulted with social partners, and revised law was to come into force in August 2022. The ministry communication, largely focused on the rights of parents, indicated that the revised law would cover remote work, but any other changes related to psychosocial risks were not known.¹⁸

⁹ Two legal sources mention risk assessments. The [Ministerial Order on training in the OSH area, 27/07/2004](#) refers to risk assessment in the paragraph (9) in point (2) (ministerial orders follow different numbering than codes and bills, instead of articles, paragraphs are used). The Labour Code regulates this issue in Article 226 and further in Chapter VIII Trainings, article 237⁽³⁾. Lack of specification to include psychosocial risk components was also mentioned in the interviews with the representative of the CIOP-PIB and the representative of social partner NZSS 'Solidarity'.

¹⁰ Article 226 of the Labour Code.

¹¹ [Ministerial Order on health and hygiene in the workplace](#) (in Polish).

¹² [Framework agreement on work-related stress](#)

¹³ [Framework agreement on harassment and violence at work](#).

¹⁴ OPZZ, NZSS *Solidarność*, *Forum Związków Zawodowych, Pracodawcy RP*, Konferencja Lewiatan, [Wspólna deklaracja partnerów społecznych dotycząca zapobiegania i przeciwdziałania zjawisku stresu związanego z pracą](#), 2008 (in Polish); OPZZ, NZSS *Solidarność*, *Forum Związków Zawodowych, Forum Rzemiosła Polskiego, Pracodawcy RP*, Konferencja Lewiatan, [Wspólne Rekomendacje Zespołu Negocjacyjnego Partnerów Społecznych w sprawie poprawienia skuteczności działań dotyczących zjawiska stresu związanego z pracą, wynikające z deklaracji partnerów społecznych z dnia 14 listopada 2008 roku dotyczącej zapobiegania i przeciwdziałania zjawisku stresu związanego z pracą](#), 2014 (in Polish). Issues around possible legal improvements were also voiced during interviews with the representative of CIOP-PIB, the representative of All of Trade Unions (OPZZ) and the representative of NZSS 'Solidarity'.

¹⁵ [Ustawa z dnia 20 marca 2020 o szczególnych rozwiązaniach związanych z zapobieganiem, przeciwdziałaniem i zwalczaniem COVID-19, innych chorób zakaźnych oraz wywołanych nimi sytuacji kryzysowych](#) (in Polish).

¹⁶ Email correspondence with the Ministry of Economic Development, Labour and Technology dated 18 May 2021. On file with the report authors

¹⁷ The Ministry of Social Policy and Family overtook labour policies after the Ministry of Economic Development, Labour and Technology was transformed into the Ministry of Economic Development and Technology

¹⁸ The Ministry of Social Policy and Family, [Ważne zmiany dla rodziców. Projekt zmian w Kodeksie pracy trafił do konsultacji społecznych](#) (in Polish)

2.3 Psychosocial risk management policy objectives

From the policy perspective, psychosocial risk management is covered first and foremost by the Multiannual National Programme called 'Improvement of safety and working conditions'. The programme has been running since 2008, and it is divided into three-year periods, with Stage 5 (for 2020-2022) being currently implemented.¹⁹ The main objectives of the programme are to design innovative organisational and technical solutions aimed at the development of human resources, and – at the same time – the development of technologies that would lead to minimising the number of employees working in hazardous or harmful conditions.

The 2020-2022 programme sets targets such as: (i) the creation of a legal basis for the implementation of EU strategic frameworks and directives in the sphere of OSH; (ii) design and fine-tuning of measures preventing professional exclusion as well as solutions aimed at enabling employees to retain their work capability; (iii) development of methods and tools to prevent and reduce occupational risks; and (iv) shaping and promotion of the safety culture.

Although the programme strongly focuses on new technologies and the fast-developing digital world, human capital development remains a core element of the policy. The programme's psychosocial risk actions target a number of groups: employers, employees, OSH and human resources specialists, psychologists and other professionals. The programme activities are implemented on three levels: central, local and social, and they are generally divided into two categories: (i) performance of activities by official authorities; and (ii) conducting studies, research and development by research institutes.

As of May 2021, the Ministry of Economic Development, Labour and Technology initiated works on the sixth stage of the Multiannual National Programme, planned for 2023-2025. Anticipated projects are intended to cover emerging psychosocial risks connected with new forms of employment, increasing job insecurity, social isolation, digitisation and automation of work processes, increased cognitive workload and increasing time pressure.²⁰ The Laboratory of Social Psychology at the Department of Ergonomics, CIOP-PIB is responsible for carrying out scientific research specifically in the area of psychosocial working conditions. The laboratory conducts research into occupational stress, workplace bullying and job burnout, develops methods and tools to measure occupational stress across a wide range of occupations, and formulates recommendations for the prevention of workplace stress and reduction of the negative consequences of occupational stress on workers' wellbeing and health, accounting for both individual and organisational resources, as well as promoting psychosocial safety culture. Anticipated projects for the upcoming sixth stage of the Multiannual National Programme are intended to cover emerging psychosocial risks connected with new forms of employment, increasing job insecurity, social isolation, digitisation and automation of work processes, cyberbullying at work, increased cognitive workload, increasing time pressure, the working conditions of young workers, work ability, and maintaining professional activity among selected occupational groups and women.²¹

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

The inspection regime concerns legal aspects of working conditions, including safety and health regulations. Inspections are delivered predominantly on the district level by the labour inspectorate and can be initiated at any time, without prior notice.²² Usually, companies tend to be notified, which provides them with time to prepare.²³ Visits can be initiated by employees or can be part of a prevention programme. The Chief Labour Inspectorate organises sector-specific inspections as part of the

¹⁹ CIOP-PIB, [Program Wieloletni. 'Poprawa Bezpieczeństwa i Warunków Pracy' – V etap 2020-2022](#) (in Polish).

²⁰ Email correspondence with the Ministry of Economic Development, Labour and Technology, dated 18 May 2021. On file with the report authors.

²¹ For a detailed list of projects implemented within the Multiannual National Programme 2020-2020 by CIOP-PIB, see https://www.ciop.pl/CIOPPortalWAR/appmanager/ciop/pl?_nfpb=true&_pageLabel=P26800385591408696399667&html_tresc_root_id=21639&html_tresc_id=300011837&html_klucz=21639&html_klucz_spis=

²² [Act on Chief Labour Inspectorate](#) (in Polish).

²³ [Act on Chief Labour Inspectorate](#) (in Polish), Article 26 (3) reads that: 'Before commencing inspection activities, the labour inspector reports their presence to the employer, except when they consider that such notification may affect the objective result of the inspection.' This issue was also voiced during the interview with the representative of NZSS 'Solidarity'.

prevention programme. This is announced in advance, and within a specific period companies of the chosen sector are prioritised in visits.²⁴

Labour inspectorate visits focus on monitoring a workplace, checking the compliance of legal documents, verifying procedures, and conducting short interviews with employees and employers. If an inspection shows violations such as direct safety and health hazards, or issues with contact, and payments, psychosocial environment verification can get overlooked.²⁵

On psychosocial risks specifically, several measures can be taken by labour inspectorates. However, these do not lead to any obligatory actions that need to be taken by the employer. During an inspection, the labour inspectorate can invite employees to fill in an anonymous survey. The survey is designed to provide information on the extent of psychosocial risks (mainly stress) that employees are exposed to in the workplace. The survey results can be communicated to the employer, with non-obligatory recommendations to introduce changes or an invitation to participate in appropriate thematic training.²⁶

In the case of inspections on psychosocial issues, therefore, the formal and legal competencies of labour inspectorates are limited. These focus on advice, recommendations and counselling.²⁷ This is much more limited compared with other areas such as contracts, where the labour inspectorate has several tools and actions available.

The 2019 Chief Labour Inspectorate report shows that only 2.8% of all formal complaints were focused on discrimination, harassment and mobbing. Additionally, only 7% of these were considered valid, as most of the actions were either incidental (thus, not qualifying as mobbing) or were not supported by enough evidence.²⁸ According to the representative of a district labour inspectorate, these statistics likely do not reflect the full scale of mobbing, as employees may be reluctant to report such problems.²⁹ Currently, the burden of proof is on the employee, and cases of mobbing are problematic to prove in court, especially considering the weak position of the employee, as reported by the representatives of CIOP-PIB and NZSS 'Solidarity'.³⁰ The labour inspectorate has no competence in stating that mobbing is in place in a company. It can only advise and inform on legal actions that can be taken.

2.5 Specific policy initiatives targeting MSEs and psychosocial risks

As pointed out in the interviews with trade unions, CIOP-PIB and labour inspectorates, there is a substantial gap in policies specifically addressing MSEs regarding psychosocial risks.³¹ Further, microenterprises (1-9 employees) are rarely unionised, reducing the possible impact of actions taken by trade unions. The situation is somewhat better in the case of small enterprises (with 10-49 employees), where employees are more likely to be trade union members, and can therefore benefit from training on psychosocial risks, legal support and networking.

CIOP-PIB acknowledges the substantial difficulty in reaching micro and small enterprises, given the specificity of their operations. Micro and small enterprises are not required to have OSH employee representatives in the company. Micro companies face difficulties surviving in a business environment, stopping their activity or transforming into one-person business activity. In such circumstances, the

²⁴ The plan for inspections for the following year is available online on the Chief Labour Inspectorate website in late December. The [2021 Inspection Plan](#) foresees inspections in the following sectors: meat processing, municipal waste management, forestry and agriculture. Similar conclusions were drawn during the interview with the representative of the Chief Labour Inspectorate.

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ Kucharska, A. (2018). Pracownik wobec mobbingu. Państwowej Inspekcji Pracy. <https://www.pip.gov.pl/pl/f/v/199748/PRACOWNIK%20WOBEK%20MOBBINGU%20INTERNET.pdf>
The issue of survey and recommendation was also mentioned during an interview with one district labour inspectorate representative.

²⁷ Ibidem. This report notes that: 'Reporting mobbing may be related to a visit of a labour inspector in the organisation. If the employee agrees to raise their case openly with the employer, then the inspector can talk about it; nevertheless, it is not for them to decide whether mobbing has occurred or not and the overlap of this sanction (a court can only do this).' Similar sentiments about competences of labour inspectorates were expressed in interviews with one district labour inspectorate representative, and the representative of NZSS 'Solidarity'.

²⁸ Chief Labour Inspectorate, [Sprawozdanie Głównego Inspektora Pracy z działalności Państwowej Inspekcji Pracy - 2019](#) (in Polish).

²⁹ Interview with one district labour inspectorate representative.

³⁰ Interviews with the representative of CIOP-PIB and representative of NZSS 'Solidarity'.

³¹ Interviews with representatives of trade unions, CIOP-PIB and the representative of one district labour inspectorate

management of psychosocial risks is not considered a high priority, compounded by the fact that business owners often do not have the resources for this. At the same time, the fact that micro and small companies are usually family-run businesses leads to their fuller appreciation of the importance of the wellbeing of their employees.

The CIOP-PIB established the Safe Work Leadership Forum,³² which focuses on creating a network of large companies and promoting a more expanded understanding of OSH, including psychosocial risks. The rationale behind this action is that large companies can attract employees by providing a better psychosocial working environment.

Both the CIOP-PIB and the Chief Labour Inspectorate conduct informational and educational actions for small and microenterprises. For example, the CIOP-PIB has established a separate website on health and safety at work, dedicated only to microenterprises. The website contains a section on psychosocial risk management accompanied by general information on health and safety and sector-specific materials.³³ Another MSE-oriented action is 'Get a Chief Labour Inspection Diploma'. This involves educational activities on health and safety and further audits of introduced changes in the establishment. However, this initiative does not have any special segment on psychosocial risk management.³⁴

2.6 Training and courses focusing on psychosocial risks

The abovementioned ministerial order regulates general rules of OSH training. It differentiates between two types of OSH training: initial training and regular training, with the frequency of the regular training depending on the position of the employee and the working environment. Neither the ministerial order nor the Labour Code obliges employers to include psychosocial risks in OSH training.³⁵ However, some employers have decided to do this. A report, 'Safety at work in Poland in 2019. Mobbing, Depression, Stress at Work', developed for the Safe at Work Coalition, shows that 58% of respondents had psychosocial components in their training, focusing mainly on people relations and stress.³⁶

Enterprises that employ fewer than 100 employees are not obliged to employ OSH-specialised staff, and training can be carried out either by an external OSH entity or an employer, provided that the working environment is not classified as hazardous. In practice, this may cause differences in the extent and quality of OSH training available in small and microenterprises.

Voluntary training on psychosocial risks is a substantial component of preventive actions of governmental institutions. Every year, the Chief Labour Inspectorate organises preventive actions focusing on stress and other psychosocial risk management. District labour inspectorates deliver this programme and its implementation varies according to district-level resources. It involves training for employees and employers, and it may include an audit of the company if desired.³⁷ Training for professionals, employees and employers, and social organisations are also available regularly at the CIOP-PIB³⁸ or the Training Centre of the Chief Labour Inspectorate.³⁹ The CIOP-PIB presents risk assessment sheets on its website, prepared for almost 100 different professions and involving psychosocial risk components.⁴⁰ During the COVID-19 pandemic, the CIOP-PIB prepared risk assessment sheets in relation to remote working and covering communication issues, time pressure, work-life balance and feelings of isolation.

Additionally, the Training Centre of the Chief Labour Inspectorate provides training programmes for any work-related area, including psychosocial risks.⁴¹ In 2021, the Chief Labour Inspectorate coordinated two actions on psychosocial risk in the workplace: training for professional drivers and work-related

³² CIOP-PIB, [Forum Liderów- informacje ogólne](#) (in Polish).

³³ CIOP-PIB, [BHP dla Mikroprzedsiębiorstw](#) (in Polish).

³⁴ Chief Labour Inspectorate, [Sprawozdanie Głównego Inspektora Pracy z działalności Państwowej Inspekcji Pracy - 2019](#) (in Polish); Interview 4.

³⁵ [Ministerial Order on training in the OSH area, 27/07/2004](#) (in Polish).

³⁶ Koalicja Bezpieczni w Pracy, [Mobbing, stres, depresja w miejscu pracy](#) (in Polish).

³⁷ Chief Labour Inspectorate, [Sprawozdanie Głównego Inspektora Pracy z działalności Państwowej Inspekcji Pracy - 2019](#) (in Polish); Interview with the representative of one district labour inspectorate.

³⁸ CIOP-PIB, [Aktualna oferta edukacyjna](#) (in Polish).

³⁹ Chief Labour Inspectorate's Training Centre, [Działalność szkoleniowa](#) (in Polish).

⁴⁰ CIOP-PIB, [Karty charakterystyk zagrożeń zawodowych](#) (in Polish).

⁴¹ Chief Labour Inspectorate's Training Centre, [Działalność szkoleniowa](#) (in Polish).

psychosocial risks management issues; and a programme for employers, 'Prevention of negative effects of stress in the workplace'.⁴²

According to the representative of CIOP-PIB, over the years, the interest in training on psychosocial issues has increased, especially in companies branding themselves as responsible employers. The perception of this training has shifted as previously psychosocial topics were seen as not necessary. Over the last years, the interest in stress management and counteracting mobbing activities has increased, but it can also be affected by regional dynamics, as pointed out by the representative of a district labour inspectorate. As training on psychosocial issues is voluntary, they reach primarily people who are already interested in the topic of psychosocial risks, and therefore don't reach enterprises that are not aware of or not actively interested in psychosocial risks, as indicated by the representative of CIOP-PIB.⁴³

2.7 Public awareness campaigns

Public awareness campaigns and actions in Poland, especially those focused on psychosocial risks, are scattered across time and different institutions. It was noted by the representative of CIOP-PIB that there is a lack of systemic coordination that could provide effective outreach and evaluation of actions.⁴⁴ However, institutions do cooperate and support themselves with insight and know-how. The Chief Labour Inspectorate regularly cooperates with trade unions to reach out to members of specific professions and sectors.⁴⁵

Since 2006, the Chief Labour Inspectorate has been delivering a prevention programme involving public awareness campaigns.⁴⁶ Between 2015 and 2016, the campaign focused on stress at work, and it provided educational materials on mitigating stress in the workplace and contact information to relevant institutions.

In the case of CIOP-PIB, large-scale promotional campaigns date back to a few years ago. Between 2014 and 2016, the campaigns 'Good communication is a part of safe work' and 'Employee health is a profit to the company' entailed accompanying activities that involved 15,000 employees. These campaigns entailed, among others, educational and promotional actions followed by psychological support to the participants and workshops on stress management.⁴⁷ Between 2014 and 2015, another public awareness action was called 'Stress at work - no thanks!'. This was conducted as part of the European campaign initiated by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA). It included 27 events and promotional activities on stress in the workplace, and it involved 1,600 in-person participants and many more viewers on mass and social media.⁴⁸

CIOP-PIB additionally runs smaller-scale promotional actions. These have various dedicated sections or websites where the organisation presents articles and recommendations on psychosocial risk management, including violence in the workplace,⁴⁹ conflicts in the workplace,⁵⁰ depression,⁵¹ or the pandemic, and mental health.⁵² Many other promotional printed materials like posters and brochures are also available, free of charge, to any interested entity.⁵³ Additionally, CIOP-PIB is responsible for co-organising annual celebrations of World Day for Safety and Health at Work by distributing promotional materials and encouraging willing entities to participate. The 2021 campaign, themed 'Anticipate, prepare and respond to the crises. Invest now in resilient OSH System', underlined new emerging psychosocial risks in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁴

⁴² Chief Labour Inspectorate, [Program działania PIP na 2021](#) (in Polish).

⁴³ Interview with the representative of CIOP-PIB.

⁴⁴ Interview with the representative of CIOP-PIB.

⁴⁵ Interview with the representative of the Chief Labour Inspectorate.

⁴⁶ Chief Labour Inspectorate, [Program Prewencyjny PIP](#) (in Polish).

⁴⁷ CIOP-PIB, [Informacyjna Kampania społeczna 2014 - Dobra komunikacja elementem bezpiecznej pracy](#) (in Polish).

⁴⁸ CIOP-PIB, [Europejska kampania informacyjna 2014-2015](#) (in Polish).

⁴⁹ CIOP-PIB, [Opis zagrożeń zawodowych, Przemoc w pracy](#) (in Polish).

⁵⁰ CIOP-PIB, [Sprawy ogólne BHP, Konflikty w pracy](#) (in Polish).

⁵¹ CIOP-PIB, [Sprawy ogólne BHP, Depresja w pracy](#) (in Polish).

⁵² CIOP-PIB, [Epidemia n zdrowie psychiczne](#) (in Polish).

⁵³ Interview with the representative of CIOP-PIB.

⁵⁴ CIOP-PIB, [Światowy Dzień Bezpieczeństwa i Ochrony Zdrowia w Pracy, Międzynarodowy Dzień Pamięci Ofiar Wypadków przy Pracy i Chorób Zawodowych, 28 kwietnia 2021](#) (in Polish).

Employers of Poland, a national representative organisation of employers in Poland, organised the campaign 'Understand. Feel. Act'. This campaign focuses on the mental wellbeing of employees. It includes a series of promotional videos, webinars and other educational materials focused on professional burnout, depression and supporting psychological resilience.⁵⁵ The association also regularly participates in social dialogue, lobbying for improvements in the legal framework governing psychosocial risks. The Employers of Poland along with another employers' organisation – Confederation Lewiatan – were involved in dialogue with trade unions on psychosocial risks. Both organisations signed recommendations calling for the inclusion of psychosocial risks in the risk assessment and obligatory OSH training.⁵⁶ Another employer-based organisation – the Safe at Work Coalition – organises educational activities and provides annual reports on safety and hygiene in Poland. Their 2019 report focused in detail on psychosocial risk, showing the widespread presence of psychosocial risk in the workplace. Notably, 74% of respondents expressed that they are exposed to stress, mainly due to time pressure, extensive workload, inadequate earnings and professional responsibility.⁵⁷ The 2020 report focused on the pandemic. It has shown that stress in the workplace intensified due to reorganisation of work and pandemic-induced fear about employees' health.⁵⁸

Despite existing challenges, there are some actions and evidence showing that the awareness of psychosocial risks is raising in Poland overall. For instance, research carried out internally by All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (OPZZ) shows that compared to 2011, in 2019, 20% more respondents reported understanding the concept of sexual harassment.⁵⁹ Another 2019 report prepared by the Safe at Work Coalition has shown that the vast majority of respondents were aware of psychosocial risks at the workplace and the current legal framework.⁶⁰ These data, however, tend to represent views of employees of small to large companies rather than of microenterprises.

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

According to the representatives of trade unions, in Poland, collective bargaining initiatives are not an effective solution to regulate psychosocial risks as their coverage is low.⁶¹ Collective bargaining and agreements can include specific regulations on psychosocial matters, providing that these are not less favourable than existing laws. Within already existing collective labour agreements, the most popular health and safety regulations include establishing additional health benefits for employees, supplementary leave, shorter working hours or financial remuneration for employees working in a hazardous environment.⁶² Collective labour agreements directly covering issues of psychosocial risks were not identified by the representatives of trade unions.⁶³

Sectoral initiatives on psychosocial risks are more common in service-oriented sectors such as retail, customer care, the medical sector and education. In the opinion of the representative of a district labour inspectorate consulted for this report, employees of the public sector are believed to be more vocal about possible violations and psychosocial needs, but this may be region-specific.⁶⁴ As reported by representatives of trade unions themselves, the trade unions of such sectors tend to be more active in organising initiatives and public debates on psychosocial risks.⁶⁵

It was noted by the representative of OPZZ that during the pandemic, the All-Poland Psychologist Trade Union have been active in providing stress relief support for medical staff working in pandemic-focused

⁵⁵ Grupa Artemis, Pracodawcy RP, [Kampania Zrozum. Poczuj. Działaj!](#) (in Polish).

⁵⁶ OPZZ, NZSS Solidarność, Forum Związków Zawodowych, Forum Rzemiosła Polskiego, Pracodawcy RP, Konfederacja Lewiatan, [Wspólne Rekomendacje Zespołu Negocjacyjnego Partnerów Społecznych w sprawie poprawienia skuteczności działań dotyczących zjawiska stresu związanego z pracą, wynikające z deklaracji partnerów społecznych z dnia 14 listopada 2008 roku dotyczącej zapobiegania i przeciwdziałania zjawisku stresu związanego z pracą](#), (in Polish).

⁵⁷ Koalicja Bezpieczni w Pracy, [Mobbing, stres, depresja w miejscu pracy](#) (in Polish).

⁵⁸ Koalicja Bezpieczni w Pracy, [Bezpieczeństwo Pracy w Polsce. Wpływ pandemii koronawirusa na polski rynek pracy](#)

⁵⁹ Ankieta OPZZ na temat problematyki dyskryminacji, mobbingu i molestowania w miejscu pracy oraz przestrzegania uprawnień pracowniczych związanych z rodzicielstwem (2019), Internal OPZZ document. On file with the report authors.

⁶⁰ Koalicja Bezpieczni w Pracy, [Mobbing, stres, depresja w miejscu pracy](#) (in Polish).

⁶¹ Interviews with the representative of OPZZ and the representative of NZSS 'Solidarity'.

⁶² CIOP-PIB, [System ochrony pracy w Polsce](#) (in Polish).

⁶³ Interviews with the representative of OPZZ and the representative of NZSS 'Solidarity'.

⁶⁴ Interview with the representative of the District Labour Inspectorate.

⁶⁵ Interviews with the representative of OPZZ and the representative of NZSS 'Solidarity'.

facilities.⁶⁶ Regular sectoral trade union actions involve training and seminars on stress management and organisation of the workplace. Frequently, trade unions organise legal interventions and legal training on issues such as recognising mobbing, developing internal procedures on mobbing and equal treatment at work, as pointed out by the representative of OPZZ.⁶⁷

National trade unions, mainly OPZZ and NZSS ‘Solidarity’, have been actively involved in social dialogue on legal improvements on psychosocial risks. Additionally, in 2021 OPZZ issued a memo ‘OPZZ 5 for safe work’ to celebrate World Day for Safety and Health at Work. One of the demands was focused on psychosocial risks, underlining the fact that the pandemic intensified non-favourable working conditions.⁶⁸ Earlier in 2020, the Female Committee of OPZZ issued a statement expressing that women in the workplace are more exposed to psychosocial risks due to being in subordinate positions. To mitigate women’s exposure to risks such as mobbing and sexual harassment, the committee calls for the inclusion of a gendered perspective in procedures, monitoring and communication actions.⁶⁹

3 ESENER 2019 country-level results

This chapter provides an analysis of the ESENER 2019 country-level results to provide an overview of key national trends impacting compliance with psychosocial risk management in MSEs, including the:

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

We also consider how the situation had changed since 2014 when the ESENER 2014 survey was conducted.

3.1 Inspection regime and reasons for compliance

Frequency of inspections

ESENER 2014 showed that in Poland a total of 46% of the establishments contacted through the survey reported to have had a visit by the labour inspectorate. ESENER 2019 indicates a slight decrease to 44%, which is still above the EU average of 41%.⁷⁰ Similar to previous ESENER rounds, the likelihood of labour inspectorate visits is directly linked to company size. ESENER 2019 shows that in the last three years, 81% of businesses with 250+ people reported having had a visit by the labour inspectorate.

However, comparing ESENER 2014 and ESENER 2019, inspection coverage increased among microenterprises (5-9 employees) from 30% to 39%.

⁶⁶ Interview with the representative of OPZZ.

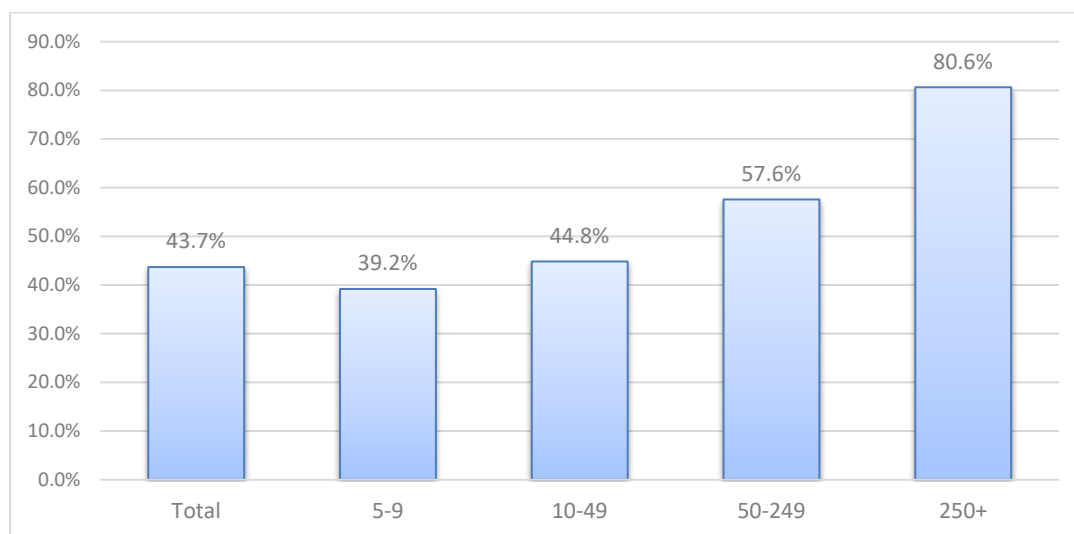
⁶⁷ Ibidem.

⁶⁸ OPZZ, [Tydzień Bezpieczeństwa Pracy „Piątka OPZZ dla Bezpiecznej Pracy”](#) (in Polish).

⁶⁹ OPZZ, [Stanowisko Komisji Kobiety OPZZ z dnia 12 listopada 2020 roku w sprawie sytuacji kobiet w środowisku pracy w kontekście zagrożeń psychospołecznych](#) (in Polish).

⁷⁰ EU-OSHA. (2019). First Findings: European Survey of New and Emerging Risks: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/third-european-survey-enterprises-new-and-emerging-risks-esener-3/view>.

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

Institutional incentives persist in being the main reasons for compliance among companies of all sizes. 'Fulfilling legal obligations' (79) and 'avoiding fines from the labour inspectorate' (75%) are the two most common reasons for addressing health and safety in the establishment. Comparing ESENER 2014 and ESENER 2019, 'meeting expectations of employees' became more popular and noted an increase from 48% to 65%.

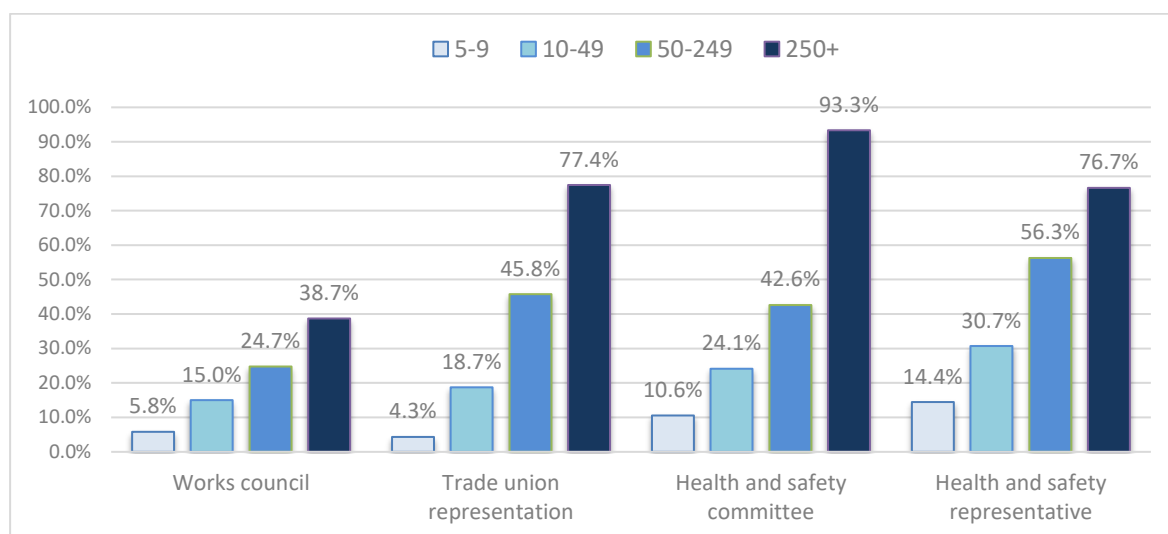
The least common reason for compliance among all enterprises is 'increasing productivity'. Comparing ESENER 2014 and ESENER 2019 among microenterprises (5-9 people), this recorded a significant increase from 25% to 41%.

3.2 Employee representation methods

Forms of representation

In Poland, as much 61% of the companies consulted through ESENER 2019 reported not having any form of employee representation. Among those reporting representation, the most popular forms are health and safety representatives (26%) and health and safety committees (20%). This largely confirms the EU-27 data where health and safety representative was also the dominant representation method, with almost 60% of companies reporting this form. Overall, employees' representation varies considerably across companies of different sizes in Poland. Companies of 250+ people have significantly more representation than other companies, considering all forms. Differences in levels of unionisation among the surveyed companies are significant, where trade union representation in micro companies accounts for over 4% while in companies with 250+ people it is at the level of 77%.

Despite sizeable differences between smaller and larger companies, smaller enterprises noted some increases in representation. When comparing ESENER 2014 and ESENER 2019 in micro (5-9 employees) and small (10-49) enterprises, a moderate increase in representation in almost all forms can be observed.

Figure 2: Forms of employee representation in the establishments – by company size (% of establishments)

Source: Ecorys analysis of ESENER 2019 results

Representative election methods

In the EU-27, ESENER 2019 respondents indicated that the employer selected the OSH representative in most cases (56%), followed by bottom-up election methods where employees choose the OSH representative (34%).⁷¹ In Poland, a contrary tendency can be observed, as 54% of health and safety representatives are reported as elected by employees. It differs by company size, where large enterprises more likely to have OSH representatives elected by the employees. Fifty-two per cent of microenterprises had a representative appointed by the employer, while in the case of the largest enterprises, only 13% did.

Frequency of discussions of health and safety matters between management and employee representatives

In Poland, 55% of all enterprises reported occasional talks on health and safety matters, followed by 35.5% claiming to have regular ones. The frequency of conversations is linked with company size – the larger company, the more regularly discussions happen.

Comparing ESENER 2014 and ESENER 2019 results, the occurrence of having discussions rarely increased. Overall, the 'not at all/practically never' option was chosen by 2% of all companies in 2014. In 2019, it increased to 7%, with the highest increase among microenterprises.

3.3 Establishment-level responses to psychosocial risk management

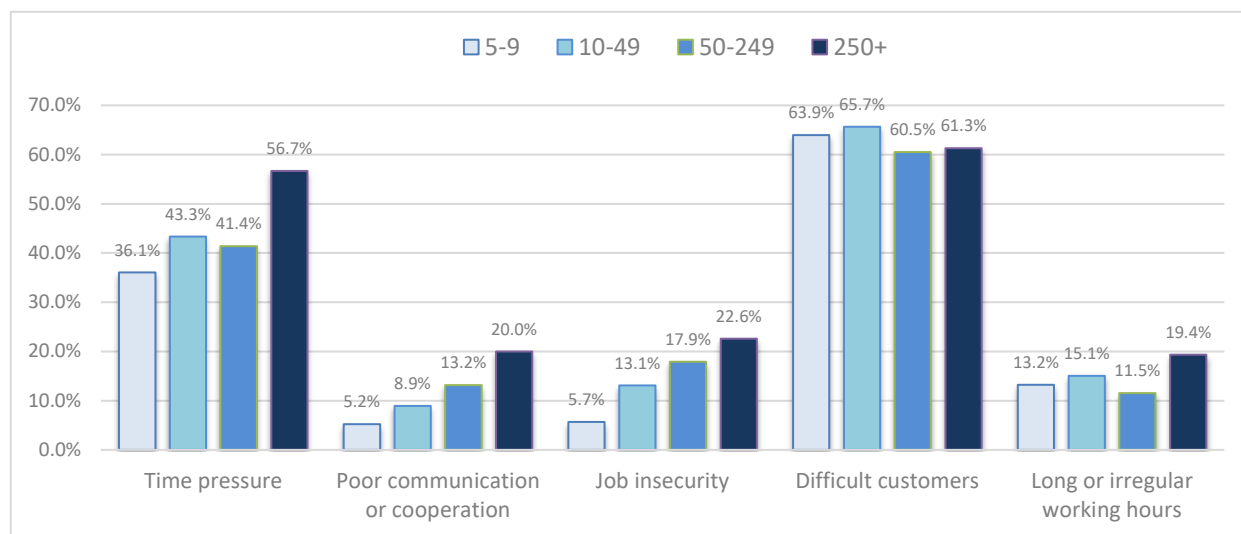
Identification of psychosocial risks

In Poland, ESENER 2019 has shown that two of the most frequently reported psychosocial risks are having to deal with difficult customers, patients, pupils and so on (69%) and time pressure (40%). The persistence of demanding clients is similar across companies of all sizes, while time pressure is linked with the company size – the larger the enterprise, the more commonly reported time pressure is. Similarly, poor communication/cooperation relates to the company size. While only 5% of microenterprises experience this, as much as 20% of businesses with 250+ people face these risks. Please note that the data was collected before the COVID-19 crisis and may need to be treated with caution given the changing nature of the working environment.

⁷¹ EU-OSHA. (2019). First Findings: European Survey of New and Emerging Risks.

Comparing ESENER 2014 and ESENER 2019, the 'job insecurity' in Poland was said to diminish. It has decreased by 6 percentage points, with the highest decreases among microenterprises. In 2014, job insecurity was reported in 14.1% of microenterprises, while in 2019, it declined to 6%.

Figure 3: Psychosocial risks in the establishments – by company size (% of establishments)



Source: Ecorys analysis of ESENER 2019 results

Introduction of action plans to prevent work-related stress

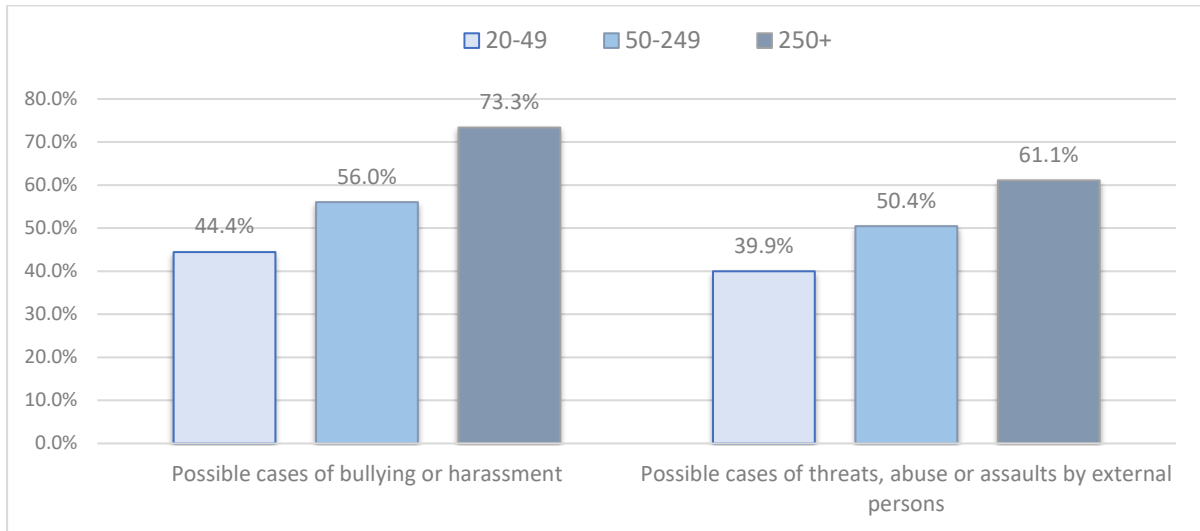
In regard to planned, preventive actions to tackle work-related stress, ESENER 2019 asked enterprises employing more than 20 people about action plans governing such approaches. Overall coverage of action plans in Poland is not significant, considering that out of all enterprises 18% in 2019 and 14% in 2014 had one in place. The presence of action plans relates to company size, and action plans are more common in larger establishments. Comparing ESENER 2014 and ESENER 2019, a moderate increase can be observed in all enterprises. The highest increase of 10.1 percentage points was reported among businesses with 50-249 people, followed by a 6 percentage points increase in the largest companies and 2 percentage points growth in 2010 in enterprises with 10-49 people.

Introduction of procedures on bullying and harassment

The ESENER survey asked representatives of companies employing 20 and more people about procedures to prevent bullying and violence.

ESENER 2019 has shown that procedures have become more common across the firms participating in the research since 2014. The coverage of both procedures is similar. Their presence is linked with company size, with the presence of both procedures being more common in larger companies. In 2014, procedures on bullying or harassment were reported in 34% of companies surveyed in Poland. In 2019, their reporting increased to 49%. A similar rise is present among reported procedures on possible cases of threats, abuse or assault by clients/external persons.

Figure 4: Establishments with procedures for dealing with possible cases of bullying and violence – by company size (% of establishments)

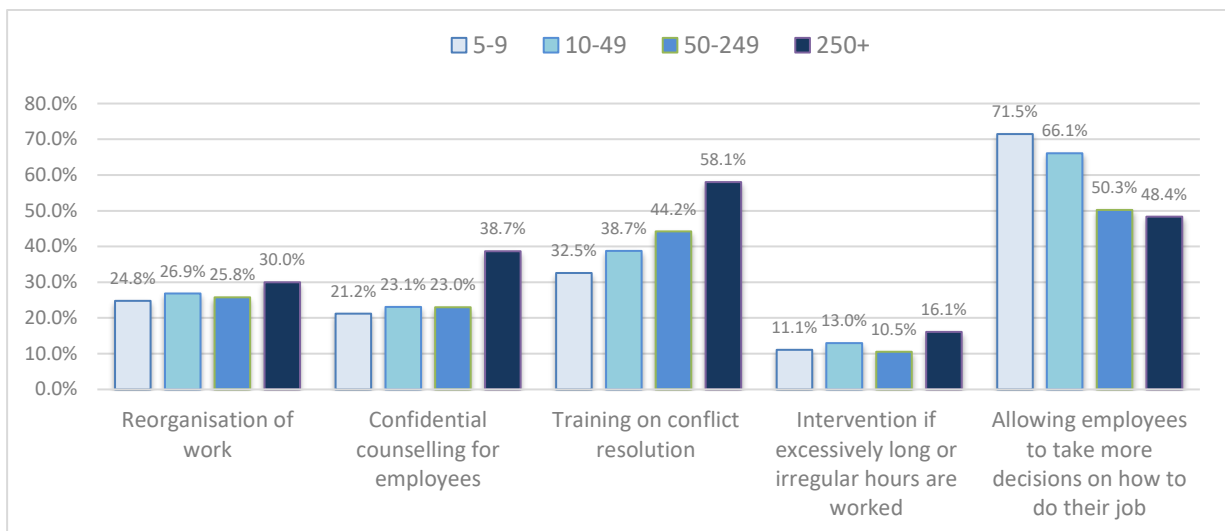


Source: Ecorys analysis of ESENER 2019 results

The ESENER 2019 results show that, overall, ‘allowing employees to take more decisions on how to do their job’ was adopted most, by 67% of all companies. Small companies reported more often using independent working and allowing employees to take more decisions. Additionally, 71.5% of microenterprises chose this solution, while in companies with 250+ people this accounts for 49%.

Compared to ESENER 2014, measures aimed at conflict resolution have become more common across all companies. Additionally, micro and small enterprises have increased their efforts to provide confidential counselling for employees.

Figure 5: Measures for psychosocial risks used in the 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 included:

1. the links between workplace culture, productivity, absenteeism and presenteeism and approaches to psychosocial 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.

The chapter provides an analysis of the main similarities and differences between establishments according to factors such as the sector and company size.

4.1 Sample of in-depth interviews

A total of 46 interviewees from 25 establishments provided inputs to this study. Within this group, 21 enterprises contributed with both the management and employee representatives' views, offering the opportunity to understand similarities and differences in perception of how psychosocial risk management is approached in a single company. The remaining interviews represent opinions of only the managers. A total of 12 of the companies interviewed also provided inputs to the 2019 ESENER survey, allowing for a follow-up of the responses provided in the survey and through this qualitative follow-up study. The company sample consisted of nine public and 16 private establishments, of which 11 were micro (between 5 and 9), and 14 small (between 10 and 49) employees. Thirteen of the enterprises were located in urban areas (cities), while 12 were situated in small towns and rural areas.

A total of 21 employee representatives and 25 management representatives were consulted during this study. In terms of gender, 48% of respondents were male and 52% were female. Respondents were predominantly Polish, with one foreign employee only. The following sectors were represented in the sample: automotive and fuel industry, human resources, construction, services (events, translations, trainings, research), movie production, education, forestry, postal services, public administration and justice sector, finances and banking, social care services, medical services, catering and hospitality, and sports and recreation.

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

This section describes the links between workplace culture, productivity, absenteeism and presenteeism and psychosocial risk management approaches among MSEs in Poland.

Company culture

Company culture plays a significant role in how psychosocial risks are understood, approached and managed. In fact, most respondents pointed to the overall culture at their enterprises as the key framework for dealing with psychosocial risks, highlighting the general atmosphere and ways of communicating among the employees and between the employees and management.

Common view

The overwhelming majority of the respondents across all the sectors and sizes reported a good, friendly and positive atmosphere at workplaces. Some highlighted that people working together are colleagues, while others mentioned company relations as 'family-like' especially in enterprises where the same people had worked together for years. Regular staff meetings were appreciated as a good platform for discussing any issues about work, especially in the case of companies with shift-based work where employees do not have the chance to interact with all colleagues. Generally, communication between

employees and management was characterised as informal, except for two enterprises reported to have more formalised and hierarchical channels of communication. The majority of the respondents said that the culture allows for the discussion of psychosocial risks, emotions or problems, but this is seldom used in practice and such topics are not discussed. Even if there is a sense that management could be approached, employees tend to discuss such issues among themselves. The possibility of talking to managers directly about any concerns was highlighted as an advantage. Another essential element of the overall culture is a clear division of roles and responsibilities in a company that facilitates direct and effective communication, reducing unnecessary conflict and frustration.

Culture, and consequently approach to psychosocial risk management, seems to broadly reflect and result from personal leadership and the character of key managers and owners. When inquired about why the company culture has been shaped in a certain way, both managers and employees signalled that this is directly due to the manager's personality and commitment, and personal circumstances. One employee representative stressed how important it is that the company owner is a father to small children. This fact allows the employee to speak up freely when they need days off to look after their children.

Company culture was generally considered to reflect the size and type of work done. Regarding size, direct, informal communication results from the small size of the companies, where having fewer than a dozen employees naturally allows for direct, informal contact. In fact, representatives of one small company indicated that maintaining such a culture was a matter of conscious effort with the company's growth and expansion. While the atmosphere was direct when the company was smaller, it became much more formalised and hierarchical with the development and increase in the number of employees. Management decided to reverse the process and reintroduced an informal and direct culture of communication. Another company, however, highlighted that with expansion, the introduction of more structure and hierarchy was beneficial to ensure better management of a larger number of people.

Similarly, an employee representative in a small company in the automotive sector highlighted that they moved to a small company from a corporation precisely because a smaller enterprise allows for more direct communication and an informal atmosphere. At their previous work, they witnessed harassment that was not dealt with appropriately by the management, which prompted their leaving. They appreciate the good atmosphere very much at the new workplace and highlighted how this has improved their quality of work and life overall.

'I come to the work and then we see what is to be done. We talk, we laugh, we do our job. When there is a problem, we solve it. No tensions, we talk and laugh. When we are finished, I go home. At home there is no need to complain about the job, I rather tell some funny stories to my wife if they happen.'

Source: Employee in a micro company (construction)

Sectors where there is a significant division of ranks and levels of education of the employees report more hierarchical work organisation and communication. Medical and justice sectors, where enterprises encompass highly qualified professionals (lawyers and doctors) and support staff (administrative workers, medical support staff), are characterised by distinction in communication according to the inter-company hierarchy. Communication among support staff was judged as direct and informal, with room to discuss stress and challenges, while communication between support staff and doctors and lawyers is more formalised. The doctors and lawyers were reported as more resilient to stress, having more resources available and better strategies to deal with it. Research revealed that while working together for many years sometimes results in more informal relations across the hierarchies, this is not a rule, and distinctions persist. Interestingly, research among the public administration institutions revealed that the generally expected vertical hierarchies prevail, while some enterprises invest efforts in remodelling work organisation and culture into more horizontal ones.

The more manual work-oriented sectors, also male-dominated, present significantly more informal culture, including 'inelegant' language, such as swearing, as reported by one interviewee. The atmosphere is considered good, although with 'no hours spent on discussing issues' and short messages preferred.

Lastly, the opportunity for direct, informal communication was significantly reduced due to the pandemic and teleworking.

'In pre-pandemic conditions, it was normal for someone to share what was bothering them – and then return to work refreshed and with renewed energy. Virtual communication does not allow for a similar discharge of emotions.'

Source: Employee in a micro company (services)

This might have, in particular, a significantly negative impact on employees working with vulnerable clients, such as in social services. Their employees report good relations with co-workers as primary means of handling any issues or stress, especially among the caregivers. Talking about problems such as the challenging behaviour of clients is a critical way to release stress.

Absenteeism / Presenteeism

In this section we present findings regarding absenteeism and presenteeism among the micro and small companies interviewed. For the purpose of this research, we define presenteeism as 'the practice of being present at one's place of work for more hours than is required, especially as a manifestation of insecurity about one's job.'

Common view

Overall, absenteeism and presenteeism have not been reported as significant phenomena in the majority of the companies in this study. Several enterprises reported no absenteeism or presenteeism at all, while others indicated some levels of presenteeism. Presenteeism was especially noticed among employees working on projects or occupying senior positions, with high responsibility for task completion. It has been especially present in companies demanding intellectual work (research or human resources, creative industries), or where employees want to 'be part of a creative process and sometimes find it difficult to let go.' Absenteeism was reported in the construction sector or in companies where more manual work is required and among the enterprises dominated by the male workforce. It was attributed in part to alcohol consumption.

Differences between manager and employee representatives

In some companies, both management and employees reported cases of presenteeism, but while managers indicated that even with the excessive workload at times, additional work is properly remunerated, employees signalled that it might be challenging to receive total compensation for extra work. Some employees also reported that it is difficult to take time off even if they wish to. An extreme case of presenteeism was reported at a public educational institution where the employee representative spoke of constantly being assigned additional work hours, without being consulted, and without the possibility of declining extra work. They further reported that some employees regularly show up at work even when sick and in need of leave, while others benefit from extensive sick leave periods that, in their view, amounts to extreme absenteeism. They attributed this situation to understaffing of the institution and unequal treatment of the employees by the management.

'I am constantly assigned additional work hours. I should finish work at 1pm every day, instead all the time I have to stay until late in the afternoon. I never know what will be my work time tomorrow. I have no say in this. I cannot plan my day, take care of my child. Simple things as scheduling a doctor visit or shopping with my son are challenging. This leads to extreme frustration, no work-life balance. I see how my child suffers due to it.'

Source: Employee in a small company (education sector)

This situation, characterised by the unpredictability of work and little control over the scope of working hours, significantly impacts the private lives of the affected teachers who cannot plan personal engagements. It is particularly difficult for this employee as she is a single mother and carer to a sick parent.

Productivity

The respondents generally acknowledged links between effective management of psychosocial risks and the company's overall productivity. The management representatives recognised the connection, judging that removing stressing elements and addressing any conflicts smoothly is essential for ensuring good workflow and allowing the employees to focus on their work.

'Relations between the owner and employees, as well as between employees are important for productivity. Such culture is built by the actions of the owner/manager and the way they address employees.'

Source: Manager, micro company

Similarly, the view was that content employees who show up at work motivated or feel safe lead to better company results.

Good and clear communication is considered especially important for productivity, and the employees stressed this. They reported that productivity is lower in cases of poor communication with management and a lack of clarity about tasks and responsibilities. Working remotely with limited human contact was also reported as reducing productivity. At the same time, one manager in the banking sector highlighted that ensuring workload aligned with individual capacities of employees, accompanied by their preparation to deal with difficult customers, results in the fact that the bank has never had to deal with any complaints by clients. They also stressed that management of psychosocial risks begins at the hiring stage. When assessing candidates for jobs, it is essential to review their education and formal skills and evaluate whether the candidate will be able to deal with the stress associated with a specific position. As they pointed out, not everyone can work with clients, no matter how much training is provided.

The issue of psychosocial risk management was also considered in the light of overall changes in some industries. Representatives of an enterprise active in sports highlighted that taking care of employees' mental health is vital as it reduces the possibility of coaches behaving inappropriately while working with clients (shouting or touching). Such behaviour used to be acceptable in the past, but now it is considered violence and cannot be tolerated. Making sure that coaches are in good mental condition is therefore crucial for the business.

4.3 Awareness level of psychosocial risks factors and obligations to manage them

The following section presents key findings of the level of awareness of psychosocial risk factors and the obligation to manage them in MSEs. The discussion shows that the understanding of psychosocial risks among the consulted companies is somehow low, with several companies reporting that they did not face any psychosocial risks. Notably, several companies said that generally they did not observe significant psychosocial risks until the pandemic. Risks resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have been described in a separate section.

Common psychosocial risks

Common view

Both the managers and the employees highlighted some general psychosocial risks in the establishments. The most common risks are stress relating to excessive workload and short deadlines and working with demanding clients. Notably, only one respondent reported mobbing at work, while the vast majority of interviewees either highlighted that issues such as harassment or mobbing are not present in their workplaces or simply do not mention them at all. While the respondents were mainly able to identify vital psychosocial risks associated with their enterprises, there was also a sense of little importance given to these issues, and they are not high on either employees' or managers' agendas. This primarily reflects the overall position psychosocial risks occupy within OSH in Poland, as illustrated in the earlier sections of this report. Dealing with stress, poor communication or harassment is still often considered a luxury and matter of future rather than common current practice.

'All of these questions [interview questions about psychosocial risks] are very "European". In Poland, the labour market is different, nobody thinks about such issues. You go to work, you do your job. Nobody thinks about stress, workload, or bad relationships. There is no time for that.'

Source: Employee in a small company (justice sector)

Having to deal with difficult or abusive clients was reported as a high risk for many of the sectors.

This includes elements such as having to deal with theft, difficult patients and students' parents. Exposure to this risk varies depending on the position occupied in a company. In the case of difficult or abusive patients, the significant risk falls on the medical support staff at the healthcare frontline rather than the doctors. In the construction sector, dealing with demanding clients falls on managers and owners rather than employees. Additional risks consider fieldworkers in agriculture and forestry who face the risk of confrontation (possibly violent) with pro-environment activist groups in the forestry sector. Violent encounters are also reported in the social services sector. Having to deal with difficult clients is further enhanced by additional sources of stress such as the responsibility burden for medical professionals or relatively low salaries in social care services, contributing to a higher risk of burnout among the employees.

Poor work-life balance due to excessive workload and stress was reported by management and employee representatives alike. This is especially highlighted in the hospitality sector, characterised by long working hours. As one respondent stressed, 'it is difficult to have relationships outside the industry.' Workers from the medical sector complained about constantly increasing patient quotas that are impossible to meet. The same results pressure was indicated in postal services, where centrally managed sales targets are stress sources, and in the education sector, understaffing leads to extensive extra hours being assigned to teachers, combined with the stress that no proper care can be provided to children.

'Management consistently increases quotas of patients that should be examined during working hours. At the same time, they have high expectations for the employees to deliver quality medical services.'

Source: Employee in a small enterprise (medical industry)

Another element contributing to psychosocial problems is poor communication within enterprises. While this was acknowledged both by the representatives of management and employees, it was more dominant among the employees. In the most extreme case, one employee characterised poor communication with the middle management as a case of bullying.

Differences between managers and employee representatives

Excessive workload, short deadlines and the necessity of meeting targets surface from most interviews; however, they seem to have slightly different meanings for managers and employees. Managers highlighted the overall responsibility for company performance and successful completion of projects, often in light of limited funding and high competition.

In some cases, identification of risk led to the replacement of a manager:

'I replaced a person who had a different approach to management. It was initially difficult to change the workplace culture towards open communication. In time I was able to foster good relations with employees and change the workplace. I encourage employees to come to me directly with any issues or problems. I prefer to know if a problem or error occurs, so that adequate reaction is possible, and a solution can be found.'

Source: Manager in a small company (administration)

Further, uneven treatment of employees is an issue:

'One thing is paperwork; another is an actual implementation of the law. I am not aware of exact regulations on psychosocial risks so I may be wrong. In our company, we have a fine system, if medical tools are lost or destroyed. Everybody uses these tools, both doctors and assistants. Only assistants are punished if something happens. They need to pay for the replacement from their own salary. Nothing like this ever happened to a doctor. I may be wrong, but it does not seem lawful.'

Source: Employee in a micro company (medical)

COVID-19 impact

The COVID-19 pandemic has left its mark on public and private companies alike. Several sectors transitioned to teleworking in part or entirely, while others have substantially limited interaction with clients. It has been particularly stressful for private enterprises where fear of going out of business or layoffs has added to health-related stress. While some managers reported their efforts to keep such pressure away from the employees and not communicate business-related fears to the staff, the overall

difficult situation was felt and reported across companies. The additional burden on the managers came from the fact that work in times of the pandemic had to be reorganised, accounting for different levels of vulnerability of individual employees, their family status (need to care for small children when schools and kindergartens were closed), and a general sense of insecurity. Employees brought up the fact that since older colleagues were sent home due to their increased health vulnerability, the existing workload had to be somehow divided among the remaining staff, which led to overwork.

High levels of unpredictability of governmental decisions regarding lockdown and limitations to business operations placed additional stress on managers, and required them to adapt schedules and work division quickly. At the same time, the general fear of catching the COVID-19 virus from other employees and clients has reduced over time, and people have grown accustomed to the 'new normal'.

Extensive telework and limited ability for socialisation and interaction between employees and clients have left a mark on the risks and possibilities to manage them. For example, reduced human contact and opportunity for dialogue between employees have limited their chance of discussing work-related problems and sharing concerns. The fact that various workshops and trainings attended by the employees before the pandemic had to be cancelled also had an impact on people's ability to network and establish contacts with professionals in similar positions. Extensive telework led to digital fatigue for some.

'Public administration organises regular workshops on the local and regional levels. They connect professionals working in similar positions. They allow us to gather, discuss problems, exchange ideas. Afterward, we stay in touch, we call each other if we have some problems. It is a great support system. Now due to pandemics, these meetings are stopped. Some other trainings are available, but these are only some lectures online. It is not the same.'

Source: Employee in a small company (public administration)

Increased stress due to the pandemic and reduced contact with clients resulted in more complex customer relations, frustrated that they cannot count on eye-to-eye services. This has been strongly felt in institutions providing services to vulnerable clients, such as social care centres. This has required extreme levels of adapting to the new situation in the education sector and building new forms of rapport and relationships with pupils and students, using cameras and online communication. It has been challenging for older teachers, who are not necessarily fluent with technology, resulting in additional stress and poor performance. In the **health** sector, the introduction of telemedicine and a limited possibility to examine patients has led to increased pressure on doctors, who felt a huge responsibility for making correct diagnoses based on a conversation only. Enterprises active in event organisation had to entirely transform their working mode into online service delivery, which was particularly difficult.

'The COVID pandemic impacted the establishment by limiting the possibilities for activity. Inhabitants could not leave the grounds of the social welfare house, and visitation from families was impossible for many months. These changes generated unease among the inhabitants and resulted in more difficulty for the caregivers.'

Source: Manager and employee in a small company (social care)

Lastly, extensive teleworking was reported to have a **negative impact on work-life balance**, especially for parents of small children. The lines between work and family time became blurred, which decreased the quality of work and family time. Parents of small children who could not telework due to the nature

of their jobs had to take leave from work to attend to children. Similarly, there were complaints of telework being heavily monitored by supervisors, which led to additional discomfort.

Legal awareness

The research revealed varying degrees of perceived awareness of legal obligations regarding psychosocial risk management, both among the management and the employee representatives. While representatives of some companies reported confidence in understanding the legal framework governing psychosocial risks and integrating it into internal codes and procedures, others openly talked of not knowing the laws or finding them unclear and confusing.

'Once, after hiring a woman, it turned out that occupational health and safety standards oblige the company to prepare a second toilet, only for women. There is no space for an extra toilet in the company building, so this woman was eventually fired.'

Source: Manager in a small company (construction)

The majority of the respondents reported being familiar with the general OSH regulations and legal obligations but less so with their specific aspects of psychosocial risk management. Some managers relied on labour inspectorates, pointing out any irregularities if they occurred and needed dealing with, while others reported availability of specialised legal knowledge (within the company or outsourced) if deemed required. Generally, companies where managers showed more leadership and personal commitment to psychosocial risk management revealed a better understanding of the legal framework.

Response to identified risks

Several companies reported some, albeit limited, action in response to identified psychosocial risks. Generally, however, a lack of clearly defined, comprehensive and, most importantly, preventive measures is evident. Companies reported that if problematic situations occur, they are dealt with ad hoc, adjusting response to concrete problems and people involved.

The general line of responses would include reorganisation of work if excessive workload was the problem, reorganisation of teams if conflicts between employees arose and rearrangement of office space to facilitate more accessible communication. The respondent from the banking sector brought up the importance of organising internal trainings on dealing with demanding customers. Such training prepares employees for possible stress and makes them aware that difficult customers can be a problem for anyone, and it is important for them to know what steps to take, how to keep calm and not stress out. In forestry, the interviewees recalled one campaign – conducted company-wide, with the topic of mobbing. The campaign included training, email information and posters.

Some companies reported that while no problematic situations had occurred so far, they felt confident that their work culture would allow them to deal with this smoothly if needed. In a small enterprise in the legal sector, administrative workers complained to the direct management about low pay and extensive workload. The management then took up this issue with the regional managers, and since this did not bring any results, administrative workers went on strike, supported by their immediate managers (of the local branch). Another example from a public enterprise includes a one-day training course on interpersonal relations organised in response to poor communication between different enterprise sections.

Some of the responses included replacing managers who were assessed as not managing such risks adequately or being part of the problem rather than a solution. It was done in response to employees complaining they felt afraid to speak to the managers freely.

In companies where management recognised limited opportunities for employees to socialise and interact, informal, integration meetings were organised. They are essential to maintaining relations among the team since the rotation during day shifts can be alienating.

The COVID-19 pandemic provoked a major response by almost all the companies in our study. The fear of catching the virus led to the significant reorganisation of work in some sectors, prompted by the national regulatory framework. Actions included the introduction of telework as a possibility, the introduction of rotation of teams at work and a reduction in opening hours. Special attention was paid to elderly and more vulnerable workers who could work from home or take temporary leave. Since some employees complained of isolation resulting from teleworking, companies introduced the possibility of hybrid work, offering some workspace for employees and the opportunity of meeting other colleagues. At the same time, teleworking was welcomed by some who reported it to be more efficient, thus reducing stress.

Awareness campaigns

The research revealed that respondents did not know of any national or sectoral campaigns aimed at raising awareness of psychosocial risks. One interviewee mentioned a sectoral initiative in the human resources sector titled 'Yes, for diversity', which covered workplace inclusivity issues and employees' wellbeing and stress management. The respondent was able to name this campaign as their company was a co-partner implementing it. As such, interviews demonstrated the limited reach of actions organised by the Chief Labour Inspectorate or any other sectoral initiatives.

Role of inspectorate

The role of the labour inspectorate in enhancing psychosocial risk management was judged to be very limited. The majority of the respondents either did not recall any visits of the labour inspectorate or remembered them, commented that they were not motivating in any way. Those who witnessed inspections reported that no psychosocial issues were addressed. Overall, visits by the inspectors were considered discouraging, with the focus on punishing rather than support. Voices from the employees were similar, showing little trust in the institution.

'Even if someone had any problems, they would not talk about them with the inspectorate employees, because it could be used against this company.'

Source: Employee in a micro company (services)

One respondent commented that since the company is informed in advance about an upcoming visit, hardly any irregularities are detected, as the enterprise can prepare beforehand. Two public companies reported their internal OSH inspections are carried out on an annual basis, but these did not consider psychosocial aspects of work. Two managers considered visits by the labour inspectorate as valuable and motivating. One manager of an educational institution reported that they helped them to spot and address any gaps in work organisation. A recent visit revealed, for instance, that the canteen was understaffed. When this issue was voiced by the labour inspectorate, they fully addressed it. Other managers consider such visits as time-consuming, focused on paperwork and highly irrelevant.

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

The research revealed varying levels of OSH organisation at the micro and small companies, with generally low commitment to it. While some companies reported a well-organised and systematic approach to the management of OSH, others stated that the issue is dealt with only in a limited way, in direct response to minimal legal requirements. Public companies and enterprises, which are branches of larger entities, tend to have better organisation of OSH, generally managed centrally by regional or national offices. Several companies outsourced mandatory OSH training of their employees to external companies, and some small companies had an employee (or manager) tasked with overlooking OSH at the enterprise (OSH officer).

Regardless of the levels of organisation and commitment to OSH, the issues of psychosocial risk management were not mentioned in the general OSH frameworks of the companies. None except one company (medical services) reported psychosocial risks as part of their general OSH approach.

Generally speaking, even in companies where some additional activity in the area of OSH was organised, interviewees reported that it was done superficially and to meet requirements. No genuine commitment to the management of OSH was reported.

In companies where workplace risk assessments were conducted, psychosocial issues were generally not covered. The only exception is the medical sector where comprehensive risk assessments were reported by the management representative as addressing these issues. According to the manager, each employee is evaluated upon exposure to the different risks such as exposure to physical and verbal aggression, emotional burden, time pressure and responsibility burden, among others. Overall, company risk assessments are based on individual assessments and issues voiced by employees on different levels (employees between themselves, employees to managers, and employees to human resources business partner). However, an employee representative from the same enterprise reported that they are not aware of any risk assessments being conducted.

4.5 Extent of psychosocial risk management and procedures in place

Generally, micro and small companies tend not to have formalised procedures and predictable ways for preventing and addressing psychosocial risks. Not only were no procedures reported as existing, but the need for the introduction of any formalised measures was questioned by the respondents.

Actions to prevent psychosocial risks, action plans, procedures for bullying, and effectiveness of the actions and procedures

Good, open and frequent communication between the employees and management is largely considered key for the prevention and mitigation of psychosocial risks. This is particularly important in micro companies, where introduction of formalised procedures does not seem feasible or desirable both due to their size and, as reported by the respondents, due to the nature of the risks. No action plans were reported, nor were procedures for dealing with bullying, stress or harassment.

'I doubt whether, in the case of such a delicate issue, procedures (generally standardised, formalised) are the best way to address psychosocial risks.'

Source: Employee in a micro company (services)

Managers reported investing efforts in maintaining good communication within the companies and making sure employees find them approachable. A manager and owner of a small automotive company said that they made sure to meet and greet every employee in the morning when they first arrive at work. They think such a small gesture sends a vital signal that employees are important to them and they are present if needed. Another manager made it a point to encourage and remind employees to use their annual leave and take holidays regularly to promote work-life balance. In the case of an institution offering social care to vulnerable clients, a psychologist who is primarily employed with providing services to the clients is also available to the employees if needed.

'No, the company did not take such [preventive] actions. There was no need. The company is so small that all problems can be solved on a regular basis.'

Source: Employee in a micro company (services)

A public workplace had in place a 'buddy system' where new employees are assigned more experienced colleagues to support and guide them in the initial stages of employment. The manager of this company also reported that psychosocial issues such stress management and relations with parents are regularly discussed during teacher council meetings. Interestingly, the response from the employee representative of the same enterprise revealed that psychosocial risks are not addressed or managed

at all, and that the wellbeing of staff is not considered. This shows that the presence of formal procedures does not necessarily result in effective management of psychosocial issues. At the same time, other micro and small companies did not mention specific procedures or measures but stated that good atmosphere and work organisation is due to good leadership and communication.

Available training and types of training needed

The respondents mentioned several types of training covering psychosocial issues, both organised in-house by the managers and provided by external stakeholders. These include in-person and online sessions. An online training (e-learning/self-study) mentioned by the staff of a petrol station had such issues like client relations. However, online training was described as less effective than the on-site training on other OSH issues, and both respondents preferred learning through experience. In the social care sector, a manager organised several trainings for employees each year. The manager looks online for them, checks offers, prices and proximity to the company. Psychosocial risks were not addressed in separate training, but are often included to some extent – for example, stress management, burnout avoidance in other trainings. In the banking sector, a manager organised internal training for the employees about possible demanding clients and how to handle them.

Publicly available trainings included sessions on stress management and people relations organised by the National Medical Chamber.

‘There are trainings on psychosocial risk available in the public service system and they are very helpful. Availability of these trainings should be more promoted. In general, people are not aware that these trainings are an option.’

Source: Employee in a small company (legal sector)

Interviews in the legal sector revealed that workshops on psychosocial risks were available and included stress management and handling difficult relationships, among other topics. Importantly, training becomes more available. Previously, these sessions had a limited number of participants, and now, since they are online, they are open to every willing employee. Similarly, public administration representatives reported the availability of training on stress management, work-life balance and handling demanding clients. Both were considered beneficial and welcomed by employees.

Differences between management and employee representatives

Availability of trainings reported by the management representatives does not always translate to employees benefiting from them. For instance, while a manager of a medical enterprise stated that plenty of trainings were available for all employees that involved issues like stress management, assertiveness and wellbeing in the workplace, the employee representative of the same company stated that no trainings were available. These trainings were developed both by the OSH department and by the establishment. Trainings had different forms such as online tests, webinars or in-person training (now less available due to pandemic regulations).

Generally, the fieldwork in this study revealed a limited interest in additional training. While some employees expressed a view that training on communication could be empowering and useful, managers voiced doubt that even if such training were available, employees would be prone to choose training directly connected to their job and career development rather than managing psychosocial risks. Generally, companies where higher levels of awareness of psychosocial risks were observed were those reporting training availability or interest, while enterprises with low awareness levels reported no training and no need.

4.6 Dedicated resources and degree of worker participation

Both micro and small companies assigned minimal resources to the management of psychosocial risks. Since companies employing fewer than 100 employees are not legally obliged to have appointed OSH officers, psychosocial challenges, prevention and mitigation often remain the responsibility of managers and owners. This is especially true in the case of micro companies.

As described in the sections above, not all companies carry out workplace risk assessments, and there are no formal channels for identifying psychosocial risks. As such, room for the involvement of employees is limited. The research revealed that managers think that employees are welcome to speak up about any issues they consider important and thus contribute to the identification of risks that need addressing. This can take place during regular team meetings or by approaching management directly. Employee representatives largely confirmed this, but as one highlighted, employees can discuss issues with the management, but any major decisions on the company level are made by management only. This leaves a sense of limited impact and role for the employees in the process.

As one manager reported, since there was no risk identification procedure/process in the company, there was a lack of general employee involvement in this task. Often a specific situation involves risks that need to be managed, and then any employee can be involved in the process as long as the risk affects that person. Such an individualised approach, however, limits opportunities for any systemic approach and solutions. Only one company reported an anonymous survey organised annually, including psychosocial risk (questions on relations with managers and so on), but it mainly focused on other aspects. Nevertheless, such a survey allows for the relatively free expression of a larger number of employees.

The research did not reveal any substantial role being played by representatives of labour unions or any correlation between unionisation and better involvement of workers in the identification of psychosocial risks. An interview with one employee representative revealed a view that this may be because representatives of the labour union are approved by the management.

4.7 Barriers and drivers to psychosocial risk management

This section describes the main barriers and drivers that micro and small enterprises in Poland identified as affecting levels and effectiveness of psychosocial risk management in the organisation.

Barriers to psychosocial risk management

The interviewees identified several barriers to psychosocial risk management. These are connected to the nature of these risks, their delicate nature and difficulty to discuss them, low awareness, and limited resources available at micro and small companies for such work, as opposed to larger companies. The general 'system', understood as the availability of public services, legal settings and support available to the companies, was also brought up as one of the barriers inhibiting effective management of psychosocial risks.

Common view

The dominant barrier revealed by the research is the **low level of awareness of psychosocial risks** and 'knowledge gaps' in how to address them. This was reported by the managers and employees alike. Low awareness is considered one of the key culprits for weak preventive action. Lack of reflection on the side of management was also cited as a barrier, especially in a line of work where physical safety is of great concern, such as the construction industry. Research in this sector revealed that psychosocial risks are not considered a priority compared to the ongoing and demanding task of keeping employees safe and physically uninjured.

'It is not clear if some risks are indeed a risk or some individual predispositions of the employees. Employers can come up with some actions addressing psychosocial risks at the workplace, but it is unclear if it is needed or desired by the employees.'

Source: Manager in a micro company (human resources)

Lack of national or sectoral campaigns and easily accessible resources about psychosocial risks were raised as barriers to their management. In general, both employees and managers had limited awareness of psychosocial risks; they may be aware of their existence, but they do not give them enough

importance and are not being sensitive to them. Managers, even if willing to address such risks as stress, harassment and poor communication, often lacked necessary skills and training.

The research also revealed a certain level of helplessness regarding the possibility of effectively managing psychosocial risks and acceptance that 'nothing can really be done.' Several respondents acknowledged that work is stressful, clients are sometimes difficult, and this will not change. Managers also stated that they are personally open to listening to their employees, but they do not feel they are able to help.

'The most severe risks are workload and stress. Nothing can be done about it. This is how the system functions. The fact that there is nothing to be done is just depressing.'

Source: Manager in a small company (justice sector)

Lastly, some respondents attributed difficulty in managing psychosocial risk at the company level to the overall national context, where people's wellbeing, mental health and good work-life balance are not highly valued. Reporting psychosocial problems such as high levels of stress or trauma resulting from dealing with difficult customers is still a matter of social taboo that is only slowly being changed. In this sense, the overall healthcare system, with weak psychosocial services, was considered the external factor negatively impacting what goes on inside the companies.

Differences between managers and employee representatives

The delicate and highly personal nature of some risks is understood as another difficulty in developing a systematic approach. Employees were reluctant to express their concerns or problems at work, fearing being judged as 'weak' or 'problematic'. It was challenging to report cases of mobbing or harassment where it is a matter of 'word against word' or to bring up difficulties with supervisors or poor management. As long as employees did not speak up about issues, the management did not try to address them.

'People are not open to share and voice their issues. The psychosocial risks are not seen as a problem unless something bad happens. There is a lack of thinking ahead and/or prevention actions.'

Source: Employee in a micro company (human resources)

Managers also reported that the personal nature of many of the risks results in difficulty in developing systematic approaches, patterns and predictable solutions to problems as each problem and person are considered different.

The issue of **limited resources** was highlighted by the representatives of management as an important barrier. Addressing psychosocial risk is considered an additional burden on the company owners, who often struggle with a shortage of people, money and time.

'Management of psychosocial risks is an additional burden, on top of the existing health and safety regulations. Especially in the pandemic, when resources are limited, and the market situation is difficult. Focusing on the management of psychosocial risks is an additional responsibility.'

Source: Owner and manager in a small company (services)

Our research revealed that the business environment in which private micro and small companies operate in Poland is generally considered unfavourable, with high employment costs, extensive regulations and limited support offered to owners. In this context, owners and managers focus on companies' 'survival' rather than having resources available for tackling psychosocial issues in a preventive, systematic manner. What remains is ad hoc (re)actions once problems occur. At the same time, conversations with managers from public institutions revealed that they face their own set of barriers. In the education system, poor communication and cooperation with the national education institutions inhibited meaningful actions. Teachers are heavily monitored rather than supported, and the environment is hostile, including anonymous verbal attacks on teachers.

Drivers of psychosocial risk management

Our research revealed very little in terms of drivers of psychosocial risk management. For the companies that acknowledged such risks in the first place, **the key drivers were legal obligations and increasing work effectiveness**. At the same time, our research revealed that inspections by the labour inspectorate are insufficient and do not cover psychosocial risks so that power of the legal driver seems somewhat limited.

In several cases, management representatives understood taking care of their employees' wellbeing as their ethical responsibility and something that needs to be done as part of their job. Generally speaking, the issue of leadership style and personal commitment of management to making their companies safe in terms of psychosocial risks is significant. Without formalised procedures and mechanisms in place, it is often up to the managers to ensure good communication, a healthy atmosphere and equal treatment of the employees. This importance of the 'human factor' is both encouraging and somewhat worrisome. In such a setting, effective management of psychosocial risks becomes a matter of chance rather than a predictable system. If an employee is lucky enough to work for a company managed by an empathic, ethical and committed manager, they can count on an effective approach to psychosocial risk management. However, if a manager is not sensitive to those issues or does not perceive them as relevant, employees seem to have very little in terms of mechanisms and instruments guarding their rights.

Since the link between psychosocial risk management and productivity was widely acknowledged both by the representatives of management and employees, it can be argued that it is the key internal driver for ensuring a healthy work environment.

5 Conclusions

This study shows that management of psychosocial risks in micro and small companies in Poland remains an area in need of significant improvement. This conclusion comes both from the review of the policy and legal framework and the results of the qualitative data collection conducted from the management and employee representatives. The results largely confirm findings of ESENER 2019 for Poland.

The main finding is that **awareness of psychosocial risks is relatively low, this also being the case regarding the legal obligations governing the area**. While excessive workload and difficult clients were generally identified as key risks by the majority of the respondents, followed by poor communication, several companies reported no risks at all. This is worrisome as it shows no consideration of the issues of psychosocial wellbeing. The fact that respondents did not mention bullying, harassment or unequal treatment (discrimination) significantly may be interpreted positively as a sign that such risks are not widely present. It might, however, also indicate that awareness of what constitutes such a phenomenon is insufficient. Low levels of awareness can be in part attributed to lack of comprehensive, effective campaigns, while they are also considered somehow reflective of the general cultural approach to workers' wellbeing. Interviews among both the companies and representatives of key institutional stakeholders indicate that Poland is somehow in the early stages of developing high awareness of and adequate mechanisms for preventing and responding to psychosocial risks.

There is a **difference between levels of awareness of psychosocial risks in different sectors**. Generally, representatives of companies where there is strong engagement with clients (such as health and education, social services and human resources) showed higher levels of awareness. At the same time, workers and managers in the construction sector indicated limited importance being assigned to such issues. The research has also revealed a certain level of acceptance of the key risks identified (excessive workload and stress) as elements of work that cannot be changed. This has been especially pronounced in the case of representatives of the hospitality sector (long work hours) and legal services (stress is part of work). Where identified risks are more external (for instance, difficult clients), there seems to be more action on the side of the management, in terms of training and support.

The research also suggests that **different risks or their intensity can be attributed to different roles occupied by the respondents within one company**. Managers and highly qualified experts were more exposed to stress related to the company performance, competition on the market and meeting targets. They also reported higher levels of presenteeism, related to higher levels of responsibility in enterprises. Employees, including support and administrative staff as well as fieldwork workers, had more exposure to difficult clients. This finding should be considered when designing effective public or sectoral campaigns aimed at raising awareness of psychosocial risks – while targeting specific sectors is beneficial, understanding how risks affect different positions within companies differently may help tailor messages more effectively.

In terms of **procedures and mechanisms for psychosocial risk management, the research shows that micro and small companies have very limited to no actions specifically addressing these issues**. Interviews revealed very little need for any formalised approaches, especially given the small size of many of the enterprises and the delicate nature of many of the risks. The **key approach to identifying and addressing the risks was through open and direct communication**. This in particular concerns ad hoc responsive actions to problems arising, rather than any preventive steps. Indeed, prevention did not surface as especially important, indicating that such 'strategic' approaches remain to be developed. Among the preventive actions, training can be singled out, together with opportunities for socialisation and meetings organised by the management to bring workers together.

Workplace risk assessments were implemented in very limited scope among the companies interviewed, and even then, psychosocial issues were not covered (with the exception of healthcare providers and social care services). Lack of formal procedures for identification of risks leads to very low levels of employee engagement in the process. Employees are welcome (in the words of management representatives) to share their concerns and ideas during team meetings or by approaching managers directly. At the same time, interestingly, our fieldwork revealed that the companies where management representatives boasted the most comprehensive approaches to psychosocial risk management are

also those where employee representatives reported very limited knowledge of these measures or complained of a very difficult work environment.

The research among the companies found that the **labour inspectorate was not considered a relevant stakeholder and inspection visits were not perceived as a useful instrument for enhancing psychosocial risk management at companies**. This is partly due to the low frequency of such visits (as ESENER 2019 data shows, these are more frequent in the case of large companies), the fact that they are usually announced in advance and that they are considered largely as coercive. While labour inspectors in theory can address psychosocial risks during their inspections, interviews with the companies showed that this seldom takes place. This largely confirms information obtained from the labour inspectorate – there is a possibility yet no obligation for the inspectors to raise such topics. Generally, the research revealed that generally understood OSH in micro and small companies remains an area in need of improvement, with enterprises struggling to address all the regulations and standards governing physical safety of the workers. In such circumstances, psychosocial risks are not high on the OSH agenda, neither for the managers nor for the inspectors.

Motivation and drivers for management of psychosocial risks revealed by the study largely confirm the findings of ESENER 2019. **Micro and small companies follow OSH regulations, largely due to fear of inspections**. This has two possible implications. First, in the light of the limited role played currently by the inspectorate (infrequent inspections and lack of coverage of psychosocial issues) discussed above, enhancing inspections and including such topics can contribute to more active approaches at the companies. Second, as the policy and legal overview presented in this report shows, psychosocial risks are not explicitly listed in the regulatory framework. Rather, they constitute one of the many elements of OSH that should be taken into account by the enterprises. Given the fact that companies indicated fulfilling legal obligations as a key driver, making such obligations explicit could further strengthen the case.

Contrary to ESENER 2019 results, however, our qualitative research shows that productivity is considered an important factor for ensuring that the workplace is stress-free, work is adequately organised, and that employees feel safe and motivated. This finding is promising, showing that effective management of psychosocial risks can in fact be promoted as an investment in the company and part of a business strategy.

Low levels of unionisation among micro and small companies in Poland have a twofold effect on psychosocial risk management. On the one hand, on the level of individual companies, the potential role of mediators that can be played by representatives of trade unions is absent. Active, well-informed representatives could become important stakeholders in identifying psychosocial risks and suggesting ways to address them on a company level. On the other hand, national and sectoral trade unions are sources of information, training and resources that are available to their members.

Lastly, the **COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted operations of micro and small companies, introducing new risks or strengthening the existing ones**. Extensive teleworking, increasing sense of job insecurity, limited human contact, and the need to adjust to new modes and organisation of work have all contributed to the general health fear. All the sectors in our study were impacted, with some having to develop new modes of delivering services (events, education and health), and others reorganising work into shifts and introducing telework for some employees. The impact has been particularly significant in the case of parents of small children unable to attend schools and kindergartens. Parents had to combine work and minding their children, which meant that work-life boundaries became blurred. The pandemic to a certain extent served as a catalyst for a public debate about psychosocial issues, such as stress, isolation and the importance of communication. It remains to be seen how this will be transferred into policy and the regulatory framework governing work.

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) contributes to making Europe a safer, healthier and more productive place to work. The Agency researches, develops, and distributes reliable, balanced, and impartial safety and health information and organises pan-European awareness raising campaigns. Set up by the European Union in 1994 and based in Bilbao, Spain, the Agency brings together representatives from the European Commission, Member State governments, employers' and workers' organisations, as well as leading experts in each of the EU Member States and beyond.

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