



Protecting workers in hotels, restaurants and catering



By courtesy of Prevent

Introduction

The hotel, restaurant and catering sector (Horeca) covers hotels, bars, pubs, restaurants, contract caterers, fast-food take-aways, cafes and bistros. It is an important job creator in the service sector and, for many EU Member States, in the economy as a whole. This growing sector currently employs more than 7.8 million people in the European Union.

This fact sheet presents the key findings of the Horeca prevention report. Its aim was to give an overview of occupational safety and health (OSH), identify good practice, and examine the key employment and economic changes taking place in the sector.

Sector characteristics

The Horeca sector is composed mainly of small enterprises employing 10 people or less. Its workforce is young: according to European statistics (EU-25, Eurostat 2005) some 48 % are under 35, and people of 55 years and older make up less than 10 % of the workforce, although numbers are rising as a result of demographic change. Female workers — 54 % of the workforce — outnumber men. The sector is considered a good place for young and relatively unskilled people to enter the workforce. The educational level of the workforce is low: 40 % of employees are relatively unskilled; only 1 employee in 10 has a high level of education. Despite the demanding working conditions, the sector does not have above-average rates of accident and disease.

European, national and local policies and practices

In recent years, occupational safety and health legislation has become increasingly complex. Since 90 % of all Horeca establishments are very small, employers often lack the time and resources to understand and follow the legislative issues affecting the sector. Implementing legislation at a company level appears to be a significant problem in the sector.

At European level, workers are covered by Framework Directive 89/391/EEC. It requires employers to carry out risk assessments

and imposes a general duty on employers to ensure the health and safety of all employees at work.

There are few policies specifically formulated for the Horeca sector. Some policies, such as hazard analysis critical control point (HACCP) and the smoking ban, led to State institutions and prevention service providers looking more closely at the sector. In some cases, this has resulted in the introduction of further safety and health measures.

In 2004, the European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions (EFFAT) and Hotrec, the trade association of hotels, restaurants and cafes in the EU and EEA, signed a joint document entitled 'An initiative to improve corporate social responsibility in the hospitality sector'.

Topics covered by the document

- Equal opportunities and non-discrimination: Enterprises should develop policies to cover recruitment, pay, promotion, training and terminating contracts.
- Working conditions and work organisation: Practices such as 'job splitting', flexitime and other measures to promote work-life balance should be encouraged. Enterprises should also seek to re-employ seasonal employees from one season to the next to maintain stability and continuity.
- Fair pay: The principle of non-discrimination should apply to pay at all levels. Non-financial incentives with a 'family-friendly' impact, such as day care for children, should be considered.
- Vocational and continuous training, and lifelong learning: Training should enhance the 'professionalisation' and employability of employees. Enterprises should offer more apprenticeships and traineeships where it is economically and socially feasible.
- Health and safety: Policies should be drawn up in discussion with employees and programmes aimed at tackling problems that are specific to the sector should be developed.
- Restructuring: Employees and their representatives should be kept aware of their company's situation, and be informed and consulted on any planned restructuring exercises. This will avoid or at least limit any negative consequences for employment and prevent any souring of the relationship between employer and employee.

Working conditions

Hotel and restaurant work is varied, but safety and health literature focuses on the risks of working in kitchens and, to a lesser extent, on waiting staff. Supporting activities such as cleaning and goods supply are rarely represented in scientific reports. Workers also face physical and psychosocial risks, including social hazards and long hours.

The sector offers atypical employment and working conditions, which is reflected in both the working time and type of contracts. In general, the sector asks for more flexibility in working conditions and time. There was a noticeable deterioration in working conditions from 1995 to 2000, especially in relation to psychosocial risks such as ergonomic conditions, job demands, working hours and job autonomy.

The Horeca sector is changing rapidly as new technologies come on the market and customer demand changes. The factors behind this transformation are many and varied, including: sociological changes such as the diversification of households and the multiple roles people fulfil nowadays; demographic changes as society ages; and economic changes such as mergers, restructuring and a freer movement of labour and resources.

The most significant risks of working in the sector are:

- physically demanding work involving prolonged standing and static postures, carrying and lifting and repetitive movements, often combined with other unfavourable working conditions such as the poor design of the workplace;
- exposure to high noise levels; some 29 % of the workers in the sector are exposed to noise and more than 4 % consider this puts their health at risk (!);
- hot or cold working environments, especially the combination of high temperatures with draughts, open doors, alternating between working in warm, humid conditions and cold environments such as storage rooms;
- cuts and burns;
- trips, slips and falls caused by wet and slippery floors, obstacles and falls from a height;
- dangerous substances, for example the widespread use of cleaning agents and biological agents in food.

The most important psychosocial risk factors are:

- long and non-standard working hours; the sector is characterised by long shifts, irregular and unusual working hours; a lot of the work is done when other people are not at work;
- difficulties maintaining work-life balance, especially given the unpredictability of working time, the length of working days and the lack of control over the work;

- high workload and time pressure; some 75 % mention working at high speed; 66 % have to work to tight deadlines; some 48 % say they do not have enough time to get work done (!);
- low control over work: monotonous work that lacks creativity and requires little initiative is widespread;
- contact with colleagues and the chef: lack of support can aggravate work stress; some 70 % of the workforce feel able to ask for support from colleagues; only 53 % from supervisors (!);
- continuous contact with customers, which can be a source of stress or, in the worst cases, lead to harassment or even violence;
- lack of training and education; parts of the jobs require no formal education and a low level of training and experience; people are not always well trained to do their job, which can lead to more stress.

Case studies

Case studies focus on the practical prevention of risks to workers in this sector. The report provides descriptions of 18 practical actions at the workplace level, describing the involvement, motives and objectives of the participating groups. It also identifies and assesses results, side-effects, success factors and problems. The case studies were chosen to show the different risks the Horeca sector is dealing with and to reflect the variety of working environments. This includes not only restaurants and hotels, but also school canteens, clubs and bars.

Successful risk prevention involves:

- good risk assessment; prior identification of hazards is essential to ensure the right issues are being addressed;
- worker involvement to ensure all issues are identified and to create the support necessary for the successful implementation of prevention measures;
- management commitment;
- successful partnerships to launch large-scale initiatives on a regional, national or sector level; to ensure the success of these types of project, all stakeholders need to be involved;
- the right kind of training;
- an inclusive approach using different types of action, which can increase the overall success of any action taken.

More information on OSH in the Horeca sector is available at: <http://osha.europa.eu/sector/horeca/>

More information on OSH in the Horeca sector in Ireland, Malta and the UK is available at: <http://www.hsa.ie>, <http://www.ohsa.org.mt/>, <http://www.hse.gov.uk/catering/index.htm>

(!) Parent-Thirion, A. et al., *Fourth European survey on working conditions*, 2005, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) 2007.

