

Future Occupational Safety and Health Research Needs and Priorities in the Member States of the European Union

Summary of a European study

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work has compiled information from the Member States of the European Union about their future research needs, which forms the basis of a new report “Future Occupational Safety and Health Research Needs and Priorities in the Member States of the European Union”.

The aim was to collect up-to-date information on these research needs and priorities to inform the European Commission’s research programmes, to improve collaboration between the Community bodies and the Member States, and to guide occupational safety and health research over the next decade.

Each Member State was asked to report on emerging risks and their future OSH research needs and priorities. They were asked to include the viewpoints of the social partners as well as all relevant research institutions, according to national practice. The final published summary report is based on these individual Member State reports.

The report provides general conclusions about future OSH research needs and priorities, which are summarised below.

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Aiming to Identify Future European OSH Research Needs and Priorities

The report aims to support discussion in EU Member States about future European OSH research needs and priorities. The European Agency is therefore organising a follow-up project in 2000 in order to receive feedback about the report’s conclusions. Based on these comments, the aim is to provide a consolidated document for use in the formulation of priorities for future research programmes of the European Union.

Overall OSH research needs and priorities

Ten overall priorities were identified, each mentioned by at least two thirds of Member States as future OSH research priorities. (See Box 1)

Box 1. Overall OSH research priorities

■	Psychosocial risk factors
■	Ergonomic risk factors
■	Chemical risk factors
■	Safety risks
■	Risk management in SMEs
■	Occupational and other work-related diseases
■	Risks in specific activities
■	Risk assessment
■	Substitution of dangerous substances
■	Physical risk factors

Key:
the number of Member States which paid particular attention to one or more risks in a certain category

■ = risks mentioned 13 times
■ = risks mentioned 12 times
■ = risks mentioned 11 times
■ = risks mentioned 10 times

Psychosocial issues, ergonomics and chemical risk factors emerged overall as the top priorities for future research. Nearly all Member States prioritised these three areas and they featured as priority issues under several categories. Within the field of psychosocial issues emphasis was placed on stress at work. In the area of ergonomics particular priority was given to manual handling/work postures.

Regarding chemical risks, toxic/dangerous chemicals and particularly carcinogens were prioritised. Furthermore research into the substitution of chemicals to reduce risks appeared separately in the top 10 and chemicals were also prioritised under the category of risk assessment.

The next most frequently mentioned priority concerned safety risks (particularly human factors) followed by risk management in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises. SMEs were also ranked high in the category about priorities in particular groups and work organisational issues.

Mentioned by two-thirds of Member States were: occupational and other work-related diseases; risks in specific activities; risk assessment; chemical substitution; and physical risk factors.

In the field of occupational and other work-related diseases once again Member States identified the need for more research into problems caused by psychosocial and ergonomic factors, as well as those caused by exposure to a combination of factors including complex combinations resulting from the introduction of new technologies. Among physical risk factors, noise and electric/magnetic fields appeared to be of particular interest.

Research priorities relating to risk management and risk assessment featured prominently. As mentioned above risk assessment relating to dangerous chemicals and carcinogens is of particular interest as is managing chemical risks through substitution of less harmful substances. Risk management in SMEs has been referred to. Other risk management areas highlighted included integrated OSH management systems, certification and competence issues.

Priorities within the main OSH research categories

Society and work organisation

Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises featured prominently, recognised as having particular needs. (See Box 2) There are also some groups such as ageing workers and people with reduced working ability that are of particular interest to the Member States. With regard to changing work patterns, teleworking and subcontracting emerged as important areas for future research. The self-employed were highlighted in addition in the expert seminar.

Management and technology

Risk assessment is still felt to be an important topic, having the highest priority in the “management and technology” category. The integration of OSH management system into other management



systems (such as quality control and environmental issues) also emerged as an important topic. Emphasis was put on external assistance, e.g. learning from others (best practice, benchmarking) and learning and competence development.

Regarding technological development, Member States highlighted research needs in the field of the development and use of new products, production methods, processes and equipment to eliminate or reduce risks. The interest in the substitution of chemicals has also been referred to.

Risks in the working environment

Risks in the “working environment” category received most attention, indicating that there are still gaps in the knowledge of how to control them.

Health effects

The relatively high scores in this category reflect increasing awareness that it is important to focus on both health and safety aspects in the prevention of occupational risks.

Specific and other topics related to working environment and health

Only a few countries mentioned risks in specific activities. Agriculture, manufacturing, construction, transport and health/social work received particular attention. One national return registered an interest in the special occupational groups.

Box 2. Priorities within the main OSH research categories

Society and work organisation

■	Small and medium-sized enterprises
■	Cost/benefit studies of OSH
■	Cost analysis of OSH, costs of accidents and diseases
■	Subcontracted labour
■	Ageing workers
■	People with reduced working ability
■	Tele-working
■	Self-employed
■	Organisation cultures
■	Temporary workers
■	Young workers

Management and technology

■	Risk assessment
■	Risk management in SMEs
■	Substitution of dangerous substances
■	New safe products, production methods, processes and equipment (for prevention of risks due to ergonomic, safety, biological, physical or psychological risk factors)
■	OSH management systems, certification of OSH management, integration in other management systems
■	Best practices, benchmarking
■	Learning and competence development, training methodologies
■	Accident prevention
■	Workplace health promotion, methods for occupational health services
■	Risk communication and perception
■	Management and worker participation
■	Machinery, plant safety and mechanical handling (e.g. the assessment of risks associated with the operation, service and maintenance of machinery and plant)

Risks in working environment

■	Psychosocial risk factors
■	Ergonomic risk factors
■	Chemical risk factors
■	Safety risks
■	Physical risk factors
■	Biological risk factors

Health effects

■	Occupational and other work-related diseases
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Specific topics

■	Risks in specific activities
■	Development of methodologies

Key:

the number of Member States which paid particular attention to one or more risks in a certain category.

- = risks mentioned 12-13 times
- = risks mentioned 10-11 times
- = risks mentioned 8-9 times
- = risks mentioned 6-7 times

Need for European co-operation

Member States concluded that the major need for co-operation at the European level was the organisation of joint research projects and programmes.

Partners in preparing the report

The Agency's Thematic Network Group on Research - Work and Health provided assistance in organising and monitoring the study. The group consists of OSH research experts from EU Member States, Social Partners and the European Commission. The Health and Safety Laboratory (HSL), UK, assisted in analysing the national reports from Member States and in preparing the summary report. The work was carried within the framework of the Topic Centre on Research - Work and Health.¹

The European Agency organised an expert seminar in Bilbao in June 1999 to discuss the preliminary results of this project. Seminar participants were OSH research decision-makers and experts from the Member States, the European Commission, European research institutes and Social Partners as well as from the U.S.A.

How to get the report

The summary report is available in English on the Agency's Web site at <http://agency.osha.eu.int/publications/reports/resprior/>.

The printed report - “Future Occupational Safety and Health Research Needs and Priorities in the Member States of the European Union”, European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2000, ISBN 92-828-9254-9 - can be ordered from the EC's Publications Office EUR-OP in Luxembourg (<http://eur-op.eu.int/>), or from its sales agents. The price is 7 euro (excluding VAT).

This Fact Sheet is available in all EU languages at <http://agency.osha.eu.int/publications/factsheets/>.

¹ Topic Centre on Research - Work and Health is a consortium of 10 major OSH research institutes in the European Union.