Qualitative post-test evaluation of ESENER: Overview report

European Risk Observatory

European Agency
for Safety and Health
at Work

ESENER

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Executive summary

This report draws together the results of a study into how respondents answered the 2009 European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER). Based on a series of cognitive interviews ([1]) with respondents to the survey in 90 organisations across five countries, the study examines in detail the responses provided to some of the key survey questions. In general, most of the respondents interviewed demonstrated a reasonably good understanding of the survey questions discussed. However, we conclude that most of the questions examined could benefit from relatively minor changes to the wording of the questions and/or different response options to avoid any misinterpretations and improve the reliability of the results. A few questions could benefit from significant amendment or restructuring to address the intent behind them in a different way. In both cases, suggestions about how the question wording could be changed have been provided.

In addition, during the course of the interviews, a number of general issues emerged which apply to more than one question and should be taken into account in the design of the 2014 ESENER. These include:

- ensuring that question responses take into account the fact that practice can vary across different parts of an establishment;
- applying response scales consistently throughout the questionnaire and providing a sufficient number of options so respondents feel they can answer the question accurately;
- taking care with the wording of questions when asking about hypothetical situations that the respondent may not have experienced in practice;
- ensuring that the wording is as precise as possible and not open to mistranslation or misinterpretation;
- ensuring that the survey is completed by an appropriate respondent and that the perspective that the respondent should take in answering the questionnaire is continually emphasised throughout the survey interview;
- taking different national institutional and legislative contexts into account when analysing and interpreting the results of the survey.

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1 Face-to-face interviews focusing on the cognitive processes that respondents use to answer survey questions.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER) is the *largest* pan-European survey on occupational safety and health (OSH) undertaken to date and was conducted in 2009 by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA). Approximately 36,000 telephone interviews were performed in private and public sector establishments with 10 or more employees in the 28 Member States of the European Union and in Turkey, Norway and Switzerland.

The survey explored the opinions and views of managers and workers' representatives on how health and safety risks are dealt with in their enterprises. It specifically emphasised the growing area of psychosocial risks as well as the economic and social context of work. Workers' involvement was investigated specifically, with a separate interview directed at employee health and safety representatives.

The findings[1] showed that enterprises were, on the whole, positively engaged with OSH issues. Accidents, musculo-skeletal disorders (MSDs) and work-related stress were the principal OSH concerns of European enterprises, alongside violence, bullying and harassment. There were also important differences between employers in different countries, of different sizes and sectors, and with respect to the level of awareness, management commitment, preventative actions and involvement of employees in OSH.

The findings of the survey illustrate that there are large differences between Member States in relation to the extent to which employers have formal OSH policies in place. Although such policies are more frequently in place within larger establishments across Member States, different countries vary considerably in the number of employers that have such policies. The UK has the highest proportion of employers with a formal policy (98 %), for example, and Greece has the lowest average proportion (just 38 %). However, the legislative and other contexts can vary significantly between countries and need to be taken into account when interpreting the results.

ESENER therefore contained a wide range of questions which allow us to understand the OSH management situation across the EU and beyond. Other questions explored the management approaches in place and the drivers of and obstacles to OSH management. Specific questions also examined important current topics such as psychosocial risks within the workplace and the participation of workers in OSH decisions.

ESENER went through extensive pretesting procedures before being taken into the field, including qualitative piloting,

quantitative piloting, expert consultation and translation/back-translation[2].

1.2 Aims of the work

The main aim of this study was to develop a more in-depth understanding of results from ESENER and of the way in which OSH is managed in the workplace. The detailed aims and objectives are listed in Box 1.

> **Box 1: Aims and objectives**
>
> - Improve understanding of the ESENER results by producing secondary information that helps clarify what respondents actually meant by their answers.
> - Provide information about how respondents' answers are shaped by the context in which they operate (e.g. national, economic, job-related).
> - Give some indication of 'OSH performance' in the selected establishments and the feasibility of including more 'outcome measures' in a future study.
> - Serve as a quality control measure, assessing the extent to which the questionnaires measured what they were designed to measure.
> - Assist in the development of new questionnaires through the critical assessment of existing questions and identification of additional items appropriate for investigation through a computer-assisted telephone interview survey.
>
> Key issues to be explored include those that formed part of the ESENER questionnaires as well as:
>
> - resources dedicated to health and safety management (human and financial, in-house and external);
> - health and safety performance (e.g. level of employee absence related to occupational accidents or ill health);
> - system for health and safety management (integration with other areas of management, lines of responsibility, approach to decision making and involvement of employees); and
> - extent of worker participation (methods used, degree of commitment, extent of dedicated resources).

1.3 Methodology

The qualitative post-test focused on five Member States, selected to capture broad variation in OSH-relevant national characteristics. The countries chosen were Germany, Finland, the United Kingdom, Italy and Bulgaria. They represent larger

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1 For survey results and publications: http://esener.eu

2 For online methodological details of ESENER: http://esener.eu

and smaller economies, differing approaches to corporatism and social partnership, and varied regulatory regimes and management systems with regard to OSH. An initial literature review was carried out, setting out the national context of OSH in each country (refer to the national overview report for more details; EU-OSHA, 2013).

1.3.1 Achieved sample

Within each country, it was decided to conduct in-depth, cognitive interviews in 18 establishments that had responded to the previous ESENER survey. These establishments were selected to generate a balance across broad industrial sectors but with a bias in favour of small enterprises, as the survey showed that it is among these that there was the greatest variation of results (Table 1.1). The aim was to have at least two respondents in each cell.

Interviewers aimed to speak to both a management and an employee representative in each establishment; unfortunately, in some cases it was not possible to interview an employee representative because of staff turnover, time limitations or the lack of employee representatives within the organisation. However, employee representatives were interviewed in 86 % of the establishments visited. There was also some variation in the total number of establishments visited in each country; there was a slight shortfall in the numbers of Italian establishments recruited, although numbers were supplemented by additional cases in Germany, Finland and Bulgaria. In total, 90 establishments were visited across the five countries. All interviews were conducted face to face and were audio-recorded and transcribed. The breakdown of the achieved sample is set out in Table 1.2.

1.3.2 Cognitive interviews

The interviews with management and employee representatives focused on a selected number of questions featured in the 2009 ESENER survey. These questions covered areas of specific interest. There were concerns regarding the understanding of some questions, how they were translated or the potential for valid, bias-free answers. The themes covered included the management of OSH, concern about OSH risks, the organisation's approach to risk assessment, the drivers and barriers to the measurement of OSH issues, the links between OSH and organisational performance and — for employee representatives — the extent of worker participation in OSH matters. The guide also included some open-ended questions confirming or elaborating background information on the characteristics of the organisation and the type of work conducted.

The technique of **cognitive interviewing** allowed the research to explore a number of possible problem areas associated with quantitative surveys, linked to the use of precategorised, unnuanced answers to address complex questions. These include:

- lexical problems (problems with the meaning of words or their use in the survey context);
- inclusion/exclusion problems (problems determining the scope of a term or concept);
- temporal problems (limitations of determining boundaries of the reference period or duration of activity in question);
- logical problems (resulting from the structure of the question);
- computational problems (resulting from problems with recall or other issues of respondent capacity).

(Conrad and Blair, cited by Tourangeau *et al., 2000*)

These issues mean that researchers analysing raw survey data can never be completely confident in determining what respondents meant by their responses and whether or not responses are strictly comparable. This is a particular challenge for cross-cultural surveys such as ESENER, in which terms and processes may be understood differently according to the cultural context or translation issues may hamper respondents' understanding. The results of this kind of post-test evaluation can, therefore, help with both the interpretation of responses and the development of future survey questions.

Cognitive interviews allowed these issues to be identified and explored. Interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide, during which respondents were presented with a selected number of questions from ESENER. They were then encouraged to reflect on what they meant by their answers, what kind of situations they referred to in answering the question, and how easy or difficult they found the question to answer (in terms of both understanding the question and the adequacy of the response options provided).

This kind of reflection was encouraged through the use of 'think aloud' techniques — whereby the respondents described their thought processes as they decided on their answer — and through probing and observations by the

Table 1.1: **Sampling matrix**

	Producing industries	Private services	Public services
10 to 19 employees	At least 2	At least 2	At least 2
20 to 49 employees	At least 2	At least 2	At least 2
50 or more employees	At least 2	At least 2	At least 2

Table 1.2: **Achieved sample breakdown**

Sector	Size	Number of establishments	Number of employee representatives interviewed
United Kingdom			
Producing industries	Micro/very small (10 to 19)	1	–
	Small (20 to 49)	–	–
	Medium (50 to 149)	–	–
	Large (150 or more)	3	3
Private services	10 to 19	–	–
	20 to 49	1	–
	50 to 149	1	–
	150 or more	3	2
Public services	10 to 19	–	–
	20 to 49	1	–
	50 to 149	–	–
	150 or more	8	6
Total		**18**	**11**
Italy			
Producing industries	Micro/very small (10 to 19)	1	1
	Small (20 to 49)	1	–
	Medium (50 to 149)	4	4
	Large (150 or more)	1	1
Private services	10 to 19	–	–
	20 to 49	–	–
	50 to 149	–	–
	150 or more	5	3
Public services	10 to 19	1	1
	20 to 49	1	1
	50 to 149	–	–
	150 or more	1	1
Total		**15**	**12**
Germany			
Producing industries	Micro/very small (10 to 19)	–	–
	Small (20 to 49)	3	3
	Medium (50 to 149)	–	–
	Large (150 or more)	2	2
Private services	10 to 19	3	2
	20 to 49	1	–
	50 to 149	–	–
	150 or more	1	1
Public services	10 to 19	1	1
	20 to 49	2	1
	50 to 149	4	4

Sector	Size	Number of establishments	Number of employee representatives interviewed
	150 or more	2	2
Total		**19**	**16**
Finland			
Producing industries	Micro/very small (10 to 19)	3	3
	Small (20 to 49)	2	2
	Medium (50 to 149)	1	1
	Large (150 or more)	1	1
Private services	10 to 19	2	2
	20 to 49	2	2
	50 to 149	2	2
	150 or more	1	1
Public services	10 to 19	2	2
	20 to 49	1	1
	50 to 149	1	1
	150 or more	1	1
Total		**19**	**19**
Bulgaria			
Producing industries	Micro/very small (10 to 19)	1	1
	Small (20 to 49)	3	3
	Medium (50 to 149)	–	–
	Large (150 or more)	2	2
Private services	10 to 19	1	1
	20 to 49	3	3
	50 to 149	2	2
	150 or more	1	1
Public services	10 to 19	2	2
	20 to 49	2	2
	50 to 149	2	2
	150 or more	–	–
Total		**19**	**19**

interviewer. Interviewers were encouraged to react to respondents' non-verbal cues, such as hesitation or facial expression, and to follow up with additional probes to identify the reasons for the respondent's reaction. Interview discussion guides also contained a number of elaborative probes, which encouraged the respondent to give more detail, providing greater context to the survey questions. The guides were also flexible, allowing interviewers to respond with additional probes based on the respondent's answers. However, it should be noted that taking questions out of the context of the original questionnaire can lead to some confusion among respondents that might not exist in the actual survey. For example, the survey focused on the respondent's establishment or 'local unit' (e.g. branch of a

multisite organisation). This is clearly stated at the beginning of the survey. Although respondents were reminded about the establishment focus in the cognitive interviews, some still found it difficult to talk only about their particular workplace instead of their whole organisation.

1.3.3 Additional data collection

The establishment information collected through the cognitive interviews was supplemented by additional data on particular issues of interest to EU-OSHA. These related to OSH performance (such as records on accidents and sickness absence) and

the organisational resources dedicated to health and safety (such as the type and seniority of staff involved in health and safety and the percentage of working time dedicated to health and safety). Since this type of information usually required reference to company records, it was decided to collect this before interviews by asking management respondents to complete a form (see Annex 1). However, in the event, many managers struggled to provide all of the information requested, either because the information had not been collected or because the level of detail required was not available.

1.3.4 Reporting

Interviewers compiled a short report on each establishment visited. These **establishment reports** all followed a similar structure, setting out background information and a summary of the respondents' answers to the survey questions. They also contained sections exploring respondents' interpretations of the key terms, any areas causing difficulty or confusion and any additional information supplied as context to the questions or in the form. Ensuring that each establishment report covered the same areas allowed for comparison within and between countries.

Common themes and issues emerging from each set of establishment reports went on to form the basis of a **national report** on each of the five countries (Conrad and Blair, cited by Tourangeau *et al.*, 2000). These again followed a common structure, setting out the national context on OSH issues and the main technical issues and interpretations from the establishment interviews. The findings from the five national reports are summarised in this overview report.

1.4   Structure of this report

This report covers the technical responses to the cognitive interviews and reviews each of the questions examined in turn. For each question we summarise the response across all five

countries, make recommendations about whether or not the question should be amended and, where appropriate, identify options for change.

Chapter 2 looks at three questions about respondents' approach to the management of health and safety in the workplace.

Chapter 3 examines responses to a question about levels of concern with a specified series of health and safety risks in the establishment.

Chapter 4 considers both management and employee representative respondents' views on a series of questions about their establishment's approach to risk assessments.

Chapter 5 looks at two questions in the management survey aimed at investigating why occupational safety and health issues are addressed in the workplace and the difficulties faced in dealing with them.

Chapter 6 reviews responses to four questions asked of only employee representatives about employee participation and involvement.

Chapter 7 looks at a series of questions that employee representatives were asked about the training they had received and the resources at their disposal.

Chapter 8 considers responses to questions about the establishment's business performance and its performance on occupational safety and health. Two questions covered these issues in the original questionnaire but did not get a good response. Therefore two new questions covering these issues were developed and tested in the interviews.

In the final chapter, Chapter 9, we draw out some of the common features of the responses that transcend particular questions and should be taken in account in the overall design of any future questionnaire.

2. Approach to management of health and safety

In this chapter, we review the responses to the three questions we examined on respondents' approach to health and safety:

- one asking if there was a documented health and safety policy, or something similar;
- another asking about the impact of any policy in practice; and
- a third asking about the degree of involvement of local managers in the management of health and safety.

Below, we look at each of the questions in turn.

2.1 Is there a policy?

> **Question MM155/ER200**
> **Is there a documented policy, established management system or action plan on health and safety in your establishment?**

The general intent behind this question was to establish if the respondent's establishment had a written statement of management commitment to health and safety and if responsibilities for health and safety were broadly identified. However, the precise wording, with three different terms used, caused some confusion and only a minority of informants understood the question clearly. Furthermore, responses were influenced by the different national contexts. For example, in Finland every organisation must have a written health and safety policy, whereas in Germany there is no legal obligation to have one; organisations are only required to follow the *Berufsgenossenschaft* regulation. Therefore, not having a policy does not indicate a poor approach to occupational safety and health.

Other issues that arose with this question include the following:

- The meaning of the terms 'management system' and 'action plan' caused uncertainty, except in Finland, where respondents were more likely to refer to these than a health and safety policy.
- Some respondents thought any document was evidence of having one of the items identified in the question. For example, in Germany and Italy respondents often mistook the existence of a risk assessment document for evidence of having a written policy or action plan.
- In Bulgaria, some respondents initially thought this question was asking for certified systems only (ISO accreditations), so

this needed to be clarified, whereas in Finland any evidence of compliance with health and safety legislation was taken as evidence of having the documentation.
- This question was asked of both management and employee representatives and in some cases (e.g. in Italy and Germany) the two respondents gave inconsistent answers, reflecting the fact that they were talking about different documents. This further emphasises the need for greater clarity in this question.
- Finally, respondents often referred to more than one document, which was confusing for the follow-up questions (e.g. MM156/ER202).

2.1.1 Recommendation

This question would benefit from being amended to make it clearer and more directly address the intent behind it.

2.1.2 Options

One option would be to ask about the three different types of documents separately in order to get a better picture of what really exists. In this case, further clarification would be helpful to define what is meant by the different terms. For example:

Does your establishment have any of the following?

- *A written health and safety policy setting out commitments and responsibilities.*
- *An established management system for controlling workplace risks to health and safety.*
- *Written action plans for dealing with health and safety issues.*

Another option is to change the wording of the question to make it more general (less dependent on the literal interpretations of words such as 'policy' or 'action plan'). For example:

Does your establishment have a written statement setting out its commitment to health and safety and outlining key responsibilities?

A third option is to emphasise that this question is about policies set by the organisation. For example:

Is there an in-house document setting out the management of health and safety in your establishment?

None of these suggestions specifically addresses the issue of a written policy document not being required in some countries (such as Germany) but this contextual issue could be taken into account when interpreting the results.

2.2 Impact of the policy

Question MM156/ER202
In practice, how much of an impact does this policy, management system or action plan have on health and safety in your establishment? Does it have a large impact, some impact, or practically no impact?

The aim of this question was to try to establish whether the policy actually had an impact on day-to-day practice and the culture of the workplace or was more of a theoretical or technical document with little impact on workplace practice.

There were a number of problems with this question. Although most of the respondents felt that they understood the term 'impact' in general terms (inferring that it meant a positive effect resulting in better health and safety outcomes), there were three different reference points used to provide evidence of 'impact'. The first was the policy's impact on organisational practices (such as working time and rest periods, prevention measures, information and training or occupational health surveillance). The second was the policy's impact on employee awareness (whether or not employees were generally mindful of health and safety issues). The third was the policy's impact on health and safety outcomes within the organisation (such as absence levels and accident rates). The reference points chosen by respondents, therefore, affected how much of an impact they believed the policy had. Some thought the policy could have only a minimal impact, as it is just a piece of paper; it is what emerges from it that has an impact on the establishment.

The question had three possible response options and in Bulgaria a few of the respondents interpreted 'some' as minor, so they rated the impact as lower than the label suggests, or requested a mid-point response option. For example, a management representative from a small private construction establishment insisted that their health and safety policy had an impact, neither 'some' nor 'large', but a 'good impact'.

Finally, respondents from large, multi-site organisations found it difficult to give an overall assessment because the impact varied or was patchy across different areas of the business or even across different groups of employees.

2.2.1 Recommendation

This question would benefit from being amended either to make it clearer or, more fundamentally, to address the intent behind it in a different way.

2.2.2 Options

Given the three different interpretations, an attempt could be made to clarify on which aspect the question is focused, for instance by defining 'impact' or giving different answer options. For example, if the question were focused on impact as demonstrated by employee practice, it could say:

In practice, how much of an impact does this policy, management system or action plan have on everyday workplace practice and health and safety in your establishment, as measured by …? Does it have:

- *a large impact (for example, most employees take account of health and safety in their everyday working actions);*
- *some impact (for example, a minority of employees take account of health and safety in their everyday working actions); or*
- *practically no impact (for example, very few employees take account of health and safety in their everyday working actions)?*

Other approaches might include asking the same question but using the term 'influence' rather than 'impact' or asking the extent to which the policy has been implemented.

A different option altogether would be to ask a series of more factual questions. For example:

Is the policy actively promoted to employees and managers?

In your view, what proportion of the workforce are aware of the content of the policy etc.?

(However, some respondents may not feel able to accurately answer a question such as the second, and awareness may not be the same as impact.)

Whatever the wording of the question, it might be worth re-emphasising that the question refers to one particular establishment.

2.3 Involvement of junior management

Question MM159/ER 214
Overall, how would you rate the degree of involvement of the line managers and supervisors in the management of health and safety? Is it very high, quite high, quite low or very low?

This question was designed to provide an insight into the extent to which the health and safety policy influenced

workplace practice and if junior managers took their health and safety responsibilities seriously. However, from the interviews it was not clear if this question had been interpreted by respondents in the way intended, partly because of difficulties in translating the question and partly because of variation in practice between different managers.

On the translation issue, the term 'line managers and supervisors' had been translated into Bulgarian in a way that suggested a wider group including senior managers as well as line managers and supervisors. The German translation was 'line managers' and 'other managers', which suggested a broader interpretation as in Bulgaria. In Italy, the translation covered directors, owners (of a small establishment) and other managers. Although a clearer translation could potentially address this particular problem, smaller establishments might not employ a tier of junior managers and so the management respondents would be, in effect, rating their own degree of involvement in health and safety and therefore might not provide an objective response.

The second main issue with the question concerned wide variation across respondents in their understanding of the term 'involvement'. Thus:

- In the UK, some respondents linked 'involvement' to the number of health and safety activities carried out by line managers and supervisors (their responsibilities), whereas others understood it to mean their engagement with or commitment to health and safety. There was also a difference between employees' and managers' understanding of the term; for example, in one establishment an employee representative took the lack of health and safety responsibilities among line managers and supervisors as evidence of little involvement. Meanwhile, the management representative, agreeing that the line managers and supervisors had few responsibilities, gave the opposite rating because he thought their level of engagement with health and safety was high.
- In Bulgaria, the question tended to be interpreted as being about whether or not junior managers were involved in, for example, health and safety training and instruction, rather than whether or not they took their responsibilities seriously.

- In Italy, a number of respondents thought the question was about the degree of commitment to health and safety principles showed by junior managers.
- In Germany, the term was considered to refer more to attitudes towards and experience of OSH than to practice. Respondents referred to their next supervisor or OSH contact person in the management. This could also be a member of the top management. The German translation of the question asked for 'direkte und andere Vorgesetzte', which means 'direct and other managers with power to direct'. This included supervisors as well as managers of any level in the company.

Finally, in most countries, respondents from larger organisations tended to feel that the level of involvement varied between different managers, so a number requested an average or mid-scale response option, which was not possible on the four-point scale provided.

2.3.1 Recommendation

This question would benefit from being amended to make it clearer.

2.3.2 Options

The two main issues with this question appear to be respondents' understanding of the term 'involvement' and the term 'line manager'.

The word 'involvement' could possibly be replaced with a more precise alternative such as 'engagement' or 'commitment'.

The group of managers referred to could also be defined more precisely, for example using the term 'junior managers' or 'employees' direct superior(s)'.

Alternatively, the question could be restructured to ask about the degree of involvement/engagement/commitment of different levels of management.

3. Levels of concern with OSH risks

One of the questions discussed with respondents examined a series of health and safety risks in the establishment.

3.1 Concern about workplace risks

> **Question MM200/ER250**
> For each of the following issues, please tell me whether it is of major concern, some concern, or no concern at all in your establishment:
> 01) Dangerous substances (eg dusts, chemical, biological); 02) Accidents; 03) Noise and vibration; 04) Musculoskeletal disorders; 05) Work-related stress; 06) Violence or threat of violence; 07) Bullying or harassment.

The objective behind this question was to identify the main health and safety issues across each establishment in the survey. However, this question raised more technical issues than many of the others.

In the interviews, we found that survey respondents interpreted the term 'concern' in a number of different ways. Therefore, the way in which the question was answered varied not just between countries and between establishments but also between the management and employee respondents and even, in a few cases, within single interviews. The issues included the following:

- It was unclear whether the question was about the presence or frequency of occurrence of a risk or about how well managed the risk was. Even respondents who were referring to the management of risks could interpret the notion of 'concern' in different ways; for instance, it is well managed, so it must be a concern (otherwise it would not be considered worth managing), or it is well managed, so it is not a concern (as the management of the risk has alleviated any concern). This ambiguity means that it could be difficult to interpret the results from this question.
- Answers were also influenced by respondents' views on the potential for harm or consequences of an incident rather than the likelihood of its happening. Therefore, the potential consequences of a workplace accident were in some cases considered to be more of a concern, even if this was a rare event, than the daily occurrence of noise in the workplace, which was felt to cause a low level of harm.
- In the UK and Italy, some respondents answered in terms of whether or not the issue had received attention and/or been taken seriously. However, this could lead to social desirability bias, as some management respondents were reluctant to state that any of the items listed were of 'no concern', since

this might suggest they did not acknowledge that these issues were health and safety risks (regardless of their actual incidence within the organisation).
- In Germany, the word 'concern' had been translated into 'topic matter', so some thought the question was about whether or not risk had been discussed or constituted a conventional OSH issue in the particular workplace.

Answers were also affected by the correspondent's point of reference. Management respondents, particularly from larger establishments, tended to consider all risks present in the establishment (or even the whole organisation), whereas employee respondents often focused on the risks present in their particular work area. In the UK and Germany, some management respondents found it difficult to give a generalised answer, as the level of risks varied across the different parts of the organisation.

Some respondents wanted more response options, particularly in Germany, where there was a translation issue concerning the scale: 'some' was translated as 'less important', so there was a tendency to always say that a risk was of major concern, even though some risks were more of an issue than others. In Bulgaria, respondents were reluctant to say a risk was of 'some' concern, as this seemed to imply it was a minor concern. Other respondents wanted an option between 'major' and 'some'.

The term 'dangerous substances' was considered too broad to be meaningful in some countries (such as Bulgaria, where some substances would be a concern and others were not), whereas in Germany it was unclear whether or not this included disinfectants. Generally, in social care/healthcare, respondents tended not to include biological substances in this category.

Some management representatives found it difficult or irrelevant to answer the question about problems concerning psychosocial risks such as work-related stress, bullying and harassment and, to a lesser extent, violence or the threat of violence, because these issues fell outside their remit. In addition, it was not clear to some respondents whether the question on violence referred to threats from other employees, from the wider public (or customers) or from both.

3.1.1 Recommendation

This question would benefit from being amended to address the intent behind it in a different way.

3.1.2 Options

At present, respondents appear to be confused about whether the question is asking about the extent to which a risk is a priority or focus for OSH in the establishment, or simply the extent to which the risk is present.

If the question is seeking to find out the extent to which a risk is present, one option would be to ask a linked series of questions such as:

Is [the particular risk] present in the workplace? Yes/No
(A further option here is to provide a series of options to ask about the extent of its presence, such as: Y*es, in most parts of the workplace/Yes, in a few parts of the workplace/No.*)

In the absence of control measures, is there potential for harm? High/Medium/Low
[or other response options]

Are control measures in place to reduce the risk of potential harm? Yes/No

Taking account of control measures that have been put in place, is the potential for harm High/Medium/Low? [or other response options]?

On the other hand, if the question is more focused on the extent to which a risk is a priority, a different set of questions would be needed, such as:

Which of the following areas do you feel are priorities for OSH in your organisation? [specify risk…]

Is this because [the risk]:

· *occurs frequently as part of our work;*
· *is not currently well managed;*
· *both?*

In either case, it may be worth emphasising to the respondent that the question refers to the particular establishment and not the organisation as a whole.

4. Approach to risk assessments

A series of questions asked respondents about their establishment's approach to risk assessments. Some of the questions were asked of management respondents, some of employee respondents and a few of both. This study reviewed a number of these questions covering:

- whether or not risk assessments take place;
- who conducts any risk assessments that occur;
- what triggers a risk assessment;
- what is covered by a risk assessment;
- what actions are taken as a consequence of an assessment;
- whether or not employee representatives have a say in the conduct of a risk assessment;
- employee representatives' views on whether or not follow-up actions are taken after a risk assessment and whether or not employee representatives are involved.

4.1 Do risk assessments take place?

Question MM161/ER207
Are workplaces in the establishment regularly checked for safety and health as part of a risk assessment or similar measure?

In some countries this question worked well, but in others there was some confusion about the meaning of some of the terms used. The key issues concerned respondents' interpretation of the term 'regularly' and what constituted a 'risk assessment or similar measure'.

In Bulgaria the term 'regularly' was generally understood to mean 'recurring within a specific time period', but the duration of this period varied greatly among the respondents, from every three months to once a year. In Finland the term 'regularly' was understood in different ways. For some interviewees it meant up to every five years; others felt that once every two years was not often enough to be considered 'regular'. Sometimes the answer to this question was changed after discussion, as the interviewee realised that any checks conducted were not done so 'regularly'. In a few cases, management and employee representatives disagreed on whether the frequency with which assessments took place could be considered 'regular'.

- The terms 'risk assessment' and 'workplace checks' were understood to mean totally separate processes in Italy and Germany. Under the Italian legislative framework, employers are required to carry out a 'risk assessment' every four years or every time there is a significant change, and to keep the risk assessment document, called the DVR (*Documento di valutazione rischi*), in the workplace. Similarly, in Germany,

the term 'risk assessment' was often understood to refer to the legislative requirement. In contrast, 'workplace checks' in both countries were often understood to refer to more informal checks. In many organisations a range of checks are carried out. The question should clarify which types of checks respondents should refer to, as the response here affects all subsequent questions in this section.

- In Germany, the term 'workplace checks' was translated in such a way that it applied only to checks on the physical layout. A few respondents did not consider other types of checks, such as those on psychosocial risks.

4.1.1 Recommendation

This question would benefit from being amended to address the intent behind it in a different way.

4.1.2 Options

Given the different reference points, it may be useful to replace this question with a set of questions asking, first, if risk assessments are carried out in the workplace, second, if risk assessments are carried out on activities and, third, if other prevention measures take place. This set of questions could be followed up by asking another question or set of questions about the regularity with which such assessments are carried out.

A simpler and perhaps preferable alternative would be to ask respondents if either or both of the following are carried out regularly: (a) formal (legally required?) documented risk assessments or (b) less formal workplace checks. If required, the term 'regularly' could be further defined (e.g. at least every two years).

4.2 Who conducts a risk assessment?

Question MM162
Are these risk assessments or workplace checks mostly conducted by your own staff or are they normally contracted to external service providers?
    01) Conducted by own staff; 02) Contracted to external providers; 03) Both about equally; 04) No answer.

This question generally worked well in some countries; however, the response options were not very informative, as often establishments used both internal and external staff but not to the same extent. The question also suffered from the different national understandings of the term 'risk assessment', which is a formal procedure in some countries, such as Italy or Germany, supplemented (e.g. in larger establishments) by less formal or more specific 'workplace checks' conducted on

a more frequent basis. The difference in understanding of the terms 'risk assessment' and 'workplace checks' led to some confusion about whether these assessments/checks were conducted internally or externally.

- In a number of the establishments in Germany, the risk assessments were carried out by external OSH services annually, biannually or triannually, but further workplace checks were performed by internal staff. It was felt that the answer options did not fully capture this situation, as it was rarely the case that internal and external staff were used 'both about equally'. Respondents from other countries would have preferred a wider range of responses as well.

Furthermore, in Finland, the difference between internal staff and external service providers was not clear where the establishment was part of a corporate group or a department of a public administration, as some respondents considered the group's OSH representative to be 'external'.

4.2.1 Recommendation

The value of this question should be reviewed to determine whether or not it generates useful information. If it does, then the question would benefit from being amended to address the intent behind it in a different way.

4.2.2 Options

If the question is retained then it may be helpful to distinguish between formal risk assessments and less formal workplace checks (as recommended for question MM161) and, for each process, provide a set of multiple response options such as:

- *carried out only by employees of the organisation;*
- *carried out only by staff from external companies;*
- *carried out mostly by employees of the organisation, with some help from external companies;*
- *carried out mostly by external companies, with some help from employees of the organisation;*
- *carried out by employees of the organisation or external staff, depending on the type of risk.*

4.3   What triggers a risk assessment?

Question MM163

On which occasions are these risk assessments or workplace checks carried out?
   01) Following a change in the staffing, layout or organisation of work;
   02) At the request of employees e.g. in case of complaints; 03) At regular intervals, without any specific cause.

One of the aims behind this question was to investigate whether risk assessments are a formality or an active working process. In the event, many respondents had problems answering this question accurately, as they tended to answer either what *should* happen even if it did not occur in every circumstance or what *would* happen if the situation arose (e.g. an assessment would take place if employees requested one, but to the respondent's knowledge that situation had not occurred). The key point here is that, given the available responses to the question, respondents often chose to give a socially desirable response: the answer they thought would be most acceptable, rather than what had happened in practice. This potential bias could lead to a misleading set of results.

Some respondents wanted more answer options to cover situations where assessments took place on some occasions but not always, for example depending on the nature of the request from an employee.

The national context again had an influence on responses to this question. For example, in Italy management representatives explained how the organisation re-assessed different parts of the legal risk assessment document every time there was a significant change in products, work processes, new machines or the like. However, in some establishments other workplace checks were carried out more frequently following requests from employees or without any specific reason.

4.3.1 Recommendation

This question would benefit from being amended to address the intent behind it in a different way.

4.3.2 Options

Suggestions for alternative prompts were made by a minority of respondents and included:

- *following an accident;*
- *following a change in business circumstances;*
- *following a change in process (the respondent who suggested this did not include it in his interpretation of 'organisation of work');*
- *following analysis of accident/ill health data;*
- *following a change in legislation.*

An alternative approach would be to divide the question into two, with the first part looking at prompts for a risk assessment:

   Are risk assessments carried out:

   a) *when they are scheduled to take place;*
   b) *when they are considered necessary in the circumstances;*
   c) *both?*

If respondents answer b) or c), the second part of the question could then explore the circumstances that would trigger an assessment.

The question may also need to distinguish more clearly between hypothetical answers and those referring to an existing situation. If it is intended to cover only actions that have actually occurred, respondents could be asked:

> Have any of the following situations led to risk assessments being carried out?

If it is intended to cover both actual and hypothetical situations, then more appropriate wording could be:

> Would any of the following situations lead to risk assessments being carried out?

It is unclear if such changes would mean that respondents would be less likely to give socially desirable rather than totally accurate responses, although more precise questioning, as suggested, may reduce the risk.

4.4 What is covered by risk assessments?

Question MM164
Which of the following areas are routinely considered in these checks?'
01) Equipment and working environment; 02) The way work is organised; 03) Irregular or long working hours; 04) Supervisor–employee relationships.

The intention behind this question was to see if non-traditional risks were covered by risk assessments. However, many respondents were unsure about what some of the terms meant and so their answers may have been misleading.

Looking at each of the areas identified in the questions in turn:

- *Equipment and working environment:* In Italy, 'working environment' was mostly interpreted as the physical space of a workplace and only a few interviewees understood that it could also include the social environment and working relations. In Germany, some respondents found it difficult to distinguish 'working environment' from the 'way work is organised'.
- *Way work is organised:* This was interpreted differently across most countries and a number of respondents considered the phrase too broad to be meaningful (with some aspects of work organisation considered in risk assessments while others were not).

- *Irregular or long hours:* In Finland, Italy and the UK, some respondents answered 'no' to this aspect of the question because shift patterns were fixed, but it may have been more accurate for them to have said that the situation was 'not applicable'. The term 'irregular hours' was not clearly understood by a number of respondents, and people were unsure whether it meant unusual, unsociable or changing hours. In addition, in the UK and Germany, working hours were not always considered to be a subject relevant to occupational safety and health, but might be regarded as the responsibility of the human resources department or dealt with through meetings of the works council or management/union negotiating committee.
- *Supervisor–employee relationships:* Again, in Germany and the UK, this issue was often not considered relevant to occupational safety and health. In Finland and the UK, some respondents responded positively to this aspect of the question because their organisation looked at this issue by other means, even though it was not considered as part of a risk assessment.

4.4.1 Recommendation

This question would benefit from being amended to make it clearer and more directly address the intent behind it.

4.4.2 Options

The term 'the way work is organised' was poorly understood in some cases. It may make more sense to draw a clearer distinction between this issue and 'equipment and the working environment'. The most obvious split appears to be between the physical and social environment. The following three options could capture this distinction:

1. the physical workspace (equipment etc.) and the working positions and postures of employees;
2. the social environment (which covers co-workers, colleagues, supervisors and clients); and
3. organisational processes (sequencing of tasks, distribution of responsibilities).

Another possible improvement to the question would be to delete the term 'routinely' and provide a number of response options such as:

- *every time;*
- *in certain cases;*
- *never;*
- *not applicable (not dealt with under OSH systems).*

4.5   Actions taken

This question raised similar concerns to the previous question (M165) about the respondents' understanding of the terms used and whether or not they thought they were applicable to occupational safety and health risk assessments.

In addition, respondents found it difficult to distinguish actions taken in response to a risk assessment from actions taken for other reasons. For example, some respondents answered that training had been provided, but went on to discuss regular training programmes, organised outside a risk assessment process.

Furthermore, it was not clear how to interpret the answers to the question. In some establishments no changes may have been made because the risk assessment found everything to be in order, while in others no changes may have been made despite clear risks being identified.

4.5.1 Recommendation

This question would benefit from being amended to make it clearer and more directly address the intent behind it.

4.5.2 Options

The question could focus the respondents' attention by emphasising that it is concerned with changes as a result of a risk assessment only and not as a result of other processes. Thus, the wording could be rephrased more explicitly as follows:

Have any of the following changes been made as a direct result of a risk assessment?

An alternative option would be to ask if follow-up actions were needed as result of risk assessment and, if so, if follow-up actions have been taken on:

1. the physical workspace (equipment etc.) and the working positions and postures of employees;

2. the social environment (which covers co-workers, colleagues, supervisors and clients);
3. organisational processes (sequencing of tasks, distribution of responsibilities);
4. changes to working time arrangements;
5. provision of training

with the same response options as proposed for MM164.

4.6   Employee representatives' involvement in risk assessments

In the survey, employee and management representatives had separate questionnaires, and employee representatives were asked a series of questions about their involvement in the risk assessment process in their workplace. As the next round of ESENER will not include an employee representative interview, some of these questions may need to be adjusted for inclusion in the management representative interview.

Most respondents understood this question, although some considered the response options insufficient to explain what had happened in practice, for instance where the representative did not get involved but could have if they had wanted to.

In Finland, respondents said that the answer depended on the type of checks or assessments; employee representatives could get involved with checks carried out internally but would not have a say about the more formal external checks. This is another example of how it is important for these questions to clarify which type of checks they are referring to.

In Germany, there was a translation issue and the question asked if employee representatives had a legal right to make decisions about risk assessments, which caused some confusion.

Finally, as with some of the other questions (such as MM166), it was difficult to interpret the overall answers to the question. For example, a response that employee representatives did not have a say was not necessarily seen as a negative situation, as they thought others were better placed to make these decisions or trusted that the right people were involved.

4.6.1 Recommendation

This question would benefit from being amended to address the intent behind it in a different way in a management-only survey. If employee representatives continue to be interviewed, then this question would benefit from being amended to clarify the response options.

4.6.2 Options

If employee representatives are not interviewed in a future survey, this question could be reformulated for management representative interview by asking:

In practice, do employee safety and health representatives have a say in the decisions on when and where these risk assessments or workplace checks are carried out?

The response options could be:

- *Yes, actively involved.*
- *Yes, could have a say, but have not made a contribution to date.*
- *No, because another employee takes part (may not need this for a management-only survey).*
- *No, decisions are made by management.*
- *Depends on the subject of the assessment.*

> **Question ER210**
> **If the risk assessment or workplace check identifies a need for action: Is the necessary follow-up action taken?**

This question worked well in all five countries. In Finland and the UK, some employee representatives wanted to qualify their positive responses, by saying this happened 'in most cases' or that actions could take some time to be implemented.

4.6.3 Recommendation

It is difficult to see the value of this question in a management-only survey. If employee representatives continue to be interviewed, then this question would benefit from being amended to clarify the response options.

4.6.4 Options

If employee representatives are interviewed, some additional response options/questions could be included here.

Options as follows may work better:

- *Yes, every time.*
- *Yes, in most cases.*
- *Yes, but not always immediately.*
- *Some of the time.*
- *Rarely/never.*

> **Question ER211**
> **And are you as health and safety representatives usually involved in the choice of follow-up actions?**

This question worked well in all five countries. Again, some respondents answered positively because they could be involved if they wanted to be, even if they usually were not.

In Italy, one respondent wanted to qualify their answer by saying 'it depends' on their involvement and expertise in the particular topic.

4.6.5 Recommendation

This question would benefit from being amended to address the intent behind it in a different way in a management-only survey. If employee representatives continue to be interviewed, then this question would benefit from being amended to clarify the response options.

4.6.6 Options

For a management-only survey the question could be reformulated by asking:

Are health and safety representatives usually involved in the choice of follow-up actions?

A more comprehensive list of response options as follows may work better, such as:

- *Yes, actively involved.*
- *Yes, could have a say, but do not generally get involved.*
- *No, because another employee takes part (may not need this for a management-only survey).*
- *No, decisions are made by management.*
- *Depends on the subject of the assessment/nature of the follow-up actions.*

Question MM169/ER213

Are there any particular reasons why these checks are not regularly carried out?

01) The necessary expertise is lacking; 02) Risk assessments are regarded as too time consuming or expensive; 03) The legal obligation on risk assessments are too complex; 04) It is not necessary because we do not have any major problems.

This question was not properly tested, as most were routed past it (because most did carry out risk assessments). It appeared to work well in the few cases where it was examined (in Finland and Germany).

4.6.7 Recommendation

No change.

This question could remain unchanged for a management-only survey.

5. Drivers of and barriers to management of health and safety

Two questions in the management survey were aimed at investigating why occupational safety and health issues are addressed in the workplace and the difficulties faced in dealing with them.

5.1   Why consider health and safety?

> **Question MM171**
> **In your establishment, how important are the following reasons for addressing health and safety? For each one, please tell me whether it is a major reason, a minor reason, or no reason at all.**
>   **01) Fulfilment of legal obligation; 02) Requests from employees or their representatives; 03) Staff retention and absence management; 04) Economic or performance-related reasons; 05) Requirements from clients or concern about the organisation's reputation; 06) Pressure from the labour inspectorate.**

This question aimed to examine the factors driving an organisation's interest in tackling health and safety concerns. However, the question, as worded, gave respondents a few difficulties. The main problems appeared to be, first, a lack of clarity of some of the terms used in the question and, second, that some respondents gave hypothetical answers, saying that something *was a reason* when in fact what they meant was it *would be a reason*, but the situation had not actually arisen. In addition, some respondents would have preferred to have had further answer options.

The hypothetical responses mainly occurred in response to item 6 (pressure from the labour inspectorate). Most organisations had never had any contact with their inspector, but were driven by a desire to avoid any pressure ever occurring; some, therefore, responded positively, thereby possibly giving a misleading impression. Similarly, some respondents considered a request from an employee as a reason for addressing health and safety because it would be taken seriously if it occurred, even if none had been received. In addition, staff retention and absence management were considered potential drivers of action even when these had not presented any problems so far.

Some of the respondents were also confused by some of the answer options, either because they covered more than one issue or because they were not sufficiently distinct from one another. Thus:

- Item 1 (legal obligation) and item 6 (pressure from inspectorate) were felt to be similar by a number of respondents in several countries. In Germany, item 4 (economic reasons) was seen to be linked to items 3 (staff retention and absence management) and 5 (reputational risk or client requirements), since problems with absence and reputation can have financial implications.
- Item 3 (staff retention and absence management) and item 5 (client concerns and organisational reputation) were thought to cover more than one issue. Some respondents thought that absence management was a major reason for addressing health and safety, whereas staff retention was only a minor reason.
- Item 4 (economic reasons) was not well understood. Three different meanings emerged here: (a) if a well-managed health and safety system led to a healthier workforce and therefore to better economic performance; (b) if the company assessed financial performance by means of a system of key performance indicators which included safety behaviour; (c) if economic reasons were important in the sense that they limited investments in health and safety.

In a number of countries, respondents requested a mid-scale response option (between major and minor). Although this could create a tendency for respondents to pick the middle point, under the current question structure some respondents did not like to say that something was a 'minor' reason, as it might indicate that they were not taking the issue seriously, thereby suggesting an element of social desirability bias.

Finally, there was a translation issue in Italy, with the word 'major' translated as *prioritario* (priority) in the question, but *importante* (important) in the response options. This created some confusion.

5.1.1 Recommendation

This question would benefit from being amended to address the intent behind it in a different way.

5.1.2 Options

To avoid hypothetical responses, the question could be rephrased to be more explicit, such as:

> *Which of the following issues do you feel have affected your organisation's health and safety systems?*

There was some confusion about the distinction between some of the issues identified. It might be clearer to combine items 1 and 6 under the term 'legal obligations'. A separate item could be added, if it was felt to be informative, covering 'requirements following a visit from the labour inspectorate'. In addition, the pairs of issues identified in items 3 (staff retention and absence management) and 5 (requirements from clients

and concern about the organisation's reputation) could be separated.

Instead of adding more response options, as some respondents suggested, it might be more informative to have just the two: (a) has affected and (b) has not affected. A scale did not appear to be particularly effective.

5.2   Difficulties

Question MM172

In your establishment, what are the main difficulties in dealing with health and safety? Please tell me for each of the following whether it is a major difficulty, a minor difficulty, or not a difficulty at all.

> **01) A lack of resources such as time, staff or money; 02) A lack of awareness; 03) A lack of expertise; 04) A lack of technical support or guidance; 05) The culture within the establishment; 06) The sensitivity of the issue.**

Most of the management representatives interviewed had some concerns about this question, particularly with the precise wording of the items.

- Item 1 (time, staff or money) was thought by some to cover more than one issue. Some respondents thought they should be separated because, for them, time was an issue but money was not or vice versa.
- Some respondents were unsure whose awareness and expertise were being covered by items 2 and 3 (lack of awareness/expertise) and whether they referred to the management representative, their occupational safety and health team, other managers or employees more widely.
- In a few cases, item 4 (technical support) caused confusion, as respondents thought it was about technical equipment such as IT.
- Items 5 and 2 (culture and awareness) were sometimes seen to be similar (Germany, Italy, UK). This suggests that 'culture' is not fully understood. For example, some interpreted it as

being about the general views of staff and it was not clear that their understanding included the commitment of senior management or other factors that could be said to make up organisational culture.

- A number of respondents were unsure of the relevance of item 6 (sensitivity of the issue). Some could not understand why OSH would be sensitive, although others (e.g. in Finland) understood this as being relevant to psychosocial risks. There were also translation issues about this item in Germany, where 'sensitivity' was translated as *Brisanz* (explosiveness). Finally, some respondents (in Germany) thought it was an advantage, not a difficulty, for occupational safety and health to be sensitive (or explosive), as it meant people gave it priority.

As with question MM171, some respondents requested more response options and a middle point on the scale.

5.2.1 Recommendation

This question would benefit from being amended to address the intent behind it in a different way.

5.2.2 Options

The main option for improving this question involves defining the items of interest more precisely, for example:

- Item 1 could be separated into *(1) 'a lack of staff/time' and (2) 'a lack of financial resources'*.
- Item 2 could be clarified by stating that it refers to a '*lack of awareness among employees*'.
- Item 3 could be clarified by stating that it refers to a '*lack of relevant expertise among employees*'.
- Item 5 could be changed to refer to *'a lack of commitment and engagement among managers'*.
- Item 6 could be deleted and the ability of the establishment to tackle sensitive risks, for instance psychosocial, investigated in a different way in a separate section of the survey.

6. Worker participation and involvement

We looked at four questions that were asked only of employee representatives about employee participation and involvement, covering:

- the existence of an occupational safety and health committee;
- how often health and safety controversies arose in the workplace;
- whether or not employee representatives were regularly informed about occupational safety and health issues; and
- whether or not managers gave proper consideration to occupational safety and health issues raised by employees or their representatives.

As the next round of ESENER will not include an employee representative interview, some of these questions may need to be adjusted for inclusion in the management representative interview.

6.1 Occupational safety and health committee

Question ER102
Is there a permanent committee or working group consisting of members of the management and representatives of the employees dealing with safety and health in this establishment?

Generally there were very few problems with the interpretation of this question.

In some countries, respondents from establishments that were part of a multi-site organisation were unsure whether to answer on behalf of their particular establishment or the whole organisation. For example, the organisation might have a single occupational safety and health committee which dealt with matters in all of its establishments. Additionally, in Germany a few respondents mistook their general works council for a joint worker/management occupational safety and health committee, perhaps interpreting the term 'permanent committee' as something bigger than intended. Otherwise, respondents seemed fairly happy with this question.

6.1.1 Recommendation

No change to wording. This question could also be asked of the management representative in a management-only survey.

6.2 Occupational safety and health controversies

Question ER107
How often do controversies related to safety and health arise between the management and the employee representatives? Is this often, sometimes, or practically never the case?

There was some discussion with respondents about the term 'controversies' used in this question, but generally most appeared to understand the intent behind the question.

In Italy, a few representatives thought that the term 'controversies' was too strong, as it implied a stalemate between the parties which could result in a legal dispute. However, in most cases, respondents felt they understood the term and took it to mean different opinions and discussions between management and employees. In Germany, a few respondents thought the question referred to all management/employee conflicts rather than just those about health and safety, but this concern was not raised elsewhere.

6.2.1 Recommendation

No change to wording. This question could also be asked of the management representative in a management-only survey.

6.3 Informing employee representatives

Question ER205
Are employees in this establishment regularly informed about safety and health in the workplace?

In most countries, there were few problems with this question, although some respondents drew a distinction between information being available and being positively told about health and safety issues, and some thought that the term 'informed' was imprecise.

For some employee representatives (e.g. in Finland), being regularly informed meant having access to information on the company intranet. Most, however, thought being informed involved a combination of information being made available and being actively notified by email and/or in meetings. Some representatives in Italy thought the question referred to training in occupational safety and health and others about information about how to perform tasks safely.

6.3.1 Recommendation

If asked of employee representatives, this question would benefit from being amended to make it clearer and more directly address the intent behind it. This question should be dropped in a management-only survey, as it is unlikely to yield informative results.

6.3.2 Options

One option would be to replace the term 'regularly' with 'actively' and keep the rest of the wording the same.

An alternative approach would be to provide a series of statements and ask the respondent to choose which one most clearly represents the situation in their workplace, distinguishing active, passive and reluctant dissemination. Thus, the question could read:

To what extent are employees regularly informed about safety and health in the workplace? Please indicate which of these statements most accurately reflects the situation in your establishment:

1. *Information about safety and health is actively disseminated on a regular basis.*
2. *Information about safety and health is actively disseminated on an infrequent basis.*
3. *Information about safety and health is easily available if required, for example via an intranet or notice board.*
4. *Information about safety and health can be obtained only on request.*
5. *Information about safety and health is not available.*

6.4 Management's consideration of occupational safety and health issues

Question ER215_05
Please tell me whether you agree (1), neither agree nor disagree (2), or disagree (3) with the following statement: 'Our management gives proper consideration to occupational safety and health issues raised by employees or their representatives.'

Although most employee representatives across the five countries felt they understood the question and could answer it accurately, there were a few concerns raised. Some respondents were concerned that, although an issue raised by employees might be considered, it was not always acted upon, and therefore a positive answer to the question might not give a full picture of the situation in the workplace. However, it is not clear whether the intent of the question was to discover the extent to which issues were resolved or to investigate whether or not they were taken seriously by management.

A number of representatives said that the response depended on the level of management in question and, for instance, whereas senior management might give proper consideration, the same could not necessarily be said of local managers, who tended to prioritise the completion of work tasks over health and safety. Similarly, a few others thought that due consideration was not always given and one respondent suggested adding an additional response option of 'sometimes'.

Finally, one employee representative felt that the phrase 'proper consideration' was vague and open to interpretation.

6.4.1 Recommendation

If asked of employee representatives, this question could benefit from being amended to provide additional response options. This question should be dropped in a management-only survey, as it is unlikely to yield informative results.

6.4.2 Options

One option would be to provide a five-point response scale, such as 'totally agree, partially agree, neither agree nor disagree, partially disagree, totally disagree'.

Another option would reword the question and provide a different set of response options as follows:

To what extent does the management in your establishment give proper consideration to occupational safety and health issues raised by employees or their representatives?

Please indicate which of these statements most accurately reflects the situation in your establishment:

- *Management always gives proper consideration.*
- *Management sometimes gives proper consideration.*
- *Management never gives proper consideration.*

7. Resources and training in OSH issues

A series of questions asked employee representatives about the training they had received and the resources at their disposal. They covered:

- time off to perform their duties as a health and safety representative;
- whether or not they received the necessary information to perform their duties;
- whether or not they received the information in a timely fashion;
- what training they had received;
- whether or not the training had been sufficient and, if not, why not.

As the next round of ESENER will not include an employee representative interview, some of these questions may not be relevant to a management-only survey or may need to be amended for inclusion in a management representative interview.

7.1 Time off

> **Question ER150**
> Do you as the employee representative for safety and health usually get sufficient time off from normal duties to perform these tasks adequately?

All respondents appeared to understand the intent behind the question and no issues with the wording were raised.

7.1.1 Recommendation

If asked of employee representatives, this question requires no change to its wording. This question should be dropped in a management-only survey, as it is unlikely to yield informative results.

7.2 Receipt of information

> **Question ER154**
> Does the management provide you with the necessary information for carrying out your health and safety tasks properly?

Again, there were no problems with this question.

7.2.1 Recommendation

If asked of employee representatives, this question requires no change to its wording. This question should be dropped in a management-only survey, as it is unlikely to yield informative results.

> **Question ER155**
> Do you usually receive information on time and without having to ask for it?

The only issue raised with this question was one of clarification that the information to which the question referred was about health and safety.

7.2.2 Recommendation

If asked of employee representatives, this question could benefit from a slight amendment to the wording to make it clearer. This question should be dropped in a management-only survey, as it is unlikely to yield informative results.

7.2.3 Options

Add the phrase 'safety and health' before the word 'information'.

The results of this question might be more informative if respondents were given a number of response options such as:

- *Yes, every time.*
- *Yes, most of the time.*
- *Yes, some of the time.*
- *Never.*

7.3 Training

> **Question ER159**
> On which of the following issues have you or your health and safety representative colleagues received training?
> 01) Fire safety; 02) Prevention of accidents; 03) Chemical, biological, radiation or dust hazards; 04) Ergonomics; 05) Violence, bullying or harassment; 06) Work-related stress; 07) Discrimination (for example due to age, gender, race or disability).

There were a number of issues raised with this question. One was a general problem where the respondents found it difficult to distinguish between training they had received as an employee and that received specifically in their role as an employee representative. It is not clear if this is a major concern, in that training had been provided, unless representatives

should have received additional or specific training. If they should have, the question needs significant amendment.

Another concern raised with the wording was that the term 'training' was not clearly understood. For instance, some respondents were unsure whether it referred to 'off-the-job' training at one end of the scale or 'on-the-job' training or written instructions at the other, and whether the training was provided internally or externally.

Some of the more detailed issues raised concerned how the respondents interpreted the terms used to ask about the subject matter of the training received:

- *Prevention of accidents:* Some respondents said that they had not received a course on such a broad topic, and it took them some time to realise that training on prevention of specific risks, such as manual handling, could be included under this heading. Others thought this category included first aid training.
- *Chemical, biological, radiation or dust hazards:* Some respondents said they had been trained in some of these hazards but not others.
- *Ergonomics:* A number of respondents were not familiar with this term and needed it to be explained. They did not realise that this included training to prevent musculoskeletal disorders.

7.3.1 Recommendation

If asked of employee representatives, this question could benefit from some amendments to the wording to make it clearer. With further amendment, this question could also be asked of the management representative in a management-only survey.

7.3.2 Options

- Add the phrase 'of any kind' (if that is the intent) after the word 'training'.
- Under item 2, add the phrase 'for example manual handling' after the phrase 'prevention of accidents'.
- Under item 3, add the phrase 'in any of the following' before the phrase 'chemical, biological, radiation or dust hazards'.
- Under item 4, replace the word 'ergonomics' with the phrase 'avoiding musculoskeletal injuries'.

In a management-only survey the opening stem of the question could be rephrased as follows:

On which of the following issues have health and safety representatives in your workplace received training?

> **Question ER160**
> Is this training sufficient or would more training in any of these fields be desirable?

The only issue raised with this question (and by only a couple of respondents) was a request to clarify that the term 'training' was about health and safety.

7.3.3 Recommendation

If asked of employee representatives, this question could benefit from a slight amendment to the wording to make it clearer. This question should be dropped in a management-only survey, as it is unlikely to yield informative results.

7.3.4 Options

- Add the phrase 'safety and health' in front of the word 'training'.

> **Question ER162**
> Which of the following are the main reasons for receiving no or not sufficient training on these issues?
> 01) Difficulties to get time off for such training; 02) Lack of information about available courses; 03) Available courses are not appropriate for our situation; 04) Difficulties to get the financial resources for the training.

Respondents who had answered that they had not received any of the training identified in Question 159 or had indicated that more training would have been desirable at Question 160 were asked this question. However, as the questionnaire stands, anyone who has received only a little training (at ER159) and feels that this is sufficient (at ER160) will not be asked this question. Given this, it will remain unclear why so little training has been received.

7.3.5 Recommendation

If asked of employee representatives, this question could benefit from an additional answer option to make it more useful, and re-routing to allow it to be asked of more respondents. This question should be dropped in a management-only survey, as it is unlikely to yield informative results.

7.3.6 Options

Revise the routing to this question to include all respondents. Add an answer option that 'no more training was required'.

8. OSH and organisational performance

The final section of the questionnaire tested in the cognitive interviews covered the establishment's business performance and its performance on occupational safety and health. Two questions covered these issues in the original questionnaire but were limited in the information that they provided. Therefore, two new questions covering these issues were developed and tested in the interviews. In addition, researchers attempted to clarify and validate information provided by the interviewee through a form provided to the management representative prior to the interview (see Annex 1).

8.1 Occupational safety and health performance

The question on OSH performance asked about absenteeism, whereas the new version tried a different wording to help set a context for the question and used a wider definition of performance (including accidents and injuries as well as absence).

> **Question MM402**
> How would you rate the level of absenteeism in your establishment compared with other establishments in the sector? Is it very high, quite high, about average, quite low or very low?
>
> **New question**
> Compared to other organisations of your size and sector in the country, how well would you say you perform in terms of health and safety outcomes such as the number of accidents and injuries at work, and the level of sickness absence?
>   01) Much better than average; 02) Better than average; 03) About average; 04) Worse than average; 05) Much worse than average.

In most countries, respondents found difficulty with the original question.

Most respondents did not feel they had accurate data about absence levels in either their establishment or their organisation on which to base their answer.

Some respondents had difficulties defining absence. Some wanted to distinguish between short-term and long-term

absence. Others were unsure whether the question related to work-related sickness absence, all sickness absence or absence more generally (including maternity leave).

Many respondents found it difficult to judge their establishment's relative performance, as they did not have access to comparative data on the performance of other similar establishments or organisations or were not sure with whom they should be comparing themselves. This was a particular problem for smaller establishments and those from the private sector.

The new question still raised difficulties. Some found it easier to answer but others did not. Although it provided some clarification and some respondents felt more confident about their data on the levels of accidents, there were still concerns about the quality of the data on absenteeism. Most significantly, respondents continued to be concerned that their lack of knowledge about other similar organisations and their comparative performance meant that they were unable to provide a reliable response to this question.

8.1.1 Recommendation

The new question raises some difficulties. Either they can be accepted or the question wording could be significantly changed to address the intent behind it in a different way.

8.1.2 Options

Respondents found it difficult to provide reliable responses to the original question. The new question posed additional difficulties due to their lack of knowledge of comparative performance.

One option is to accept this degree of unreliability and, assuming it is constant, focus on long-term trends in the response to a question based on the original wording and place less emphasis on the cross-sectional results from one particular survey.

Another option is to completely refocus the question and ask respondents their current performance relative to past performance, for example as follows:

> *Compared with five years ago, how well would you say your organisation performs in terms of health and safety outcomes, such as the number of accidents and injuries at work, and the level of sickness absence?*

8.2   Business performance

> **Question MM403**
> How would you rate the current economic situation of this establishment? Is it very good, quite good, neither good nor bad, quite bad or very bad?
>
> **New question**
> Compared to other organisations of your size and sector in the country, how well would you say you perform in terms of business outcomes such as profit, turnover or other relevant measures of performance?
>   01) Very good; 02) Quite good; 03) Neither good nor bad; 04) Quite bad; 05) Very bad; 06) No answer.

The questions on organisational and economic performance worked better than those about occupational safety and health performance. However, not-for-profit and public sector organisations found it difficult to judge their economic performance (and the wording of the new question did not help in this regard).

Furthermore, although some respondents felt able to judge their business performance relative to their peers and were able to cope with the new question, many had difficulties drawing comparisons.

8.2.1 Recommendation

The original question raises some difficulties. Either they can be accepted or the question wording could be significantly changed to address the intent behind it in a different way.

8.2.2 Options

Respondents found it difficult to provide reliable responses to the original question. The new question posed additional difficulties due to their lack of knowledge of comparative performance.

One option is to accept this degree of unreliability and, assuming it is constant, focus on long-term trends in the response to a question based on the original wording and place less emphasis on the cross-sectional results from one particular survey.

Another option is to completely refocus the question and ask respondents their current performance relative to past performance, for example as follows:

> *Compared with five years ago, how well would you say your organisation performs in terms of relevant outcomes, such as profit, turnover, service standards or other measures used?*

8.3   Data sheet

Generally, it proved difficult to obtain data on occupational safety and health resources and performance using the form, and the data sheets (see Annex 1) were completed by only a minority of respondents.

Respondents had difficulty reporting:

* the amount of time dedicated to health and safety, either because this was not known or because it varied greatly from month to month;
* the costs for protective clothing, devices and equipment, because such data were considered difficult and time consuming to obtain and sometimes not under the control of the health and safety department; and
* data on ill health, which were not as readily available as data on accidents.

In addition, some respondents found it difficult to break down data by management and employees.

Overall, the results of this exercise suggest that it is unlikely that accurate data on occupational safety and health resources and performance can be collected through survey questions, as these data are difficult to obtain even where sufficient time is made available.

8.3.1 Recommendation

This method of collecting data should be dropped from the survey.

9.   Conclusions

This study interviewed respondents to the 2009 European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (90 management representatives and 77 employee representatives) to assess in detail their understanding of some the key survey questions. In general, most of the respondents interviewed demonstrated a reasonably good understanding of the survey questions discussed. Although most questions could benefit from minor changes to the wording and/or different response options to avoid any misinterpretations, we have concluded that only a few could benefit from significant amendment.

In the course of the interviews, a number of general issues emerged which apply to more than one question. Some are generic and affect the survey as a whole and others are common to just a few questions. In this final chapter we briefly review these general issues, which, if addressed, will improve the conduct and reliability of the new 2014 survey. We also make some overall comments on conducting such a comparative survey.

9.1   Responses where practice varied

One problem that was encountered particularly in larger workplaces was that some management respondents found it difficult to give a generalised answer for the entire establishment, as the level of risks and/or practice varied across the different parts of the organisation. For example, in most countries, respondents in larger organisations said that the degree of involvement of line managers and supervisors in the management of health and safety (MM159) varied across the workplace, with some more committed than others. In these cases, the response options (very high, high, quite low or very low) did not seem to fit very well and respondents were unsure how best to answer the question.

In these circumstances, it may be worth considering a range of response options to capture the situation where practice varies across the workplace.

9.1.1   Three-, four- or five-point scales

A number of the questions ask for an answer from a scale of responses. These scales are generally three points long (e.g. MM200 — major concern, some concern, no concern — or MM172 — major difficulty, minor difficulty, no difficulty). However, for one of the questions reviewed the response scale was four points long (MM159: very high, quite high, quite low, very low) and for two it was five points long (MM402 and MM403: very high, quite high, about average, quite low, very low).

There are various advantages and disadvantages of scales of three, four or five points or even longer. Generally speaking, longer scales can generate more precise results and more variation between respondents, although such variation can become inconsistent in very long (for instance ten-point) scales. Even-numbered scales can force a respondent to give either a negative or a positive response, rather than opting for a middle point. Good survey practice normally suggests that, within one questionnaire, scales should be consistent in length (although the labels attached to each scale point may change), so that respondents can easily understand what sort of response is expected of them.

In designing a future survey it would be worth reviewing the use of scales. A number of respondents to this study would have liked more than three response options so they could answer the question more accurately, so it may be worth providing four or five options (depending on the preference for an odd- or even-numbered approach). It may also be worth ensuring that a consistent scale length is used throughout the survey.

9.1.2   Hypothetical questions and answers

In some cases, respondents had not experienced the situations to which the question referred, so they answered hypothetically. Thus, when asked if risk assessments had been carried out in response to employee requests (MM163), some respondents answered positively on the basis that it *would be a reason* for carrying out a risk assessment, although the situation had not actually arisen.

In designing a future survey it might be worth exploring the potential for such occurrences when pretesting the questionnaire. If appropriate, the question could distinguish between what had actually happened and what could happen if the circumstance arose. Such an approach may still not avoid respondents continuing to give socially desirable rather than totally accurate responses, but it may reduce the risk.

9.1.3   Precision in question wording

A number of the issues that arose in the cognitive interviews involved the use of terms which could be interpreted in multiple ways or lacked precision, such as 'concern', 'involvement', 'the way work is organised' and 'supervisor–employee relationships'.

Another problem was asking about more than one aspect of health and safety practice (e.g. M155: documented policy, management system or action plan). Although the aim of such wording may be to help cross cultural boundaries where different terms are used for similar practices, this can cause problems for the respondents when the items mentioned are seen as very different.

Attention needs to be given to the potential for both these types of problems not only when designing the questionnaire but also when piloting and pretesting it.

9.1.4 Multiple respondents

The 2009 survey was aimed at both management and employee representatives with some separate questions for each and some joint questions. Although the triangulation of responses from the different perspectives could enable some interesting and useful insights into workplace practice, some employee representatives found it more difficult than their management colleagues to talk about the establishment as a whole. Especially in larger workplaces, they tended to be more familiar with practice in their particular work area, rather than across the entire site. Also, some employee representatives found it difficult to distinguish between responding as an employee representative and responding as an employee, so some of their answers lacked precision. This problem may not arise in the 2014 survey if employee representatives are not included, but it does highlight, first, the point of ensuring that the survey is completed by an appropriate respondent and, second, that the perspective that the respondent should take in answering the questionnaire is worth re-emphasising throughout the survey interview.

9.1.5 Taking the context into account

Finally, the qualitative post-test process has emphasised the importance of understanding the national context in order to fully understand the responses to the survey. In particular, a country's legislative and institutional infrastructure can have an important influence on workplace practice and needs to be taken into account when analysing and interpreting the survey results. For example, the response to question MM155 about the existence of a written health and safety policy appeared to be heavily influenced by the different national contexts. For example, every organisation in Finland has to have a written health and safety policy, whereas in Germany there is no legal obligation to have a health and safety policy but all organisations must follow the relevant regulation — not having a policy does not indicate a poor approach to occupational safety and health. This context largely explains why Germany has a lower than average proportion of employers with a formal policy.

Cross-national comparative research inevitably raises a number of methodological challenges, some of which have been raised by this investigation and highlighted in the preceding paragraphs. However, this study also shows the importance of identifying and learning from such challenges through exercises such as post-testing and cognitive interviewing. These can help us both to understand the survey findings better and to improve the focus and wording of future questionnaires. In this way, comparative surveys can also learn from each other. To that end, the continuing collaboration with Eurofound in the context of its European Company Survey, and the opportunities for each survey to learn from the other in an iterative way, are particularly important.

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