

European Agency for Safety and Health at Work

# Risk assessment using OiRA at French workplaces: a qualitative study

Executive Summary



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This executive summary was commissioned by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA). Its contents, including any opinions and/or conclusions expressed, are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of EU-OSHA.

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## 1 About the Study

This summary contains insights from a qualitative research study examining risk assessment processes in micro and small enterprises (MSEs). The study looks primarily at risk assessments that have been carried out using tools on the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work's (EU-OSHA) Online interactive Risk Assessment (OiRA) platform. Other ways of approaching the risk assessment and management process, such as other interactive tools, or offline approaches such as Excel sheets have also been included for comparison. The study provides information about how risk management is shaped by the use of online interactive risk assessment tools and specifically by OiRA. It is based on fieldwork carried out in France in 2021 and 2022, building on findings from 40 semi-structured in-depth interviews among MSEs.

The [OiRA application](#) was launched by EU-OSHA in 2011. OiRA aims to help relevant stakeholders in EU Member States develop user-friendly online risk assessment tools adapted to the specific national and sectoral context themselves, which are then promoted to MSEs for use free of charge. OiRA is an online platform that consists of the OiRA tools generator where developers/national partners can create tools (mainly focussed on certain sectors), which are accessible for everyone through an interactive website. The tools mostly follow the logic of tasks and activities performed at companies in specific sectors rather than one of risks. As such, they facilitate intuitive use also by people not skilled in risk assessments. OiRA proposes a stepwise approach from hazard identification to a documented risk assessment. End users, who may never have carried out a risk assessment before, are guided through the process and taken from the first step (risk identification) to the final step (making an action plan/creating a documented risk assessment). The guiding principle is that OiRA should serve as a way of demystifying the process of risk assessment by giving companies concrete guidance on every step that needs to be taken to implement a proper risk assessment.

The French OiRA tools are integrated into a larger occupational safety and health (OSH) infrastructure, with sectoral partners and several institutions contributing to both the development and dissemination of these user-friendly and free tools.

## 2 Comparative findings

The three groups represented in the study – OiRA users, companies using other online interactive tools and those using Excel sheets – share many similar traits in terms of their motivations, challenges and approaches to risk assessments. However, significant differences can be also observed.

### 2.1 Motivation for systematic risk assessment

For OiRA users, the **need to comply with legal obligations in the area of OSH** and the desire to **ensure the safety, health and wellbeing of employees stand out as key motivators for carrying out systematic risk assessment**. Further, these companies reported the need to reduce and avoid accidents at work, which is also highlighted from the perspective of ensuring productivity at the company, the need to reduce absence levels, and the financial savings resulting from the avoidance of accidents, which are costly for employers. The need to foster a culture of OSH compliance was also highlighted.

Companies opting for offline approaches to risk assessment also reported similar motivating factors. They also highlighted first and foremost **the need to comply with legal requirements**, followed by the **need to care for the health, safety and wellbeing of employees**.

It is interesting to note that **the order of motivating factors is different for companies using online tools other than OiRA**. Here, the primary reason was to **avoid accidents and ensure the safety of employees**. The legal obligation to carry out risk assessments, while acknowledged, does not occupy a primary place in terms of motivating factors.

## 2.2 Reasons to select a specific risk assessment approach

When selecting specific risk assessment approaches or tools, several aspects were taken into consideration by employers. These can be broadly categorised as:

- issues related to functionality, that is, reflecting the needs of the employer;
- issues related to legitimacy; and
- issues related to availability of external support.

**In terms of functionality**, all companies reported seeking or appreciating a number of essential elements in their selected approaches. These included a simple, **intuitive and user-friendly set-up** for the risk assessment tool, highlighted mostly by the OiRA users in the sample, the availability of a **well-rounded risk assessment approach canvas**, which was important for the OiRA users, or a tool that could be **integrated into the company's overall management software**, a view that was largely represented in the group using other online approaches. This latter element is associated with multiple functionalities such as a direct connection to the human resources segments of the tool or to the finance department.

An approach to risk assessment that is **adapted to the company's needs and circumstances** is considered to be one of the key elements for selecting and continuing with a chosen approach. However, the research found that this means different things for different groups. For example, some feel that this need is fulfilled by OiRA, through the fact that OiRA is sector-specific. By contrast, others – mainly the group relying on Excel sheets/offline tools – remain faithful to reliance on external support as this is provided by services that are familiar with the company's line of work. The two companies that opted for industry-specific online tools other than OiRA do so as they feel those tools are very well adjusted to their work, needs and risks.

**The issue of legitimacy can be approached in two ways.** On the one hand, there is the legitimacy of the tool/approach considered, as highlighted in the OiRA group, which comes from the fact that **public authorities are the authors/developers of the tools**. France's National Institute of Research and Security (INRS) is particularly involved in this regard. Legitimacy also results from **recommendations from OSH experts** such as occupational medicine services or **business partners and colleagues** who have tested the tool and recommend it based on their experience. All these **different forms of endorsement are important and are listed as factors that have contributed to the selection of OiRA as a tool of choice**. On the other hand, there is the question of objectivity and legitimacy of risk assessment results. This aspect is highlighted largely by companies using external services to carry out or verify their risk assessments. Here, the study found that the sense of legitimacy arising from using the expertise of external experts to carry out or verify risk assessments was paramount.

Lastly, **availability of support** is a strong factor in terms of supporting the selection and continuation of certain approaches. This support takes the form of on-site visits by external OSH experts (public services, OSH service providers) or help in developing Excel grids. Equally, within the group of companies using other software solutions, support to set up and operate the software was highlighted as important. For the OiRA group, the available support from INRS was highlighted as a significant factor.

The sector in which a company operates is key when looking into the extent to which a specific tool is tailored to the needs of a company. These needs are to some extent reported as being fully met by OiRA, while other companies prefer the support of external OSH services as these have experts with hands-on experience in the sector. Lastly, in the case of OiRA specifically, the fact that the tool is recommended by business partners and colleagues points to the potential importance of sectoral connections.

## 2.3 Challenges to systematic risk assessment

In terms of carrying out the risk assessment itself, challenges cited in the interviews carried out for this study include a **lack of time**. In particular, companies using the Excel spreadsheet approach described this as time-consuming and one of the reasons to switch to OiRA. Another challenge identified by interviewees was **insufficient information about available tools, resources and solutions**. While

companies listed numerous sources of information about OSH, including the Internet, dedicated journals, newsletters and – importantly – OSH experts, a sense of lack of trustworthy, exhaustive knowledge of the topic surfaced from several interviews. On the one hand, companies felt that they needed to glean information from many different sources, but on the other hand several reported that they did not feel they had enough information on how to select the best approach to risk assessment. OiRA was mentioned as bringing all information together very well.

Starker differences surface in terms of **understanding the essence of risk assessment** specifically, rather than OSH generally. Here, it is evident that companies using OiRA stand out as having a clear grasp of the purpose and elements of risk assessment, set out within the OiRA framework. By contrast, there are companies in the two other groups that appear to have a somewhat mixed and blurred understanding of the exact nature of risk assessment. Some see this as integrated into the larger business risk assessment process, which includes examining issues such as delays in projects or financial risks. This type of approach is beneficial on a long-term basis as embedding risk assessment into the overall business operation of a company is desirable, as long as the health and safety of employees is given sufficient attention rather than being perceived largely as sitting within the business costs framework. Other interviewees referred to risk assessment as the collection of aggregated data about issues such as sickness absence.

By contrast, therefore, **the group of companies using OiRA offers the most coherent and adequate understanding of risk assessment**. It can be assumed that since for many of these companies OiRA is the first tool that they have used and their first systematic risk assessment experience, their good understanding of the risk assessment process and follow-up procedures stems from their learning experience with OiRA. For those switching to OiRA from dedicated Excel tables, although they might have had basic knowledge already, this seems to have been further expanded by OiRA. For example, this group noted that they had discovered new aspects of OSH due to OiRA, or that they had not been aware of the need for an action plan before starting to use OiRA.

A **lack of employee involvement in OSH** and related challenges in terms of **raising awareness of OSH among the employees** was cited by a number of interviewees across the three groups. To this end, the issue of perceiving OSH as something that is carried out by managers for the good of the business rather than for employees was mentioned both by a representative of a company using an online tool and one relying on Excel/external consultants. There was a view that limited involvement of employees leads to limited ownership of the risk assessment process and also limits the information available to conduct a risk assessment properly. If employees are not invited to contribute on the basis of their workplace knowledge and/or do not feel motivated to implement and adhere to the measures in place, OSH in the company cannot be implemented to the highest standards.

## 2.4 Views on OiRA

The largest sample in the study consisted of companies using OiRA as their primary risk assessment tool. This sample comprised enterprises with varying levels of experience with OiRA, including those that have been using OiRA repeatedly over several years, relative newcomers who had completed just one risk assessment and one company that had just started its first risk assessment. Companies in the sample said that they **became aware of OiRA** through the following key channels: the Internet, recommendations from OSH specialists, and through word of mouth such as recommendations from colleagues and business partners.

OiRA was selected in most cases by the managers or the employees tasked with carrying out risk assessments. In one case, only the employees were consulted about the selection of the tool. The decision was largely made by the managers alone, or in cases where it was proposed by the employees, the decision was validated by management. When asked to reflect on what initially attracted them to OiRA and motivated them to test this tool, interviewees cited different reasons. These included **OiRA's legitimacy and endorsement by the public authorities**, which makes it trustworthy and gives assurance that it will cover everything that is needed in a risk assessment. Other reasons are related to the structure of OiRA, the fact that it is **available for different sectors and that it is easy to use**. Prior to using OiRA, companies either used Excel spreadsheets or had no systematic risk assessment in place at all. For all except one interviewee, OiRA was the first online tool that they had used.

A number of specific key strengths and positive aspects of OiRA surfaced across the interviews with an observable level of consistency. The key cited assets of OiRA included **simplicity and being intuitive, the usefulness of the action plan** and the fact that it **provides a good structure to risk assessment**. None of the interviewees had a negative opinion about this tool. However, the majority of the interviewees could not compare OiRA to other software or online tools as they had mostly either not used any different approaches or had relied on Excel spreadsheets or paper-based tools.

Overall, OiRA is judged to be a very useful and efficient tool, offering many strengths and clear added value. The tool was assessed by interviewees as being easy to learn and easy to implement. None of the companies reported any significant problems in terms of using OiRA. However, some minor technical issues were cited by a few interviewees.

Overall, OiRA is appreciated as a tool that helps to **raise awareness and strengthen a systematic approach** to risk management, especially among companies that did not have a risk assessment approach in place before using OiRA. Companies reported that carrying out a risk assessment using OiRA enabled them to understand risks that they had not thought of before, to acquire a great deal of knowledge about OSH without much effort and to think beyond the identification of risk. Some companies commented that the tool supports an easy follow-up with an action plan, something that they would not otherwise have considered to be part of the risk assessment process.

Generally, the availability of an action plan was widely appreciated throughout the sample of interviewees. The action plan was judged to **correspond well to the identified risks**. Interviewees also welcomed the fact that the action plan was **very precise, going beyond their expectations**. Companies also appreciated the **motivating value** of the action plan.

Interviewees also felt that OiRA **helps to improve awareness** of risk prevention of the person who uses it, and that by making the report and action plan available to employees, OiRA helps companies to be more transparent. Interviewees also noted that since OiRA can be implemented internally without the help of external services, this **encourages better ownership of risk assessment**. The fact that OiRA is easy to use also encouraged users to **revisit the tool rather than just using it once**.

Another aspect of OiRA was that it was highly appreciated as being helpful in **engaging employees in the risk assessment process**. There was a sense that the interviewees using OiRA were very much prepared to engage employees. They reported that the tool and its systematic approach made employee involvement in risk assessment easier compared to previous approaches and that the report and action plan helped to raise awareness of OSH within the workforce.

Finally, users appreciated OiRA's structure, which is **conducive to a well-rounded risk assessment process**. Interviewees noted that thanks to OiRA, risk assessment within the company was more structured and organised because the **work is already prepared**, meaning that the company just needs to answer the questions set out in the tool. They also noted that OiRA allows for 'more **practicality, more organisation, and more automation** regarding the reporting'. Interviewees said that they plan to continue using OiRA and that they would or already have recommended it to others.

This study shows several areas in which OiRA could be improved, although some of these, as is usual with this kind of research, are contradictory. However, all of them seem to be minor, with none dramatically altering the general concept of OiRA. The fact that there is mixed feedback about the level of information provided, with some companies finding this to be just right while others would like more or less information, indicates that most users might be happy with the current middle level of detail provided.

It seems that companies that are often willing to pay a significant amount for their risk assessment tools see clear reasons for doing so. The argument of firms that they want to have modules of their general management systems dedicated to OSH and integrated into the overall software architecture is a valid one and OiRA has not been developed to perform this function. On the contrary, OiRA has been created to reach those who do not know where to start in terms of conducting a risk assessment.

### 3 Conclusions and key pointers

This study shows that OiRA reaches the target group for which it was created and provides an easy start with regard to risk assessment to those who have not previously engaged with this topic. Many of the companies using OiRA either did not have any systematic risk assessment system in place previously or they were working with time-consuming, inefficient Excel spreadsheets and paper-based tools. Therefore, it can be argued that OiRA paved the way for many companies to embark on a long-term sustainable risk assessment path.

In light of the findings of the study, a set of recommendations has been developed, addressing mainly OiRA national partners in terms of how to best approach and support companies for better use of OiRA.

#### 3.1 On approaching companies and promoting OiRA

- OiRA should continue to be advertised as a tool best suited to MSEs especially those at the very beginning of their systematic risk assessment processes. Highlighting the tool's user-friendliness, intuitive approach, and ability to structure the risk assessment process in a time-saving and sector-specific manner will help to engage new companies.
- Promoting the fact that OiRA is developed and/or endorsed by national public authorities enhances the tool's legitimacy and appeal and is seen as a guarantee of its quality and respectability. This can be important especially in countries where a wide range of online risk assessment tools are available and companies may struggle to choose wisely. Equally, the fact that OiRA can serve as a proof of a completed risk assessment should also be promoted.
- Highlighting the fact that OiRA tools are developed in close collaboration with social and industry partners and therefore reflect the circumstances of different sectors is key to promoting the tool as context-specific. This enhances understanding that OiRA is not generic and may encourage companies to try OiRA.
- OiRA is highly recommended by its users and often reaches companies through word of mouth, personal recommendation and a snowballing effect. This is a clear asset and could be further capitalised upon by actively encouraging users to spread the word among their contacts.
- Companies report learning about OSH overall, and risk assessment approaches specifically, mostly online through dedicated government websites and magazines. These channels should be considered as a priority for further promotion of OiRA.
- Companies carry out Internet research to find information about OSH and risk assessment. Making sure that OiRA information appears high on the results list of Internet search engines can significantly help to promote it.
- The fact that OiRA proposes practical measures on how to follow up on the risk assessment is highly valued by companies. The availability of an action plan within OiRA is a clear advantage and deserves highlighting as a practical way to structure further OSH work.
- Comprehensiveness of information has to be clearly weighted against the time users need to invest in order to go through the tool.
- Aspects that allow OiRA to be targeted to a company's needs, such as optional modules or profile questions, which lead to certain aspects of the tool being considered or not, seem to be appreciated by users and should be considered in all further developments of OiRA.
- Beyond the OiRA tool itself, this study revealed the need for and appreciation of direct external support in carrying out risk assessments, not only among the OiRA users but all the groups in this study. Embedding this in some way within the respective national OiRA frameworks could be considered, either through offering direct chat support on the OiRA website or linking OiRA with existing public OSH services. Exploring collaboration with private OSH services could also be considered, within the context of providing better support to companies to enable them to engage in effective risk assessment.

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