

ADDRESSING WORKPLACE STRESS IN POLAND: SUPPORTING OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH COMPLIANCE (CASE PL1)

1 Introduction

Promotion of effective occupational safety and health (OSH) practices is a key element of safer and healthier workplaces. Improving arrangements and practices for managing OSH across a whole range of industry sectors and firm sizes — large, medium and small — is stimulated, supported and sustained by a range of institutional actors and processes both internal and external to firms. Scientific research highlights, among others, the critical role that state regulators for OSH, such as labour inspectorates but also prevention services, can play.¹ This case study is part of a research project² conducted in Poland to provide further insight into this topic.

This case study presents the programme ‘Addressing the negative effects of stress in the workplace’ implemented by the State Labour Inspection (PIP) in Poland since 2006. This annual initiative is dedicated to proactively mitigating the impact of psychosocial factors within work environments. It is a preventive measure, targeting employers and employees to foster healthier and more conducive workplaces.³

2 Description of the case

2.1 Aims

The programme ‘Addressing the negative effects of stress in the workplace’ has been set up with the aim to contribute to **tackle and mitigate** the adverse effects of **workplace stress, discrimination, burnout and other psychosocial hazards**. In general, the aims of the programme include creating safe and employee-friendly working conditions, promoting standardised measures to encourage employers and employees to prioritise worker health, and identifying opportunities for active intervention in combating and preventing the adverse effects of psychosocial occupational risk factors.⁴

More precisely, the ultimate objectives of the initiative encompass:

1. enhancing the dissemination of knowledge regarding stress, including its origins, development, physiological impacts and strategies for mitigation;
2. promoting awareness surrounding additional psychosocial threats such as bullying, discrimination, inequitable treatment, harassment, sexual misconduct, aggression and workplace violence;
3. propagating effective methods for managing psychosocial risks within the workplace; and
4. facilitating the improvement of interpersonal dynamics within work environments, thereby cultivating a supportive atmosphere conducive to teamwork and enhancing overall job satisfaction.

The programme was introduced because, during the research phase, it was found that stress and psychosocial risk factors accounted for 60% of all sick leave absences. PIP was also faced with a

¹ EU-OSHA – European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *Improving compliance with occupational safety and health regulations: an overarching review*, 2021. <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/improving-occupational-safety-and-health-changing-world-work-what-works-and-how>

² The full report is available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/polands-approach-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-role-labour-inspectorate-and-prevention-services>

³ More information: <https://www.pip.gov.pl/nasza-oferta/dla-pracodawcow/przeciwdzialanie-negatywnym-skutkom-stresu-w-miejscu-pracy?highlight=WyJzemtybGVuaWEiXQ==>

⁴ PIP Annual Activity Reports.

significant number of complaints about bullying. This highlights the necessity for a focused, educational and preventive approach to address such issues.⁵

2.2 Organisations involved

The project was created by a specially formed **working group** consisting of several individuals employed at **PIP and District Labour Inspectorates**.⁶ Each member of the group was responsible for specific tasks, such as:

- selecting the target group,
- preparing publications,
- graphic designs, and
- radio spots, etc.

In terms of preparing substantive materials, **psychologists employed at PIP** were involved in the project. The materials were submitted for PIP's personnel review.

Separately, partners such as:

- Central Institute for Labour Protection (Centralny Instytut Ochrony Pracy - Państwowy Instytut Badawczy – CIOP-PIB),
- the Nofer Institute of Occupational Medicine (Instytut Medycyny Pracy im. prof. dra med. Jerzego Nofera - NIOM), and
- trade unions

were invited to participate in the programme. Partners participated in conferences, promotional meetings, publication releases and the preparation of a questionnaire to assess stress levels at work.⁷ Generally, partners will be acquired based on the needs and topics being addressed in the specific programme. Invitations to participate in the programme will be sent out accordingly.⁸

2.3 What was done, and how?

2.3.1 Basic structure

The programme is coordinated by PIP, with coordinators in each of the 16 District Labour Inspectorates. District inspectorates are responsible, among other things, for preparing reports that are later sent to PIP.

The programme is multifaceted, comprising interlocking components of education, occupational risk assessment and creating proactive measures towards hazard elimination. This comprehensive approach manifests **across different levels of action**. At a central level, the programme disseminates knowledge, for example, through the www.streswpracy.pl website, **publications** and **webinars**, and shares insights at **conferences** on wellbeing and psychosocial risks.

However, perhaps most crucially, the programme conducts **training** involving employers, employees, social labour inspectors and OSH experts from prevention services, facilitating direct engagement and capacity building. As part of the programme, any company interested in participating in it can select from three available options of engagement 'pathways' — always encompassing training — that best align with their preferences and needs (Table 1).

⁵ Interview with the national programme coordinator, February 2024.

⁶ The PIP structure comprises the Chief Labour Inspectorate (GIP) overseeing labour law compliance in Poland and 16 District Labour Inspectorates (OIPs) with field offices in each voivodeship capital.

⁷ Interview with the national programme coordinator, February 2024.

⁸ Interview with the national programme coordinator, February 2024.

Table 1: Pathways offered within the programme

Pathway 1	Pathway 2	Pathway 3
Provides the option to partake in training sessions focused on addressing stress and various other psychosocial hazards within the workplace, including but not limited to bullying, discrimination, unequal treatment, harassment, sexual misconduct, aggression and violence.	<p>Allows participants to conduct a comprehensive analysis of workplace conditions concerning the stress-inducing aspects of the job within the company. This entails conducting assessments utilising the Psychosocial Risk Scale,⁹ a tool created by NIOM. Following the assessment, a detailed report is compiled, evaluating the hazards inherent in the company's environment.</p> <p>Subsequently, this report is presented to the employer, accompanied by recommendations of exemplary practices geared towards enhancing the psychosocial wellbeing of the workforce.</p>	<p>Offers a combined package of Pathways 1 and 2. Under this option, the workplace undergoes training sessions addressing stress prevention and other psychosocial hazards, alongside an in-depth examination of stress-inducing job characteristics using the Psychosocial Risk Scale.</p> <p>Moreover, employers can request a follow-up analysis of stress-inducing job characteristics. Subsequently, a report will be generated consisting of two components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ an assessment of the company's current situation, and ▪ a comparative analysis derived from initial and subsequent assessments is designated as Analysis 1 and Analysis 2.

Source: Ecorys & NIOM¹⁰

Illustrating the **practical application of one such pathway** is the case of the Municipal Transport Company (Miejskie Przedsiębiorstwo Komunikacyjne – MPK) facility in Łódź. Here, the local programme coordinator analysed the company's psychosocial risks. Following this, an **improvement action plan** was devised and implemented to address the identified areas of concern among the employed workers:

- A psychological office and two psychologists were made available to the employees.
- Additionally, psychological care (24/7) was provided for employees involved in accidents — known as crisis intervention. A psychologist arrives at the scene amid each accident.
- A system for reporting problems and incidents was established and managed by the Compliance Management Department. Employees are informed during periodic health and safety training about the possibility of making such reports.
- Newly hired employees receive a brochure dedicated to bullying and informing them about psychological help and support.
- The training plan for 2024 includes organising training sessions for management personnel, including lower-level managers such as supervisors and dispatchers, with a module on crisis

⁹ The Psychosocial Risk Scale tool, which plays an important part in the programme, allows participants to assess negative feelings related to stress. Analysing the causes enables the creation of proposals for corrective actions to improve the quality of work.

¹⁰ More information: <https://www.pip.gov.pl/nasza-oferta/dla-pracodawcow/przeciwdzialanie-negatywnym-skutkom-stresu-w-miejscu-pracy?tmpl=pdf&tmpl=pdf>

resolution, along with continuing the series of training sessions on combating bullying and discrimination in the workplace.

2.3.2 Target group

Although initially and primarily aimed at employers and employees, the programme has demonstrated broader outreach, as evidenced by PIP reports, encompassing individuals beyond its intended audience, including teachers and OSH experts from prevention services.

2.3.3 Improvements

Given that the programme's inaugural edition commenced 18 years ago, it is understandable that it has experienced various changes. Overall, the programme has gradually evolved, with more extensive actions and a broader reach. However, throughout its evolution, it consistently involved both educating on and providing materials for risk assessment and action plans.

The first version of the programme operated from **2006 to 2009**, focusing only on **delivering specialised training sessions** tailored for both employers and employees, coupled with comprehensive assessments of stress-inducing job characteristics within companies. These assessments informed the implementation of preventive measures aimed at addressing workplace stressors.¹¹

The **2011** edition of the programme extended and focused its reach to encompass **corporate entities**, including **financial institutions** such as banks. With this expansion came a renewed focus on disseminating knowledge about occupational stressors, their implications for mental wellbeing, and the adoption of best practices in prevention strategies.¹²

In **2012**, activities were continued with focus on education, commerce, public administration and industry, this time as an **information campaign** 'Stress and other psychosocial factors related to work', which was part of a pan-European project of the Senior Labour Inspectors Committee (SLIC).¹³ District inspectorates continued training, and publications, press articles and radio broadcasts were also produced.¹⁴

In **2013**, the programme rebranded to 'Prevention of Psychosocial Hazards in the Workplace - Stress, Bullying, Discrimination, Harassment, Violence, Aggression', and began to **enter partnerships** with trade unions and social stakeholders. Notable collaborating organisations included the All Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (OPZZ), the Society for Anti-Discrimination Education and the Government Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment.¹⁵

In **2014**, the programme reverted to the name 'Combating the Negative Effects of Stress in the Workplace' ('Przeciwdziałanie negatywnym skutkom stresu w miejscu pracy').¹⁶

In **2015**, the programme marked a significant milestone with the launch of its **dedicated website** at www.streswpracy.pl, a platform that continues to serve its purpose to this day. The website offers an assessment tool explaining different stress factors at work and potential preventive actions, enabling users to identify workplace stressors and gauge their current levels of occupational stress. Furthermore, 2015 saw the inception of the 'Stress at Work? Find a Solution' two-year **information and promotional campaign** that was subsequently spotlighted on some of Poland's most prominent online portals such as Onet.pl, Wp.pl and TVN24.pl. Promotional activities included radio spots and print publications, increasing and enhancing the reach and impact of the campaign.¹⁷ In **2016**, further innovations were introduced to support the programme. A **CD** dedicated to the topic of workplace stress and its prevention was released, and **online materials** began to be promoted via email, reaching a total of 300,000 individuals nationwide. In 2016, there was a noticeable increase in interest in preventing bullying and discrimination, indicating progress in employers' attitudes and their familiarity with the subject.¹⁸ An innovation introduced in **2017** was the possibility to test the **newly developed** Psychosocial Risk Scale

¹¹ PIP Annual Activity Report 2011, in 2010 the programme was on hold.

¹² PIP Annual Activity Report 2011.

¹³ More information about SLIC: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=148&intPagId=685>

¹⁴ PIP Annual Activity Report 2012.

¹⁵ PIP Annual Activity Report 2013.

¹⁶ PIP Annual Activity Report 2014.

¹⁷ PIP Annual Activity Report 2015.

¹⁸ PIP Annual Activity Report 2016.

tool prepared by NIOM, in addition to trainings. This option was chosen by 75 companies and 3,000 employees.¹⁹

In **2020**, a questionnaire for assessing the **quality of interpersonal relationships** in the workplace was created as part of the programme's development. There was a heightened focus on improving worker wellbeing, fostering a positive work atmosphere and enhancing overall job satisfaction.²⁰

In **2022**, at the regional level, some District Labour Inspectorates commenced additional programme promotion through their **social media channels** (e.g. Twitter, Facebook).²¹

2.3.4 Degree of innovation

The programme demonstrated its potential for innovation through its adaptive approach over time, seamlessly incorporating new methods of engagement — by integrating modern channels such as websites and social media, the initiative expanded its reach and effectiveness in spreading knowledge about stress management. The programme achieved this without losing a focus on the training and employers/employees' engagement, which are core to this initiative. The capacity for innovation was particularly evident during the pandemic when the programme transitioned to online training sessions.

3 Results

3.1 What was achieved?

As depicted in Table 2, although data reporting consistency varies across the years, the programme's training reach has remained relatively stable despite fluctuations. Notably, even amid the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in 2020, training sessions continued to be conducted. The programme consistently attracts thousands of participants for its educational sessions. However, it's important to acknowledge that the data provided do not fully capture the programme's overall reach, as they do not include metrics for website visits or the dissemination of media communications. Thus, the programme's actual reach is likely much greater than indicated solely by training participation indicators.

¹⁹ PIP Annual Activity Report 2017.

²⁰ PIP Annual Activity Report 2020.

²¹ PIP Annual Activity Report 2022.

Table 2: Reach of the project over the years (participants in training sessions 2011-2022)

Year	No of participants	No of participating workplaces	No of conducted trainings	No of training participants	No of entities participating in the measurement of stressors
2011	4,668	282	127	1,981	78
2012	-	486	143	4,474	55
2013	-	-	23	-	-
2014	-	112	136	3,700 + 100 labour unions' representatives	1,503* (*no of individuals)
2015	-	-	-	2,400	-
2016	-	-	-	-	-
2017	-	217	171	4,700	-
2018	-	-	160	-	41 (3,900 individuals)
2019	-	-	176	-	-
2020	-	-	66	-	-
2021	-	-	125	3,700	-
2022	-	-	165	6,711	-

Source: Ecorys & NIOM, based on PIP Annual Activity Reports (2011-2022)

3.2 Success factors and challenges

PIP's approach to preventing workplace stress is characterised by a mix of analytical research, training, conferences, and a diverse range of educational materials (from CDs to website and social media engagement) that are implemented on both national and regional levels. By using those channels and methods, the programme has effectively reached a wide audience, ensuring its message and resources are accessible to many. Notably, offering participation in all activities at no cost and focusing on preventive measures rather than compliance control encourages employer engagement. Through this programme, the Polish State Labour Inspection exemplifies its strategy, which focuses also on educating — about stress — and collaborating with companies to mitigate risks, showing a proactive and preventive approach to enhancing OSH compliance. The organisation of over 1,000 free training sessions has been instrumental in spreading awareness about the negative effects of workplace stress, enabling thousands of participants to acquire knowledge on managing stress, mobbing, burnout and discrimination.

A notable aspect is the long-term nature of the initiative, which has evolved over the years to enhance its effectiveness in achieving its objectives. Over time, the programme has demonstrated its adaptability by embracing the latest technologies and evolving alongside societal awareness — it shows the continuous interest of employers in the programme and an increasingly open dialogue around the topics of mental health that initially raised concern among the target group.²² Furthermore, the initiative has successfully engaged in new partnerships and attracted diverse stakeholders, expanding its reach and

²² Interview with the national programme coordinator, February 2024.

impact. Additionally, the initiative's focus on addressing psychosocial risks demonstrates its commitment to tackling challenging yet critical aspects of OSH, and notably, the emphasis on mental health began as early as 2006, showcasing PIP's foresight and dedication to addressing emerging workplace concerns. The breadth of activities and resources offered within the programme presents a wealth of opportunities for effective engagement.

Despite these successes, the programme faces some challenges, particularly in assessing stressful working conditions in companies — employers raised concerns about the lack of anonymity in reporting stress-related issues.²³

4 Transferability to other EU Member States

The programme's design allows for both centralised management and a local operational model, as previously outlined. In Poland, PIP in Warsaw is primarily responsible for overseeing the programme and its implementation. Yet, it is the district inspectorates that tailor the programme to address local needs (by providing training, educating and conducting risk assessment, disseminating knowledge, etc.) and enhancing its effectiveness.

The transferability of the programme to other EU Member States hinges on their national models for promoting and enforcing OSH compliance. In Poland, the State Labour Inspection fulfils both roles effectively, leveraging its district offices for national and local engagement and financing activities from the state budget to offer services free of charge. However, in Member States where labour inspections solely enforce regulations or lack local branches, replicating the programme while maintaining its key features — such as cost-free access, engaging training and local-level cooperation — poses a challenge. This discrepancy could hinder the programme's adaptability across different national contexts.

References and resources

Interview with the national programme coordinator from the State Labour Inspection, February 2024.

Państwowa Inspekcja Pracy (State Labour Inspection). *Przeciwdziałanie negatywnym skutkom stresu w miejscu pracy*. <https://www.pip.gov.pl/nasza-oferta/dla-pracodawcow/przeciwdzialanie-negatywnym-skutkom-stresu-w-miejscu-pracy?highlight=WyJzemtvbGVuaWEiXQ>

Państwowa Inspekcja Pracy (State Labour Inspection). PIP Annual Activity Reports for years 2011-2022 (Sprawozdanie z działalności Państwowej Inspekcji Pracy). <https://www.pip.gov.pl/o-nas/sprawozdania>

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²³ Interview with the national programme coordinator, 14 February 2024.