

GERMANY'S TELE-OSH APPROACH TO ENSURING CONSULTING: SUPPORTING OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH COMPLIANCE (CASE DE1)

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 (EU-OSHA 2021). This case study is part of a research project¹ conducted in Germany to provide further insight into this topic.

There are still major deficits in OSH consulting (according to DGUV Regulation 2²) for SMEs and among micro and small enterprises (MSEs) in terms of quality, comprehensive consulting and the effects achieved. Tele-OSH is intended to help overcome the challenge of ensuring occupational safety and medical consulting in particular by means of video consultation.

This case study is based on a joint pilot project carried out by:

- German Social Accident Insurance Institution for the foodstuffs and catering industry (BGN),³
- Occupational Medical and Safety Service of the BGN (ASD*BGN),⁴ and
- BAD Health Care and Safety Technology Ltd (2019-2021).⁵

Description of the case

Aims

The main aim of this pilot project is to contribute to improving OSH compliance among SMEs and MSEs by providing them with Tele-OSH services. In order to do so the following effects should be achieved with the use of Tele-OSH:

- To reduce the time and effort for all parties involved (occupational safety specialists, occupational physicians, employers, managers, workers).

¹ The full report is available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/germanys-approach-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-role-labour-inspectorate-and-prevention-services>

² DGUV Regulation 2 has provided the framework guidelines for the supervision of companies since 2011. The first two annexes of DGUV Regulation 2 describe standard supervision: Annex 1 applies to companies with up to 10 workers; Annex 2 contains the overall supervision by occupational physicians and safety experts consisting of the basic supervision and the company-specific part for companies with more than 10 workers. In addition to standard supervision by occupational physicians and OSH professionals, DGUV Regulation 2 also includes alternative, demand-based supervision. The alternative needs-oriented occupational medical and safety supervision is described in Annexes 3 and 4. The demarcation of the two systems with regard to the number of workers is in the hands of the statutory accident insurance institutions (UVTs), but the majority of them are up to 10 workers in the case of Annex 4 and up to 50 workers in the case of Annex 3. In the demand-based supervision according to Annex 3, workers are informed about health and safety issues in the company and motivated to implement the necessary measures. This is supplemented by further training measures. It is up to the workers to decide whether external support is necessary and to what extent. In addition to OSH professionals and occupational physicians, persons with special event-related expertise can also be called in (DGUV Deutsche Gesetzliche Unfallversicherung Spitzenverband 2012).

³ See: <https://www.bgn.de/>

⁴ See: <https://www.bgn.de/asd-bgn>

⁵ See: <https://www.bad-gmbh.de/>

- To provide comprehensive support.
- To ensure an exchange flexible in terms of location and time via video between those responsible in the company and external specialists in OSH consulting.
- To demonstrate the advantages of a video call compared to a conventional telephone call.

Target group

The target group is particularly SMEs and MSEs with (increased) need for OSH consulting and poor infrastructural connections. Tele-OSH is also useful for larger companies.

Companies and ASD*BGN advisers use Tele-OSH for suitable OSH consultations. The ASD*BGN supports companies in implementing their legal obligations and organises consulting in accordance with the Occupational Safety Act (*Arbeitssicherheitsgesetz, ASiG*). It covers regular standard supervision by occupational physicians and OSH professionals in accordance with DGUV Regulation 2 in the form of a combined supervision service for its members and particularly addresses SMEs and MSEs that are subject to the regular supervision obligation.

Suitable hardware and software are required.

Figure 1: Screenshot Tele-OSH ASD*BGN video⁶



What was done, and how?

The participating OSH players in the pilot project carried out a total of 386 telework safety consultations from 2019 to 2021 and subsequently evaluated the results.

Tele-OSH was offered for various consulting occasions, for example on:

- individual consulting of companies or workers;
- participation in meetings of the OSH Committee (*Arbeitsschutzausschuss, ASA*);
- debriefing on the implementation of already-initiated prevention measures;
- support with OSH briefing and OSH inspections;
- exchange among professional colleagues within the OSH players;

⁶ Tele-OSH ASD*BGN video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6aqmt4FbxJg>

- tele-dermatology consultations; and
- participation in occupational integration management of the company (*Betriebliches Eingliederungsmanagement*, BEM).

Certified software with end-to-end encryption was selected for the video consultations, which also has a calendar function for booking appointments.

On the BGN website, one-page practical guides are offered for the respective causes for action,⁷ like:

- participation in meetings of the OSH Committee (*Arbeitsschutzausschuss*, ASA);
- support with OSH briefing;
- support with OSH inspections;
- participation in occupational integration management of the company (*Betriebliches Eingliederungsmanagement*, BEM);
- follow-up and aftercare, e.g. for dermatological problems; and
- exchange among professional colleagues within the OSH players.

An intermediary evaluation and a final evaluation on the pilot project completed at the end of 2021 were carried out. They included results of the following surveys:

- Documented OSH support data.
- Online survey of the contractual partners of the ASD*BGN (occupational safety specialists, occupational physicians) and employer as customer.
- Interviews just with contractual partners at the end of the project in the form of qualitative semi-standardised guided interviews.

The commissioned safety and occupational health centres of the BGN and ASD*BGN were informed about the evaluation results of the pilot project. They have the option of including video consultation hours in their product portfolio since January 2022.

Degree of innovation

Digitalisation simplifies the exchange between OSH players. As a pragmatic application of digital communication, the future use of Tele-OSH is assured. Electronic data processing and storage opens the potential for sustainable practice and retrievable documentation. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the importance of individual and personal consulting in the workplace.

Due to the successful implementation so far, there are initial considerations by the BGN to also offer the video consultation for the monitoring activities of labour inspectors.

Approach

Tele-OSH is a consulting and prevention service offered within the framework of OSH consulting in accordance with DGUV Regulation 2 for all companies.

Tele-OSH reaches everyone with access to the internet and the associated technical equipment. It can be used worldwide if needed, and especially non-traditional workplaces are more accessible, such as mobile workplaces, home offices, workers working abroad, offshore workplaces and so on.

What was achieved?

The evaluations showed the following improvements and results:

- Almost 90% of occupational physicians and occupational safety specialists rated the service as a suitable method for fulfilling a consultation.
- Almost 90% of this group of people thought that video consultation is just as suitable as an on-site appointment for resolving a specific request.
- There was a time saving due to the elimination of long journeys or waiting times in the companies.

⁷ ASD*BGN Tele-OSH with the links to the practical guides: <https://www.bgn.de/asd-bgn/unsere-leistungen/projekte/asdbgn-videosprechstunde#c23599-10870>

- The clear majority of the member companies surveyed considered the video consultation service easy to implement and as a relief in their work time and workload.
- The interviewees felt comfortable with the video consultation service.
- The respondents gave the method good marks in terms of the quality of the processing of the consultation request.
- The member companies rated the video consultation as well-suited for the selected consulting issues.
- Eighty per cent of the participating pilot enterprises wanted to use this consulting service in the future as well.

Success factors and challenges

It is clear from the results of the evaluation that the surveyed occupational physicians and occupational safety experts prefer the classic on-site consulting. However, they also describe advantages for Tele-OSH.

As a new format, video consultations as part of OSH consulting in accordance with DGUV Regulation 2 are a useful addition to the service and product portfolio of the external prevention services. They represent a suitable contribution to the fulfilment of the advisory mandate and are also evaluated by the addressed member companies as a relief in work time and workload and are therefore also economically attractive.

In addition to a quality management system, successful video consulting requires a strategy for dealing with difficulties in digital communication, such as interruptions, malfunctions and other restrictions.

Transferability to other EU Member States

The Tele-OSH approach can be implemented in all European countries with sufficient internet bandwidth. Large-area countries can benefit in particular from the time saved by less traveling. The services of Tele-OSH can be customised to the specific needs of each country.

Further evidence of the transferability to other countries is that there are other forays by other OSH players with video consultation. Both the German Social Accident Insurance Institution for the administrative and management sector (VBG) and the German Federal Medical Association (*Bundesärztekammer*) are testing telemedicine. At the VBG, a model project was conducted in 2019 to examine the role that telemedicine can play in the context of OSH consulting for member companies. The result was that telemedicine represents an important addition to the range of services, to ensure OSH consulting for SMEs. Areas of application are primarily in the area of counselling (e.g. in the context of preventive care, maternity protection, stays abroad and general questions about the OSH workplace requirements) (VBG 2022). The Task Force on Occupational Medicine of the German Medical Association calls for quality requirements for telework medicine to be defined, for example, by means of an occupational medicine rule (*Arbeitsmedizinische Regel, AMR*) and monitoring of providers to ensure that occupational physicians who provide preventive occupational medicine know the workplaces and participate in the risk assessment. Both of these will continue to require at least a partial presence in the workplace (Task Force Arbeitsmedizin 2021).

Further information

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<https://www.bgn.de/asd-bgn/unsere-leistungen/projekte/asdbgn-videosprechstunde>

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