

Risk assessment using OiRA at European workplaces – a qualitative study

Summary

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List of abbreviations

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DLI	Cypriot Department of Labour Inspection
ESYPP	Internal Protection and Prevention Service
EU	European Union
EU-OSHA	European Agency for Safety and Health at Work
EXYPP	External Occupational Safety and Health Consultant
IT	Information technology
MLSI	Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance
MSEs	Micro and small enterprises
OiRA	Online interactive Risk Assessment
OSH	Occupational safety and health
RA	Risk assessment
SMEs	Small and medium enterprises

Executive summary

Micro and small enterprises (MSEs) often face significant challenges in conducting effective risk assessments (RAs) due to limited resources, time constraints, and a lack of expertise in occupational safety and health (OSH). Recognising this gap, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) launched the Online interactive Risk Assessment (OiRA) application in 2011. OiRA is a free-of-charge, online RA tool tailored to national and sector-specific contexts. It is structured around tasks and activities typical of specific sectors, making it accessible even to users without prior RA expertise.

A multi-country study was conducted, starting with France in 2022/2023 and followed by Lithuania, Slovenia and Cyprus in 2024 to explore how OiRA operates and is utilised across diverse national and contextual settings, focusing on how companies and OSH professionals use and evaluate OiRA's functionality in their daily work. The research analysed how companies in each country approached RA, focusing on factors that facilitate or hinder the adoption of OiRA. It also provided insights into end user experiences with OiRA and other RA methods, to compare the advantages and disadvantages of different methods and see how OiRA is doing within this comparison.

- **The OSH and OiRA landscape in the countries studied**

The four countries examined in this study each have unique approaches to RA. This diversity stems from each country's specific OSH environments and regulatory frameworks. These factors collectively shape how RA processes are organised, influencing whether and how OiRA is adopted in different national contexts.

National regulations significantly impact how RAs are conducted and who conducts them. In particular, in Lithuania, there is a legal requirement for RAs to be conducted by a person certified to do so, which potentially impacts companies' ability and willingness to perform RAs internally. In Slovenia, RAs must include specific documentation, such as a template recognised as a Safety Statement and a consultation record with workers or their representatives. Further, in each of the countries studied, differences could be found in terms of how often the RA is conducted in companies according to the European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER) data, with Slovenia exhibiting the highest overall rate in terms of companies conducting RAs regularly (91.8%), moderate rates in Lithuania and France (61.7% and 56.9%), and the lowest rate in Cyprus (50%). At the same time, in all countries, smaller enterprises are less likely to conduct regular RAs than larger companies. Further ESENER data confirm that Lithuanian and Slovenian enterprises rely significantly on external OSH experts to conduct RAs, depending on these professionals to fulfil legal obligations and compliance with OSH regulation. French companies, on the other hand, demonstrate a strong internal capacity to conduct RAs, with 73% of all companies doing so, even among smaller enterprises (5-9 employees, 67%).

In light of these considerations, the use of OiRA is intertwined with national contexts. Most importantly, in Slovenia and Lithuania, where external experts dominate RAs, OiRA is often used as part of external services. Also, in those countries, OiRA is complemented with (or complements) additional expertise and RA methods.

Overall, the main takeaway from the research is that OiRA effectively facilitates internally conducted RAs in smaller companies, making it a suitable and relevant option for MSEs. When comparing OiRA with other RA methods and approaches, OiRA emerges as a good option for MSEs, fulfilling its role as an entry point for these internal RAs, something for which other reported methods were not seen as capable. However, in addition to that, the use of OiRA appears to be flexible and adaptable, extending beyond conducting RAs (whether externally or internally) and reaching out beyond its original target group by also being used by medium and big enterprises as well as by external OSH services.

- **Motivations for using OiRA and its practical applications**

The ways in which companies use OiRA stem from some key factors identified by its users. It is always the employer's responsibility to have proper risk assessment done at the workplace. When deciding which approach and tool to employ — including OiRA — the primary consideration was which method best met the specific needs of the company. However, it is important to understand that the main driver for conducting RAs, as reported across all countries and by most interviewees, was legal compliance.

Therefore, while the RA methods chosen by the interviewees and their companies aimed to address particular company needs, the main motive was for the workplace to be OSH-compliant. Effectively, from the companies' point of view RAs must first and foremost satisfy legal requirements to avoid negative consequences during inspections or in the case of an accident. Therefore, the decision to use or not use OiRA was influenced by this need for legal compliance, even if it was not often explicitly discussed by its users in this concrete context.

The diversity in the decision-making process regarding which RA method to use reflected the varied characteristics of the study sample, which included companies of different sizes and sectors, interviewees performing various roles and tasks, and involving both internal and external OSH experts with differing levels of OSH proficiency. This led to variations in who made the decision about the RA method and the considerations influencing the choice of method to be used.

The study found that official backing and promotion of OiRA by public authorities enhanced its credibility and trustworthiness, making some companies more inclined to adopt it, especially in France and Lithuania. Simultaneously, a key factor was how well OiRA aligned with specific company requirements, especially concerning the complexity of the working environment. In larger workplaces that carried out multiple tasks and needed to deal with multiple hazards, companies decided whether OiRA could provide a comprehensive RA or cover a part of it, while in smaller workplaces, the decision was generally more straightforward, and OiRA was most often found to be well-suited to their needs. OiRA's sector-specific tools made it a relevant option, particularly for MSEs lacking other readily available, sector-specific tools. However, in some instances OiRA was used to assess only parts of the workplace, if there was no readily available sectoral tool. In cases where certain sectoral circumstances required additional technical measurements that OiRA could not provide, it influenced the choice of an RA method. For example, office work tools were used to assess only parts of the working environment, or combinations of different tools (e.g. for educational establishments, hairdressers and retail) were used for RA in a caregiving facility. Additionally, because OiRA is in most cases designed around sectoral tasks, it mostly does not provide specific tools covering certain assessments that interviewees found important or are required by law (e.g. psychosocial risks or manual handling).

Users also highlighted the fact that OiRA's free-of-charge nature was a significant factor, especially for enterprises with limited resources such as MSEs or public institutions, as it reduced the need for costly external service providers, which lowered the entry barriers for those entities. Lastly, familiarity with existing tools and methods influenced the decision-making process; being relatively new, OiRA had to offer incentives to encourage adoption over more established methods known to experts and authorities, even if this factor was not frequently directly noted by interviewees.

The study revealed two main ways of using OiRA, which were in many cases related to this overarching consideration: using it as a stand-alone approach, that is, as a method to conduct the RA across the whole workplace; and using OiRA in combination with other tools.

The study consistently found that OiRA is particularly well-suited for smaller workplaces. In these environments, companies often used OiRA independently because it sufficiently met their needs. When adopted as a stand-alone method for conducting RAs, OiRA frequently replaced previous approaches — such as checklists or Excel spreadsheets (France) — or took the place of external service providers (Lithuania). The shift to OiRA in these cases was driven by dissatisfaction with existing methods and concerns over costs. Specifically, some small companies chose to begin conducting RAs internally by using OiRA. Further, some of those smaller enterprises used OiRA on their own upon the recommendation of external experts, who then supported the assessment process with additional services and tasks, as reported in Slovenia.

OiRA as a stand-alone tool

In these instances — OiRA stands out as an exceptionally good option for MSEs; OiRA effectively fulfils its role as an entry point for conducting internal RAs, also because it is free of charge, a function for which other reported methods seemed to be less suited. That is because, unlike other tools, OiRA seem to have an educational dimension, guiding users step by step through the process of the full RA up to taking decisions on measures to be implemented. As a result, interviewees, including those performing RAs within their own workplaces and those conducting RAs for clients, recognised OiRA as especially relevant for those with fewer resources and less proficiency in OSH. Users appreciated its user-friendly

interface, clear layout and accessible language, which helped reduce barriers for those with limited OSH knowledge.

OiRA used in combination with other tools

Conversely, in Slovenia, Lithuania and Cyprus, mostly among larger enterprises, OiRA was more commonly used alongside other tools to perform more comprehensive assessments, or those perceived as such. This combined approach arose from various factors influencing the decision-making process. The main reported reasons for this were that OiRA was found to be less able to support larger, more complex working environments in which hazardous tasks are carried out. In such cases, other tools were more frequently used, as they were found to be more suitable. However, OiRA was used in a complementary way for double-checking results with other tools or for covering specific areas. This has to be considered in the context of the intended OiRA use, and its design, as large companies are not the targeted beneficiaries of OiRA.

Sometimes the reason for this complementary use was also related to questions about the legal validity of RAs carried out using OiRA (Slovenia, Lithuania) — that is, a perceived lack of clarity and clear communication on whether RA processes and documentation are in line and fully compliant with the national legislation. In these cases where other methods were perceived by the OSH experts as providing outputs that were recognised as proof of an RA, OiRA was not the obvious choice. The experts' familiarity with the other methods also played a role here, especially in Slovenia.

Nevertheless, even when not used independently, OiRA was regarded as an important tool in overall OSH management and as such was seen to have had a positive impact on workplace safety. In instances when it was found to be not fully suitable for conducting RAs at specific workplaces, it offered something other methods did not: it educated both experts and less proficient OSH service providers about relevant risks and gave them ideas on areas, risks and measures that they might not have considered before. In such instances, the way in which OiRA was used was quite different from its more 'traditional', stand-alone use. For example, OiRA served as an educational tool by allowing OSH experts to educate clients (employers) about workplace risks. Interviewees pointed out that, independent of the level of OSH proficiency, OiRA allowed its users to better understand what an RA entails, what needs to be covered by an assessment and the complexity of the issue of workplace risks. Companies and OSH professionals alike used OiRA to enhance their knowledge and noted that OiRA pointed them towards risks not previously considered. For example, it allowed them to 'rethink' their current approach and perspective, something that more rigid and especially offline methods were not able to facilitate.

Another key use of OiRA as a complementary tool was to cross-check its results with those of other RA methods, as noted by some interviewees (in Lithuania, Slovenia and Cyprus). By pointing out new risks not previously considered and linking risks with existing, up-to-date regulations, OiRA enabled its users to conduct a more thorough and legally compliant assessment. Here, for example, the outputs of other methods were checked with those produced by OiRA and supplemented as needed. OiRA was also used in cases where other resources had fallen short — here in the case of the OiRA COVID-19 tool, which was found to fill information gaps left by other methods or tools.

For those reasons, when used alongside other methods, OiRA's flexibility allowed companies to use it according to their needs, providing new knowledge and perspectives on risks through its interactive, online, sector- and sometimes even risk-specific design. Further, given how OiRA was used in practice, many users may engage with it not necessarily to complete a full RA but to learn, explore and supplement their existing knowledge. Therefore, any level of interaction with OiRA can add considerable value since even that partial use of OiRA can still provide significant benefits as users gain insights and information relevant to their particular working environments.

• How OiRA was assessed

Regardless of how or why OiRA was used, it was generally positively assessed. Interviewees praised its user-friendly design, noting the clear and accessible language and guidance it provides. Although some users experienced a learning curve when starting to work with OiRA, it was still widely recognised as simplifying the RA process, especially for those with limited experience in OSH. This group especially included individuals new to conducting internal RAs or employers in smaller companies. The structured

and straightforward approach of OiRA meant that it was particularly beneficial for its intended audience, whose needs were central to OiRA's design.

As noted above, OiRA was regarded for its educational value, which motivated its use even when completing a full RA was not the primary goal. Users found that it helped them learn about risks and mitigation measures. Especially in the case of those new to OSH, OiRA served as an invaluable resource that helped to increase the understanding of risk management. Even experienced users appreciated how it encouraged them to re-evaluate and enhance their existing approaches.

Additionally, OiRA was valued as a source of the most up-to-date information on legal requirements for compliant risk management, an advantage tied to its online format. Unlike other tools, and particularly offline checklists that are less adaptable, OiRA provided insights into current legislation. This was highly advantageous for OSH professionals, whether working internally or externally in or for companies, as it supported more thorough and compliant assessments. Its online nature also allowed it to respond quickly to emerging risks — here in particular, with the example of the COVID-19 pandemic — filling gaps left by less responsive, less agile and more traditional methods.

Furthermore, users perceived OiRA to be a flexible tool that could be adapted to their specific needs. They reported customising the tool by adding risks or measures as necessary (observed in France and Cyprus) and by skipping irrelevant modules (all countries). This flexibility enabled users to tailor assessments to their unique situation, demonstrating OiRA's adaptability to a wide range of RA requirements.

- **Ideas for further adaptation and development**

Despite these positive assessments, some areas for improvement were identified. While many issues were related to the reasons behind choosing particular RA methods, additional concerns emerged regarding how OiRA is used in practice. These concerns suggest opportunities for enhancing OiRA's functionality, promotion and user experience in order to better meet its diverse users' needs.

Users reported uncertainty about the purpose, structure and use of the OiRA-generated reports, which impacted their perception of OiRA's usefulness. Therefore, improving the clarity and user friendliness of these reports is of key importance.

Additionally, not all of OiRA's functionalities are enabled at the national level or are well known to users, limiting its wider adoption and the full use of its flexible features, such as collaborative functions and customisation of the content (such as adding risks and mitigation measures), as well as possibilities to take an existing RA as a basis for a new one. Promoting these functionalities may lead to more potential and current users assessing the tools as even more suitable for their particular companies and working environments.

Clarifying OiRA's legal status is also important, given that fulfilling legal obligations is a primary driver for conducting RAs. Therefore, clear communication on the status of OiRA's outputs in terms of legal compliance may encourage more companies to adopt OiRA.

Enhancing OiRA at national level by incorporating more modules or new tools for areas such as psychosocial risks or manual handling, keeping it updated with the latest legislation and expanding support for users might further increase its adoption.

Recognising that OiRA is used by a broader audience than initially anticipated, including external OSH experts, suggests its potential for wider application. Promoting features such as the OSH Service function, which facilitates collaboration between companies and external experts, as well as encouraging employee and employer involvement through collaborative and training features, could foster better engagement and ownership in the RA and risk management processes.

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