

PREVENTION SERVICES ROLE IN SUPPORTING OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH COMPLIANCE IN POLAND

Background

The 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 and prevention services, can play.¹ This policy brief is part of research conducted in Poland to provide further insight into this topic.²

In Poland, there are two types of prevention services: OSH services/experts and occupational health services (OHS). The OSH prevention service is the entity, among others, ensuring that risk assessment is in place and supplying technical information and advice to employers and workers concerning the most effective means of complying with OSH provisions. Another vital part of the prevention services is occupational medicine. The occupational medicine system is based on three institutional levels: the Institute of Occupational Medicine, Regional Centres of Occupational Medicine coordinating the referral centre for health check-ups at OHS units, and the Units of OHS, which provide occupational medical examinations for workers. The occupational medicine service and occupational doctors employed in the clinics provide required occupational medical examinations and determine if workers' health allows them to perform work.

This policy brief focuses on the role and function of OHS and OSH experts' prevention services, providing information on their scope of activities and challenges as a crucial yet equally important element of the OSH prevention system in Poland.

Occupational health services

The OHS were created to protect workers' health from negative working conditions and to provide preventive healthcare. The duties of the OHS are based on the regular monitoring of workers' health, enabling the assessment of their health condition and the identification of harmful factors related to working conditions. As part of this monitoring, doctors inform the examined persons how to prevent negative health outcomes and manage their health.³

The staff of the OHS consists of doctors, nurses, psychologists and other specialists with relevant qualifications who are responsible for carrying out multidisciplinary tasks. The OHS consists of healthcare providers, including provincial occupational medicine centres, research and development units, and medical universities (Figure 1). Occupational medicine practitioners act independently of employers, workers and their representatives to ensure objectivity and impartiality.

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 research report, on which this policy brief is based, is available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/polands-approach-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-role-labour-inspectorate-and-prevention-services>

³ Ministerstwo Zdrowia. Medycyna Pracy. More information is available at: <https://archiwum.mz.gov.pl/zdrowie-i-profilaktyka/medycyna-pracy/>

Figure 1: OHS framework



Source: Ecorys & NIOM

The main task of the OHS revolves around the delivery of occupational medical examinations. Occupational medical examinations apply to every employee, regardless of their position or type of work. They do not apply to the entire workforce since the obligation includes only employees with regular employment relationships. Therefore, they exclude employees on civil law contracts and other atypical employment forms. Notably, companies must issue a referral to the examinations. Most commonly, OSH prevention services (internal or external) or, in smaller companies, other competent staff assigned to this task, are responsible for issuing referrals for occupational medical examinations. These referrals should be based on the occupational risk assessment for selected employees, indicating OSH risks present in the workplace. Based on the referrals, OHS doctors conduct occupational medical examinations. Therefore, the quality of the risk assessment in the company is closely linked to the quality of the occupational medical examination. In general, three types of occupational medical examinations (pre-employment examinations, periodic examinations) are carried out regularly during employment, per the doctor's instructions, and control prophylactic examinations.

Overall, the key findings of the OHS indicate the following aspects of OHS activity:

- **Occupational medical examination and their preventive role.** While occupational medical examinations have a defined scope, there is also potential for introducing additional preventive examinations. However, occupational doctors do not fully utilise this opportunity, focusing on mandatory procedures.
- **Regional differences in OHS access.** Access to the OHS differs depending on the region and size of urban or rural centres. Indeed, large urban centres have better access to occupational doctors and smaller cities and rural areas may have some barriers in access to examinations.
- **Occupational medical examinations coverage (example: agriculture).** While, in principle, occupational medical examinations are mandatory for all employees, the situation becomes more complicated when employment is on a different basis than in a traditional employment relationship, as in the case of agriculture. Farmers often do not fall within regular employment relationships, so undergoing occupational preventive examinations by individual farmers is voluntary, and the farmers themselves bear the examination costs.

OSH services/OSH experts (Bezpieczeństwo i Higiena Pracy – BHP)

The OSH prevention service can be a separate unit/position within the company whose tasks are to organise preventive activities to protect from occupational hazards, improve OSH conditions and advise the employer. OSH experts can also be external consulting enterprises employed to perform OSH services — this can be either on an ongoing basis or ad hoc consultancy to perform a specific task (based on the needs of the company). OSH experts play a key role in ensuring safe and healthy working conditions. However, in Polish, the name of this service is Occupational Safety and Hygiene (Bezpieczeństwo i higiena pracy – BHP), which to some extent reflects its limited engagement in health issues.

Overall, more studies and data are needed to provide a more robust assessment of the role and activities of the OSH prevention services/experts. Indeed, there is a lack of nationwide statistical and economic data on the activity carried out by OSH prevention services, and the existing qualitative sources are fragmented. Thus, such a dynamic, diversified and fragmented environment is challenging to describe.

Notably, some interesting data and information about the profile, activities and challenges faced by internal and external prevention services have been gathered in a study by the CIOP-PIB in 2021.⁴ Overall, key findings on the OSH experts/OSH prevention services include the following aspects:

- **There could be around 5,600 external OSH entities** (individual external OSH experts and companies providing external OSH services) and between 26,000 and 32,000 employees working in internal (in-house) prevention services. The demand for external OSH prevention services is anticipated to grow in the forthcoming years.
- **There is a trend towards privatisation and market-driven solutions** in OSH management when it comes to OSH prevention services (outsourcing trend).
- **The scope of external and internal OSH experts differs in practice.** While the general scope of activities revolves around delivery or risk assessment and OSH training, there are some differences in the work dynamics between internal and external OSH experts. Internal OSH experts focus on mandatory OSH compliance, while external OSH experts tend to be contracted for more specialised tasks.
- **An ongoing debate on OSH experts with generalist profiles versus more specialised OSH expertise.** There is an ongoing discussion about the direction of the qualifications development of the OSH experts. On the one hand, some indicate that OSH experts should develop more specific knowledge tailored to specific sectors, such as construction, or particular topics, such as handling of chemicals in the workplace. On the other hand, others indicate that OSH experts should develop comprehensive OSH knowledge and, most importantly, tangible experience in working with enterprises.
- **An ongoing debate on the OSH experts' qualifications⁵** and the scope of services they provide. This is coupled with the lack of a systemic approach to monitoring the quality of the education of the OSH experts and their qualifications and services. The 2020 study mentioned above included a survey of 500 OSH experts (indicating that most respondents, especially among external OSH experts, had higher education). Indeed, 49.8 % of external OSH experts and 32% of internal OSH experts completed higher education, specifically focusing on OSH.

⁴ Dobrzyńska, M. (2021). Characteristics of bhp services in Poland - results of a survey. Occupational Safety. Science and Practice, No. 8/2021 (*Charakterystyka służb bhp w Polsce – wyniki badania. Bezpieczeństwo Pracy. Nauka i Praktyka, nr 8/2021*). https://m.ciop.pl/CIOPPortalWAR/file/92887/20210824115058&BP_8_2021_16_19.pdf

⁵ OSH experts' qualifications are regulated by Regulation of the Council of Ministers of 2 September 1997 on the OSH service. It outlines qualifications for OSH experts (both internal and external). It requires either a technician's qualification in the area of OSH, specifically, higher education in OSH, or completion of postgraduate studies in OSH. The regulation provides conditions, including educational background and professional experience, necessary for professional advancement — fulfilling roles successively as specialist, senior specialist and chief specialist in OSH. Employees in single-person OSH units should meet qualifications equivalent to at least a senior safety inspector, while those managing multi-person OSH units should meet the requirements specified for the position of OSH specialist at a minimum. Individuals with relevant higher education and one year of work experience in the OSH service may provide external OSH services to enterprises.

- **Drivers and obstacles to OSH experts' jobs.** Surveyed OSH experts indicated the following challenges hampering their professional activity: the lack of awareness regarding the importance of OSH among employees and employers, and the challenge of building a safety culture at the company level. Conversely, professionals find satisfaction in the industry's opportunities for personal and professional development, meaningful interpersonal interactions and engaging project work.

Challenges for the OSH and OHS prevention services

OHS and OSH experts' activities are shaped by an economy dominated by SMEs that challenge these services to develop approaches that are adapted to their needs and do not financially burden them. Equally, the economy's structure impacts the OSH workers, as people working in micro and small companies may not benefit from the same level of OSH protection and OSH coverage (as in bigger companies). These companies tend to have smaller resources assigned to OSH management and tend to focus on minimal required OSH compliance.

OSH and OHS prevention services are also facing some challenges regarding their human resources, and while the reasons are different, the problem remains similar. OSH prevention services/experts may face increased demand for their services. At the same time, there are different projections for the OSH experts' skills that may be required, discussing whether the companies will need OSH experts with generalist profiles or OSH experts with narrow expertise. OHS services are challenged by the decreasing number of occupational doctors, caused, among others, by the shift from the model of in-house occupational doctors to occupational doctors dedicated to occupational medical examinations. The shortage of occupational doctors affects access to occupational medical examinations in some regions or rural areas and affects doctors' capacity to use the full preventive potential of occupational medical examinations.

Finally, OSH and OHS prevention services also face similar challenges when confronted in their day-to-day work with the changes related to the new world of work. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic response indicated that both needed to develop approaches and activities addressing dynamically changing needs, impacting the organisational aspects, including the health and safety of their own employees. Further, emerging challenges such as platform work, remote and hybrid work, and robotisation and use of algorithms create additional areas to ensure workplace OSH compliance. These challenges push OSH and OHS specialists to become fully informed and competent to deal with these emerging challenges, allowing them to apply this knowledge in practice, for example, for OSH specialists to identify risks associated with the new forms of work and incorporate them in the risk assessment or for occupational doctors to understand health outcomes related to new forms of work.

OSH knowledge and perception of OSH issues and OSH experts in the workplace has also been identified as a challenge for OSH professionals. The role of OSH experts is crucial in most companies in Poland. Despite this, the OSH industry tends to be undervalued, as highlighted in the eighth edition of the Safe at Work Coalition report. The study 'Work Safety in Poland 2021: The Role and Image of OSH Services'⁶ revealed that only 10% of employees and 8% of employers appreciated the work of OSH services more than before the pandemic. This indicates a significant problem, especially given that three out of four OSH professionals did not receive adequate wage adjustments despite increased workloads. The report also emphasised a critical challenge for the OSH sector: the lack of understanding of the importance of worker safety issues. Despite the pandemic, 51% of survey participants⁷ cited employees' lack of appreciation for safety issues as a significant challenge. In comparison, 48% noted a similar lack of understanding among supervisors, employers or service providers. Interestingly, only 16% of respondents found the impact on company operations and revenues to be the most engaging aspect of their work, and 20% valued the sense of 'having an influence' their role provided.

⁶ More information is available at: https://bezpiecniwpracy.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/BHP_2021_Raport-Koalicji-Bezpiecni-w-Pracy.pdf

⁷ The CATI survey was conducted with a group of 240 OSH specialists and managers.

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