

## ASSESSING AND TACKLING EXTERNAL VIOLENCE AT WORK

### Case metadata

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## 1. Organisations involved

Sociedad Pública Eusko Trenbideak – Ferrocarriles Vascos, S.A.

## 2. Description of the case

### 2.1. Introduction

EuskoTren is a company which manages various rail, tram, road and funicular transport services in the Basque Autonomous Region, as well as the Basque Railway Museum in Azpeitia. Customer service is one of the staff's main tasks in the provision of these services, and this involves permanent contact with passengers.

For this reason, and due to certain past incidents involving Train Conductors, it became necessary to identify and assess the psychosocial risks faced by the staff. This evaluation has enabled to identify external violence as a high risk factor (a value greater than 3.5 on a scale of 1 to 5) for the following jobs: train conductor, tram conductor, criver-ticket collector, customer service staff, inspection staff and station assistants.

Although the aim of this case study is to present the actions taken to fight external violence, below (table 1) is a list of the risk factors analysed as a consequence of the psychosocial risk assessment carried out, since the analysis of these factors has also enabled prevention in other areas.

**Table 1: Overview analysed risk factors**

RISK FACTORS ANALYSED		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Performance of Duties</li> <li>▪ Harassment Behaviours</li> <li>▪ HR Management</li> <li>▪ External Violence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Management Style</li> <li>▪ Content of Tasks</li> <li>▪ Overwork</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Structure</li> <li>▪ Outside Work</li> <li>▪ Group Influence</li> </ul>

People usually associate violence in the workplace solely with physical aggression, but the problem is much wider in scope. Verbal abuse, insults, threats and intimidation also constitute forms of violence. Violence is a phenomenon which affects the health and safety of persons and entails a high personal cost due to the emotional and physical trauma suffered by the victims, their families and their workmates.

## 2.2. Aims

This case study focuses on *external violence*, understood as the probability of being subjected to physical or mental aggression (verbal abuse, insults, threats or intimidation) by the users or recipients of the services offered by the company. The company aimed to develop an action plan to counter external violence at work. The company decided to properly assess the psychosocial risks faced by its staff and put in place an external violence prevention policy.

## 2.3. What was done, and how?

The first step towards finding a solution to the problems of external violence was to identify which job positions were affected by it and the intensity of the violence. With this aim in mind, and as mentioned above, a much more wide-ranging project was carried out with the collaboration of Donostia Estrés y Coaching Center as technical advisor. The project consisted of identifying and subsequently assessing the psychosocial risks affecting the staff. This work comprised the identification of risk factors, an assessment of their magnitude and the proposal of preventive and corrective measures. In order to obtain all this information, various actions were carried out as shown in the table below.

Afterwards, once the scope of the problem was established on the basis of all the work described above, an Action Plan for the prevention of external violence was implemented. The Action Plan consisted of a series of actions described below.

### Identification and Assessment

Several actions were taken to identify and assess the risks:

- Provision of information, through meetings with the Company’s Management, the Prevention Service and the people in the Health and Safety Committee, on the nature of the risks and psychosocial factors, their health consequences, the methods for assessing them, the necessary means and resources, and the commitment and involvement required.
- Setting up a Coordination Team to carry out the project with the consensus of all the parties involved and to encourage staff participation. This Team included members from General Management, the Human Resources Department, the Prevention Service, the Prevention Delegates and a representative of the external company contracted to carry out the assessment.
- Approval by the people in the Coordination Team of a Commitment to guarantee confidentiality (of both the data collected in questionnaires and the data relating to the persons completing them), the voluntary nature of participation in the process, the avoidance of detriment to both people who took part and people who didn’t, a commitment to improvement on the part of the Management once the results were obtained, and the

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technical aspects of the entire process, based on the understanding that this process is included within the scope of occupational risk prevention and, more specifically, the prevention of psychosocial hazards.

- Monitoring of the process by all interested parties through the holding of Coordination Team meetings to plan all the actions to be taken, such as the dates, times and locations of both information talks and focus groups, the people who will be given personal interviews, the monitoring of participation percentages obtained, and the promotion of staff involvement at all stages, among others.
- Conveying to all company staff the importance of preventing psychosocial risks and the characteristics and stages of the project through information talks and various circulars. In addition to the staff voluntarily attending these, all talks included participation by representatives of the Prevention Delegates, and circulars are sent by the Coordination Team.
- Individual interviews with people in positions of responsibility to obtain information on the staff in their area.
- Holding of group meetings or focus groups with voluntary staff attendance to obtain information regarding the problems detected by them.
- Epidemiological analysis of absenteeism due to illness in recent years.
- Individual completion of a set of questionnaires, entitled ARPEGA (Arrisku Psikosoziileen Ebaluaketarako Galdaketa), consisting of 165 questions grouping together questionnaires on Stress, Psychological Health, Job Satisfaction, Vulnerability and Social Support. This was carried out on a voluntary basis and with a personal number code to preserve the confidentiality of the people completing the questionnaires.
- Identification of people at psychosocial risk to enable the company to put the necessary mechanisms in place to offer them the necessary assistance.
- Assessment of risk per job position (trivial, tolerable, moderate, substantial or intolerable) according to the consequences of the damage to health and the probability of the risk materialising.
- Individual psychosocial risk profile of the people taking part in the project, indicating the overall degree of risk, the intensity of each risk factor, the degree of vulnerability to psychosocial factors and their effects on health (this information is only given to the Company's Medical Service).
- Analysis of corrective and preventive actions to reduce the presence of risk factors and minimise their negative health effects.

## **Action Plan to counter External Violence at Work**

The promotion of staff involvement in prevention activities was done through the following actions:

- Setting up a Multidisciplinary Improvement Team to coordinate the External Violence Action Plan. The members of this team include the Human Resources Department, the Prevention Service, a representative of the external company contracted as facilitator, a representative for each of the groups affected by external violence and the Manager of each of these groups.
- Holding Improvement Team meetings to establish an External Violence Action Plan.
- Setting up the Zero Violence Team, which was responsible for monitoring all the actions proposed, any recorded incidents and any other new issues which may arise in relation to external violence at work.

- Preparation and implementation of an incident log which can be completed by the people affected and can at the same time serve to report incidents in order to implement preventive actions to avoid repetition.
- Preparation of a Guide to the Prevention of External Violence at Work so that all staff may be actively involved in prevention and know how to act when such situations arise.

## 2.4. What was achieved?

The actions carried out to prevent external violence at work in the company, as described in the above section, had various results. Some of these are discussed below.

- *Knowledge of risk factors affecting each job position in the company, their intensity and the level of risk.* This information was the starting point for adopting specific prevention measures for each job position, prioritising them according to the intensity of the risk factor in question and the risk level for each job position.
- *Knowledge of the people who have been affected.* This information was necessary to provide such people with the help they need.
- *Knowledge of the individual profile of the people involved.* All the people involved could find out, through the Medical Service, the results of the questionnaire they had completed and thus became aware of the degree of risk they were exposed to at an individual level, the intensity of each risk factor, their vulnerability in terms of psychosocial factors and the effects on their health.
- *Staff involvement in prevention activities*  
The entire process, from the assessment of psychosocial risks through the implementation of the External Violence Action Plan, had at all times involved participation by company staff. This had been achieved by always confirming the agreement of all interested parties with the proposed measures and actions, by means of meetings and circulars and talks to all staff to inform them of all the stages and actions. This has contributed to an increase in staff involvement in the company's prevention activities, with all the positive aspects this entails.
- *Reduction in the number of incidents recorded.* When analyzing the incidents that have occurred since the implementation of the incident log (the moment from which reliable statistical data were obtained regarding incidents of external violence at work), there is a gradual downward trend in the number of incidents, as can be seen in table 2.

**Table 2: Number of incidents**

Month	No of Incidents
November 2007	14
December 2007	6
January 2008	2
February 2008	8
March 2008	4
April 2008	1
May 2008	1
As at 23 June 2008	1

Source: Data from Euskotren

- *Improved working environment.* Both the implementation of the actions and the promotion of staff involvement have helped improve the working environment within the company.
- *Obtaining statistical data regarding incidents of external violence.* Following the establishment of the Incident Log, the company accessed to data such as the frequency of such incidents and other aspects which enable it to implement preventive action, such as locations, dates or times in which certain situations tend to recur, the staff most affected by them (new staff or staff who have been working for the company for some time), users or other people who habitually cause conflict, and any other aspect which may be of interest for collection and analysis.
- *Improvement of communication and staff information and training.* The training provided, the various circulars sent and the documentation generated significantly improved the knowledge of the company staff affected by such incidents as how to act and what to do in such situations.

## **2.5. Success factors**

- Participation and consultation of workers, employers and people involved in prevention activities.
- Interventions aimed at work with an Action Plan to combat the risks.
- Training of the workers to learn how to manage violent behaviours, trying to eliminate the risk at source.
- Improving not only work conditions but also labour relations and internal communications.
- Better knowledge of risk factors affecting each job category.
- Collection of data on incidents of external violence.

## **2.6. Further information**

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## **2.7. Transferability**

This experience could be applicable to other sectors where external violence is important, and to other countries as well.

## **3. References, resources:**

Information provided by the company in the framework of the Good Practice Award Competition 2008/2009.