

Psychosocial risks in Europe: Prevalence and strategies for prevention



Executive summary

Introduction

This executive summary is based on a joint report on psychosocial risks at work from the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) and the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound). It draws on the complementary work of the two agencies, which is reflected in their different roles. Acknowledging the complexity of the relationship between health and work, the report presents comparative information on the prevalence of psychosocial risks among workers and examines the associations between these risks and health and well-being. It also looks at the extent to which establishments take action to tackle psychosocial risks and describes interventions that can be adopted in companies. An overview of policies in six Member States is included.

Policy context

Raising the quality of working conditions is a goal of the EU; Article 151 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union states that Member States should work towards the promotion of employment and the improvement of working conditions. Ensuring the health and well-being of workers throughout their working lives is a prerequisite to achieving the Europe 2020 objective to increase employment across the EU. The 1989 Framework Directive on measures to improve safety and health at work obliges employers to implement preventive measures to guard against occupational accidents and diseases; accordingly, psychosocial risks must be addressed in organisations' health and safety strategies. In addition, the European social partners have recognised the importance of psychosocial risks by signing the Framework Agreements on Work-related Stress (2004) and on Harassment and Violence at Work (2007). These agreements represent a commitment to the development and application of their content at national level.

Key findings

In Europe 25% of workers say they experience work-related stress for all or most of their working time, and a similar proportion reports that work affects their health negatively. Psychosocial risks contribute to these adverse effects of work.

The most common risks relate to the type of tasks workers perform – for example, whether tasks are monotonous or complex – and to work intensity. High work intensity is associated with negative health and well-being outcomes, especially work-related stress.

Violence and harassment are less frequently reported, but have a strong negative relationship with well-being. Other working conditions, such as a good work–life balance and social support, have a positive influence.

The incidence of some psychosocial risk factors has fallen since 2005. Fewer people report working long hours and a lack of social support. However, job insecurity has grown, and one-fifth of workers still work long hours or have irregular schedules. Recently, increases in work pressure and violence and harassment have been reported in some countries; this is associated with workplace changes brought on by the economic crisis.

In general, differences in working conditions between groups of workers are sector-related. However, there are gender differences not necessarily related to sector – for example, men working longer hours or women facing more difficulties in their career development.

Psychosocial risks are of concern to a majority of companies: nearly 80% of managers express a concern about work-related stress, and nearly one in five considers violence and harassment to be of major concern. Looking at single risks, managers' greatest concerns relate to time pressure and difficult customers, patients and pupils. Despite these concerns, fewer than one-third of establishments have procedures in place to deal with such risks.

Evidence suggests that tackling hazards to psychosocial well-being is not a single event, but a process with different stages that require changes in the work environment. Interventions taken at company level are best implemented through a structured process, and this is most successful if accompanied by active worker involvement.

Information provided to companies to help them tackle psychosocial risks is most likely to be effective if it delivers an approach that



can be targeted at the company's state of readiness for change, and at the specific risks in the company and sector. There is no single solution with regard to psychosocial risks, but many effective approaches have been implemented in companies all over Europe.

At policy level, legislation and social partner initiatives have contributed to the implementation of psychosocial risk prevention. Social dialogue is a driver for improving working conditions. Examples in the report highlight policies to deal with psychosocial risk at Member State level, either through legislation or inspection, by providing practical tools, or through the involvement of social partners. However, policies are not developed to the same extent in all European countries, which can be explained by the different traditions of social dialogue and different governmental approaches, often related to the importance countries give to psychosocial risks.

Policy pointers

- Policymakers and stakeholders responsible for improving working conditions and risk prevention have to consider the specific psychosocial risks for different groups of workers.
- In line with the Europe 2020 objective to increase employment rates, attention should be paid to tackling the risks to which workers are most commonly exposed, such as the specific problems related to task type or high work intensity, and those with a strong impact on work sustainability, such as violence or harassment.
- The increasing recognition of the importance of the psychosocial work environment and the need to tackle psychosocial risks has to be translated into actual implementation of preventive policies, especially in countries where few companies have procedures to deal with psychosocial risks. Practical guidance can play an important

role in complementing legal requirements, especially for smaller companies.

- Social dialogue at different levels, from the EU to the workplace, helps raise awareness of psychosocial risks and helps in the development of policies and actions at establishment level. Further developments in this regard should continue, especially in countries where policies are still less developed.
- Measures to prevent psychosocial risks are best implemented on the basis of the traditional risk management framework. Companies are more successful in preventing psychosocial risks if well-functioning occupational safety and health management is already in place.
- Policymakers should reflect on how to increase women's participation in the labour market, while maintaining and improving the working conditions in general. Addressing issues related to working time and career development can contribute in this area.
- Job insecurity is related to some negative health outcomes. Development of holistic policies on employment, career development, socioeconomic support and restructuring can help to address the causes and consequences of job insecurity.

Further information

This summary is extracted from the report 'Psychosocial risks in Europe: Prevalence and strategies for prevention', available at www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef1443.htm and <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/reports/psychosocial-risks-eu-prevalence-strategies-prevention/view>. It is available in 25 languages at www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef14431.htm and <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/reports/psychosocial-risks-eu-prevalence-strategies-prevention-summary/view>.

