

Social Dialogue Committee for Central Government Administrations (SDC CGA)

Statement: To better tackle and prevent psycho-social risks in central governments

Adopted 20 October 2017

Introduction

1. The EU Social Dialogue Committee for Central Government Administrations (SDC CGA, hereafter the Committee) has adopted this statement to:
 - sum up main outcomes of a joint project on tackling and preventing psycho-social risks (hereafter PSR) which are a growing concern;
 - encourage national social partners to make a good use of these outcomes with a view to, if not eradicate, at least stem the growing prevalence of PSR;
 - acknowledge the importance of better preventing and tackling PSR for the well-being of employees and good functioning of central governments
 - recognize the added-value of EU social dialogue to further well-being at work.
2. In a context of work intensification, restructuring and ageing workforce, the EC-funded project sought to examine the scale and impact of PSR, particularly those associated with new technologies and third-party violence at the workplace, and discuss appropriate responses to those risks; risk assessment and chain of responsibility efficiency were identified as essential tools worth detailing throughout the project.
3. This follows on the decision to include PSR in the Committee's work programme 2015-2017, as an important health and safety issue especially at times of organisational changes. The decision stemmed from a statement adopted in 2013 *towards well-being at work in central government administrations* to contribute to the EC consultation on a new EU occupational safety and health strategy. In 2015, the Committee also reaffirmed the importance of the social dialogue and health & safety by adopting an Agreement which sets out common minimum requirements for information and consultation rights of public employees, through their trade union representatives, on matters such as working time, restructuring and health and safety. This Agreement is pending implementation by Council decision.

Key outcomes

1. The project benefited from a bottom-up approach throughout its duration between November 2015 and May 2017 with the organization of two seminars, one on health risks associated to new technologies in Vilnius and the other on third-party violence in Madrid, and a final conference in Berlin that took place in March 2017 where the project outcomes were presented and discussed.
2. In total 80 people from 21 EU and applicant countries and Norway contributed to the project including EUPAE and TUNED delegates from a broad range of central government ministries and services such as labour inspectorates, tax administrations, employment services, prison services, HRM departments as well as officials from the national health and safety agencies and the European Commission. The three main outcomes are as follows:
 - ✓ **A guide for employees and managers on tackling PSR.** Whilst there are many guides around, it is the first one jointly produced by EU social partners for central governments. It informs on the scale and impact of PSR, the legal frameworks, lists of risk factors and risk assessments, collective agreements and case studies¹ in a broad range of services. It

¹ Case studies originated from Belgium, France, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Spain and Sweden

recommends an overall strategic approach including both collective and individual as well as preventive and curative measures supported by a social dialogue framework.

- ✓ **A short animation film** to introduce the guide to a wider audience.
- ✓ **A detailed mapping research** report which sets out the groundwork for the guide.

Key challenges

1. The risks to employees' health and safety at work have changed in recent decades with more people being exposed to PSR reflecting the combined mental and social factors that affect workers' health and well-being. For employees, prolonged exposure to these risks can lead to stress, burnout, depression, cardiovascular diseases and musculoskeletal problems. For the functioning of organisations, the consequences are high levels of sick leave, poor performance, low morale of staff, higher costs, potential reputational damage.
2. Although central government administrations cover different missions, services or administrations in Europe, they are all affected by PSR. Indeed, PSR are more prevalent in this sector than other parts of the economy and are a growing concern.
3. In addition to risk factors relating to job content, work intensity and autonomy, working time, work/life balance, job security, dealing with difficult or vulnerable users is a specific risk factor in central government. Whilst users in a vulnerable situation should not be seen as a problem in itself, budgetary restraints, large scale restructuring and insufficient staffing can make it more difficult to meet in an appropriate way the needs of these citizens whose frustration can lead to violent or abusive behaviour against employees.
4. The Committee affirms strongly that violence and abuse must never be tolerated at the workplace. It is essential that a clear policy and procedure on how to deal and prevent violence be put in place including monitoring and recording of accidents. The large scope of jobs in central governments can facilitate the transfer of employees who have been victims of violence. At the same time, the root causes of this growing phenomenon need to be better addressed. The Committee reaffirms that budgetary considerations must never compromise the quality of public services for users and their right to a good administration as well as employees' right to a safe and healthy workplace².
5. Growing digitalisation entails both risks and opportunities for a healthy and safe environment, work life balance and a quality, accessible administration to all. Better monitoring and assessment of these health risks need to be carried out taking into account the views of employees and their trade union representatives and the need for sufficient training and reviewing processes. We also need to maintain a good relationship between employees and citizens as well as a meaningful job content.
6. It is reminded the Framework Directive (89/391/EEC) on health and safety, whilst not explicitly mentioning PSR, covers both physical and mental health risks and imposes a series of obligations on the employer, including the duty to ensure a safe and healthy workplace, inform and consult employees and carry out risk assessments.
7. The Directive has been transposed by all EU member states. 19 member states have gone further by including an explicit reference to PSR, or some aspects of them, in their national health and safety legislation. The other remaining countries might want to also consider establishing an explicit PSR legal framework".
8. In every country there are a range of structures and individuals available to help employees and organisations tackle PSR, such as employee representatives, unions, health and safety experts as well as labour inspectors whose involvement and support vary across member states.

² SDCCGA Statement towards well-being at work <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=480&intPageId=1821&langId=en>

9. The role of the social dialogue is crucial in tackling PSR. European social partners reached two agreements on stress and on violence and harassment. At national level, there are also a number of collective agreements on PSR. It is acknowledged that employee representatives and unions play an important role as “on-site experts” who can help management understand, evaluate, reduce and eliminate workplace risks.
10. Carrying out an effective risk assessment at the workplace, ensuring that it covers all types of PSR, all employees, with a gender breakdown, and that the outcomes are acted upon is a basic starting point. Identifying the risks is typically done through surveys, interviews or focus groups-and, as the EU agency OSHA³ points out, “it is vital to include workers or their representatives in the risk assessment”.
11. The project finds however that, even in countries with legal provisions on PSR, moving from risk assessment to actions remains difficult. PSR are seen as more difficult than acting on physical risks, like exposure to noise or dangerous chemicals. The often stated reasons are lack of awareness, willingness or expertise. The involvement of external experts or appropriate training for those undertaking the process internally, so that they have the skills to take the issue forward and act upon it, or a combination of these and other measures are part of the solutions.
12. The guide recognises and addresses these difficulties, provides a European 'helicopter' view of common challenges that can help better anticipate and respond to change and emerging risks. Its use can potentially represent a good opportunity to help raise awareness, review progress achieved, remaining obstacles to better enforce legal provisions or collective agreements supported by exchange of good practices and policies and an effective social dialogue.

Follow-ups

1. With a view to facilitate a good dissemination at national level, the project outcomes are available in 8 languages -EN, FR, DE, ES, IT, CZ, LT, EL-⁴. The Committee encourages the national social partners to disseminate the outcomes of the EU-project, especially the guide, through national events, social dialogue and health and safety structures and websites. The Committee will take stock of the activities carried out to that effect including any support that it can provide to favour a good dissemination.
2. The Committee will inform the European Commission of the project results to feed further into the ongoing review of the EU OSH legal framework and its emphasis on enforcement of existing rules. The Committee remains available to further cooperate on that topic in the future. It is also planned to discuss with OSHA the possibility to publish the project guide on their website
3. The Committee considers relevant the content of the multi-sectoral guidelines to prevent third party violence adopted in 2010 by EU social partners of different public and private sectors⁵. To mark its commitment towards a violence or harassment-free workplace, it will consider endorsing these guidelines in the course of 2018.
4. Lastly, building upon this project, the Committee has submitted a new social dialogue project to the Commission in the policy areas of work/life balance and digitalisation.

³ The EU agency for health and safety based in Bilbao

⁴ For TUNED see www.epsu.org and www.cesi.org and for EUPAE www.fonction-publique.gouv.fr/OSHPProject

⁵ See full text here <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=fr&catId=89&newsId=896&furtherNews=yes>