

Well-being and occupational safety

& health (OSH) in central government administrations:

tackling psychosocial risks at work

Background Study

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2017



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Introduction: what are psychosocial risks?

Changes in work in recent decades mean that more people are exposed to risks, such as stress, bullying, harassment and violence. In many countries these are described as “psychosocial risks”, and they are certainly present in central government.

The costs of psychosocial risks

The costs of psychosocial risks can be very substantial. For individuals, prolonged exposure to these risks is associated with a wide range of negative outcomes, from anxiety and depression to poor immune function and cardiovascular disease. For organisations, they can lead to increased absenteeism, worsened performance and, in some cases reputational damage. For society as a whole, the result is high numbers of days lost through sickness at a cost of billions across the EU.

Psychosocial risk factors

One of the earliest studies looking at psychosocial risks was published jointly by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 1984, and it identified six “psychosocial factors”, which may influence work performance, job satisfaction and ultimately health. Since then many national health and safety bodies have produced their own lists of the psychosocial factors, which potentially threaten workers’ health and well-being. The approaches in seven states are examined. Four states (France, Germany, Spain and Belgium) refer explicitly to psychosocial risk factors (“mental pressure” in the case of Germany), while three (the UK, Italy and Poland) talk about stress factors or stressors.

At European level, a 2010 report by Eurofound, the tripartite EU research agency on social and work-related issues, looked at how the issue was tackled across the EU. This approach was taken further in a joint report which Eurofound and the EU’s health and safety agency, EU-OSHA, produced in 2014. This examined the conditions considered to pose psychosocial risks to workers and, using the results of the fifth European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), carried out in 2010, it was able to show how these elements affected workers’ health and well-being

The extent to which psychosocial risk factors are present in central government

Looking at the five factors examined in the joint Eurofound / EU-OSHA report, it is clear these psychosocial risks are present in central government. Restructuring is seen found to be as one of the key concerns in the areas of **job content**, and this has been widespread across central government in recent years. An even more serious problem linked with job content is that employees are increasingly dealing with difficult service users and there are many services of central government where this is a major problem. Regarding **work intensity and autonomy**, there are certainly some areas where the amount of work may be excessive, although in the area of **working time and work life balance** central government appears to score better than other sectors of the economy. The picture is more mixed in the area of **the social environment at work**, a combination of support from colleagues, discrimination and what is known as “adverse social behaviour” – such as bullying, harassment and violence. However,

although support from colleagues may be above average, central government employees face higher levels of third party violence and abuse. Finally, in the area of job insecurity and career development, the high number of central government jobs which have been lost in some countries means that those working in central government can no longer be seen to have secure employment.

Another examination of the presence of psychosocial risk factors is provided by the Second **European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks** (ESENER-2), undertaken by EU-OSHA. This provides comprehensive results broken down by country, although, unfortunately, the figures relate to public administration, rather than just central government. Looking at seven risk factors, combined in a slightly different way to the joint Eurofound / EU-OSHA report, ESENER-2 found that six of the seven risks were more likely to be present in workplaces in public administration than in the economy as a whole. The most common risk was “having to deal with difficult customers, patients, pupils etc.”. There were significant differences between countries in how frequently these risk factors are present.

The ESENER figures relate to public administration but two separate national studies, which provide information on parts of central government in **France** and the whole of central government administration in **Sweden**, confirm the picture for those working in central government. In particular, both studies emphasise the fact that many workers in central government have faced conflicts with the public and had tense relations with users.

The framework for tackling psychosocial risks

This section sets out the context for tackling psychosocial risks, looking at existing legal protections, the range of institutional support that is available and the collective agreements that have been signed at different levels including the EU level. In each area, it first presents the situation at European level before looking at national examples.

Legal framework

There is a comprehensive body of EU health and safety legislation, with the Framework Directive 89/391/EEC at its core. Psychosocial risks are not specifically referred to in the Framework Directive, but they are implicitly covered. There is also other EU legislation on equality and discrimination which is relevant to tackling psychosocial risks relating to harassment or discrimination. All EU member states have transposed the Framework Directive into their national law, and a majority of EU members (19 out of 28) have gone further, including a reference to psychosocial risks, or some aspect of psychosocial risks in their national health and safety legislation. The details of the legislation are set out in the section along with information on the extent to which there are limits on their application in the public sector. All member states have also transposed EU legislation on equality and discrimination, and again some have gone further.

Support in tackling psychosocial risks

In every country there are a range of structures and individuals available to help employees and organisations tackle psychosocial risks. These include employee representatives, unions, health and safety experts, labour inspectors and others.

EU legislation guarantees rights to **employee representatives** in the area of health and safety, but the structures are determined by national legislation, and, as a result, there are important differences between countries.

The Framework Directive similarly refers to **health and safety experts**, workers carrying out “activities related to the protection and prevention of occupational risks”, but again the approaches taken to their role differ very substantially between states.

There is no European legislation on **labour inspectors** similar to the Framework Directive, although most EU member states have ratified ILO conventions on their use. However, despite this common ratification there are major differences at national level in the role and size of the labour inspectorates in the 28 member states.

Persons of confidence, whose role is to give support to fellow employees who have suffered violence, bullying or sexual harassment, are not provided for in EU-level legislation, and they are only found in some countries.

Negotiated collective agreements

There are two European Framework Agreements on psychosocial risks: the “Framework Agreement on Work-related Stress” (signed October 2004) and the “Framework Agreement on Violence and Harassment at Work” (signed April 2007). The two agreements are to be implemented by the signatory parties (unions and employers) and their respective national affiliates, rather than through an EU directive, and they have had an impact at national level.

National cross-industry agreements on both stress and violence and harassment at work have been reached in a number of countries, including France, Italy, Greece, Luxembourg, Romania, Spain and Slovenia, although not all countries have agreements on both topics. Collective agreements specifically for central government have also been signed in several countries, including Denmark, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden, although again not all countries have covered the whole range of psychosocial issues.

Tackling psychosocial risks

This section of the report looks at what is being done to tackle some of the most important psychosocial risks in central administration. With no consistent European-wide source of information available on this level of government, it relies on the results of EU-OSHA's 2014 ESENER survey, which provides information on public administration.

Assessing the risk

As with any other hazard, the first step in dealing with psychosocial risks is to assess what risks are present, and how prevalent and how serious they are. The ESENER survey shows that, across the EU, around three quarters (73%) of workplaces in public administration carry out regular risk assessments. On average a slightly higher proportion of assessments are carried out internally (47%) than externally (40%), with the remaining 13% split equally between the two. However, in this, as in other areas, there are major differences between countries, both in the proportion carrying out regular assessments and in who undertakes them.

These results relate to general risk assessments. To establish the extent to which psychosocial risks were included, the ESENER survey asked whether two issues, potentially linked to psychosocial risks – “supervisor-employee relationships” and “organisational aspects such as work schedules, breaks or work shifts” – were also assessed. The survey found a majority of risk assessments in public administration across the EU did include these issues, with 61% of establishments including organisational aspects in their risk assessments and 55% of establishments including supervisor-employee relationships.

Taking action

The ESENER survey provides some evidence that organisations find tackling psychosocial risks more difficult than tackling physical risks, as a higher proportion said they lacked information or tools to deal with psychosocial risks than said the same about physical risks. Public administration appears to face a particular difficulty in dealing with these risks.

On average, in public administration in the EU, only just over a quarter (28%) of establishments have an action plan to prevent work-related stress. Just over half of workplaces (51%) in public administration have a policy in place to deal with violence or abuse. However, this question was only asked in organisations where this was a problem so this figure is not comparable with other results in the ESENER survey.

Time pressure and excessive workloads were the second more frequently reported risk in public administration but the ESENER survey found that only a third of the public administration organisations (34%) had reorganised work in the last three years “to reduce job demands and work pressure” and so prevent psychosocial risks.

Almost half of the public administration organisations (47%) had a bullying and harassment procedure in place, while under a third (31%) had set up a conflict resolution procedure over the previous three years.

On average, 21% of public administration establishments had intervened in the previous three years if excessively long or irregular hours were being worked.

In public administration, on average across the EU, 41% of establishment provided training on “how to prevent psychosocial risks such as stress or bullying”, while 40% of establishments had used “confidential counselling for employees”.

National differences

The 11 separate indicators in this section of the report show there are great differences between EU countries in the action they are taking to tackle psychosocial risks. In general, the three Nordic countries, plus the UK and Ireland, are close to the top of most tables, often joined by the Netherlands and Malta. Countries in Central and Eastern Europe plus sometimes countries in Southern Europe are generally among those where action is less common. Germany, France, Italy and Spain are normally in the middle of the tables.

More information

www.epsu.org

www.cesi.org

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