

The Perception of Psychosocial Risk Factors among European Stakeholders

Keywords: perception of psychosocial risk factors, European stakeholders, work-related stress

Introduction

Work-related psychosocial risks concern aspects of the design and management of work and its social and organisational contexts that have the potential for causing psychological or physical harm. They have been identified as one of the major contemporary challenges for occupational health and safety and are linked to such workplace problems as work-related stress and workplace violence, harassment and bullying.

Various international organisations have set in motion initiatives in recent years to raise the level of awareness of psychosocial risks, work-related stress, workplace violence, harassment and bullying. For instance, in 1999 the European Parliament urged the European Commission to analyse new problems not covered by existing legislation, such as stress, fatigue and aggression. It also noted that psychosocial factors were, at that time, among the greatest health threats to workers.

The World Health Organization (WHO), more recently in its Ministerial Conference on Mental Health in 2005, stressed the importance of mental health and well being, and of prevention, treatment, care and rehabilitation for mental health problems, referring also to the workplace, and acknowledging the important role of research. European social partners have also taken action to tackle these issues by concluding two voluntary agreements on work-related stress (2004) and on harassment and violence at work (2007).

The Perception of Psychosocial Risk Factors and Work-related Stress in the EU

Little research has been conducted on the topic of perception of psychosocial risk factors up to now. However, two important surveys have highlighted a gap in the perceptions of stakeholders and workers. ISPEL investigated in 2004 the perception of work-related stress in three groups of stakeholders - employers, unions, and government institutions - in 12 EU candidate countries. The findings confirmed a gap and differences in perception between these groups as concerns the importance of work-related stress and psychosocial risks. This can have important implications for the translation of knowledge into strategies for the improvement of working conditions. In addition, findings from this survey were in line with those reported through the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions survey in 2007. These surveys found work-related stress to be one of the most commonly reported causes of illness by workers, affecting more than 40 million individuals across the EU. The 2007 Working Conditions survey showed that 6% of the workforce had been exposed to threats of physical violence, 4% to violence by other people and 5% to bullying and/or harassment at work over the past 12 months.

Aim

As part of the PRIMA-EF project, a survey of EU27 stakeholders including employers, trade unions and government institutions, was conducted to investigate their perceptions in relation to psychosocial risks and work-related stress. The survey included questions on the



perceived effectiveness and needs of European regulations as concerns psychosocial risk management and psychosocial risk perception and the role of social dialogue in this area. The survey was administered on-line and the sample included Board Members and Alternates of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, and other European occupational health and safety stakeholders.

This factsheet presents the main findings of the survey and can be used as a reference point by policy makers, social partners and experts.

Stakeholder Survey Results

The survey found that European legislation on the topic of health and safety at work (Directive 89/391) needs to be implemented more widely and effectively in relation to the assessment and management of psychosocial risks. The main barriers to its application are the low priority assigned to these risks, the complex and far from unanimous perception of them, the general lack of awareness, and the absence of agreement among the social partners.

Interesting results emerged from other European directives indirectly connected to the topic of psychosocial risks. These include Directives 90/270/EEC, 92/85/EEC, 93/104/EC and 96/34/EC. It was found that national-level application of these directives was much better. It is therefore clear that problems in applying Directive 89/391 are due mainly to the fact that it does not explicitly mention psychosocial risks and the lack of practical tools for managing them; other directives appear to have a more specific operational focus.

All stakeholders agreed that appropriate psychosocial risk assessment is essential for the prevention of work-related stress and this needs to include an evaluation of a number of areas (from employee reports, to company policies and systems). Occupational health and safety specialists have a crucial role to play in this respect and the need for specialised training programmes targeting graduates and health and safety professionals is particularly pressing.

At national level, respondents consider that work-related stress is insufficiently acknowledged and this perception was particularly higher among new EU27 stakeholders. Furthermore, only the employers' association considers the acknowledgement to be appropriate, while both trade unions and government institutions agree on the inadequacy of such acknowledgment. The main reasons for the perceived inadequacy of national schemes were a general lack of awareness about the problem, its low priority, limited specific policies and regulations, and a lack of appropriate tools for evaluating and managing psychosocial risks.

Stakeholders in each country considered psychosocial risks, work-related stress, mobbing, bullying and violence at work to be important concerns for workers. The main perceived causes of work-related stress were reported to be organisational culture, heavy workload, imbalance between home and work, lack of support at work and poor interpersonal relations in the workplace. The stakeholders also all agreed that on the European level more attention should be paid to issues related to changes in the labour market such as job insecurity, workforce migration and the eco-

conomic consequences of work-related stress. The whole sample agreed that stress can lead to illness and is a factor in increasing absenteeism, accidents and chronic illness, with negative repercussions on productivity.

As regards the respondents' perception of available support for the management of psychosocial risk factors in the form of infrastructures such as occupational health services at national and local levels, a general dissatisfaction was expressed. Stakeholders only acknowledged the importance of, and confidence they have in, support from independent experts.

More than half of the sample was familiar with the European agreement between the social partners regarding work-related stress. In addition, only a third of the respondents believed that it had any impact on actions taken to tackle the problem. Finally, most of the stakeholders acknowledged the importance of social dialogue but considered it unsatisfactory.

The survey brought to light a substantial difference between the old EU15 and the EU27 member states as regards the level of national awareness of psychosocial risks and work-related stress in relation to the importance of the issues. One possible explanation is that compared to the new EU member states, EU15 had already been exposed to these problems for more years and had more opportunity to put into action awareness schemes promoted by key organisations; an example is the European week for the prevention of work-related stress, set up by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work in 2002.

Way forward

Training and awareness raising

One of the key priorities identified by the results of the survey is awareness raising on psychosocial risks across the enlarged EU and across stakeholders. It is important that specific training programmes on psychosocial risk management are developed and promoted, for stakeholders, for occupational health and safety professionals and for health and safety inspectors.

Development of appropriate infrastructure and support

The survey results indicated that appropriate infrastructure for the management of psychosocial risks is lacking at national and local levels. This also applies to occupational health services provision. Due to the prevalence and impact of psychosocial risks, psychosocial risk management should represent a higher priority in national and international agendas and stakeholders must be made more aware of its importance. In addition psychosocial risk management tools and guidelines should be developed and their use should be promoted across the EU.

Addressing stakeholder perceptions and promoting social dialogue

Social dialogue is a useful form of communication among social partners (see also PRIMA-EF guidance sheet no. 4). It needs to be fostered at national and European level as a means of closing the gap in perception between the various stakeholders and facilitat-

ing action aimed at assessing, managing, and preventing psychosocial risks.

Scientific research

More scientific research on stakeholder perceptions and their impact on the development of policies and practices in psychosocial risk management is necessary. The findings of such research can be used to promote the effective translation of knowledge into policy and practice in the area of psychosocial risk management.

More Information

www.prima-ef.org

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