Safety and health at work is everyone's concern. It's good for you. It's good for business.

EN

European Agency for Safety and Health at Work

ESENER

Third European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER 2019)

How European workplaces manage safety and health

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Building on the two previous waves (2009 and 2014), the third European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER 2019) collected responses from 45,420 establishments across all business size classes and activity sectors in 33 countries, comprising the EU-27 as well as Iceland, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

ESENER is established as a leading monitoring tool for the management of occupational safety and health (OSH) in Europe. It is a go-to source for European and national policy-makers when key evidence is needed to inform policy-making or the approach to further research.[1]

These results are published at a time when there is a vital need to reinforce the approach to OSH management. The COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly transformed the working environment, demanding a re-evaluation of the risks that workers face and the adoption of measures tailored to new circumstances.

While the results cannot be interpreted as a clear indication of the extent of legal compliance, ESENER 2019 does provide insight into the steps and measures adopted to secure a safe working environment in establishments. The survey responses can be considered in the context of Council Directive 89/391/EEC of 12 June 1989 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at

work (also referred to as the European Framework Directive on Safety and Health at Work[2]) and supporting legislation that aims to encourage the introduction of measures to improve OSH – while recognising that OSH rules differ across countries, sectors and categories of workers. In line with this, the ESENER results aim to contribute to the Vision Zero approach to work-related deaths in the EU[3] by providing data that help increase risk awareness and ultimately support the enforcement of existing rules and guidelines.

The approach and scope of ESENER 2019 aligns mostly with that of ESENER 2014, providing the opportunity to measure longitudinal trends. Therefore, the results help spotlight any changing patterns over time in key areas such as awareness of health and safety risks, OSH management, including psychosocial risks, drivers of and barriers to OSH, and employee involvement. ESENER 2019, however, goes further in covering some new topics relevant to OSH management: these include digitalisation, perceptions of the quality of external preventive services, and evaluation of accidents or sickness absence.

The ESENER 2019 overview report focuses on complementing the evidence from ESENER with other primary and secondary data sources. It features chapters exploring the role of legislation in the development of OSH management (both as a driver and a potential barrier) and the impact of employee participation in OSH management. In order to do so a literature review and a legal mapping survey were conducted to gather information on key legal and policy features introduced nationally.

---

1   EU Strategic Framework on Healtety at Work (2021-2027): https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12673-Health-&-Safety-at-Work-EU-Strategic-Framework-2021-2027-_en
2   Framework Directive on Safety and Health at Work (Directive 89/391 EEC): https://osha.europa.eu/da/legislation/directives/the-osh-framework-directive/1
3   https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0323&from=EN

Moreover, 11 interviews were conducted with EU-OSHA focal points[4] to help interpret the results and shed light on the role of legislation as a driver of and barrier to compliance.

Moreover, the ESENER 2019 overview report follows the approach taken by prior ESENER data analyses in comparing results by country, sector and establishment size. In addition, regression analyses were conducted to explore factors that predict the adoption of OSH management measures, by assessing the strength of the relationships between different ESENER variables. As expected, the results confirm that when the right OSH management approaches are introduced, establishments are more likely to take steps to secure a safer working environment.

Key findings and policy pointers

ESENER findings show a divergence on the focus on the different types of risks and the measures adopted, which can be linked to a great extent to the size of the establishment, the activity sector and the country.

The results highlight the need for better OSH, considering the technological changes in the economy, the growing focus on the importance of the psychosocial work environment in supporting overall well-being and productivity, and in light of the COVID-19 pandemic that resulted in transformed working practices, some of which are likely to remain. Moreover, risks around the management of OSH are likely to intensify with, for example, the expansion of supply chains to include smaller organisations that have comparatively more informal working practices and allocation of responsibilities, and the introduction of novel business models.

To that end, it is pertinent to reflect on some of the key challenges identified. ESENER 2019 confirmed that risks potentially resulting in MSDs are among the most highly identified. 'Repetitive hand or arm movements' and 'prolonged sitting' are recognised by around 60 % of establishments – and this acknowledgement is growing. Yet, paradoxically, the use of measures to 'improve working lives', including the introduction of 'ergonomic equipment', decreased slightly between 2014 and 2019.

Multivariate analyses showed that the identification of safety, ergonomic and chemical risks and the use of OSH services by the establishments are correlated. This suggests that the level of awareness of risks may be enhanced by using such services. Risk identification also improves if establishments have appointed a health and safety representative.

Policy pointer

Increasing awareness of health and safety and new and emerging risks continues to be necessary, especially among micro and small enterprises (MSEs). Large companies would benefit from greater awareness of the OSH risks of their supply chain and its relationship with their own reputation. Awareness-raising of risks should be linked to signposting of support and examples of concrete actions that can mitigate risks. Linking risk awareness and OSH management to the relevant legal obligations could help promote positive responses. Risk awareness can improve if employee representatives are engaged in OSH management activities and worker involvement is promoted.

Psychosocial risks, in particular 'having to deal with difficult customers, patients and pupils', also remain a key risk factor for many establishments. While respondents to ESENER may consider 'external persons' to be the most significant problem, the internal methods of working are surprisingly less frequently acknowledged, for example 'long or irregular working hours' and 'poor communication or cooperation within the organisation'.

Establishments in the EU-27 do not seem to prioritise psychosocial risk management in their OSH management systems. Between 2014 and 2019 there has not been an increase in measures to manage psychosocial risks in workplaces, such as the reorganisation of work, or interventions if excessively long hours are worked. However, more workplaces have reported procedures to deal with bullying or harassment, with possible cases of threats, abuse and assaults by external persons, as well as action plans to prevent work-related stress.

Multivariate analyses showed that employee involvement and legal obligations as a reason to manage OSH are correlated with a higher number of reported psychosocial risks, confirming that those two factors are crucial in risk identification and addressing mitigating measures. It is worth noting that the country context is critical in the identification of psychosocial risks, pointing to the importance of national legal frameworks and culture.

Policy pointer

Establishments would benefit from a stronger focus on the psychosocial working environment. Where relevant, labour inspectorates can play a role in ensuring coverage of the psychosocial working environment during visits to establishments.

Professional advice, encouraging adoption of key measures, and methods of engaging employees will likely enhance psychosocial risk management in establishments.

---

4   National focal points: https://osha.europa.eu/en/about-eu-osha/national-focal-points

The results of ESENER 2019 suggest that Framework Directive 89/391/EEC has maintained the foundations for OSH management. As with the results of prior waves, about three-quarters of EU-27 establishments conduct risk assessments regularly. This implies that the approach is well established on the whole and has potentially provided a stable approach in securing a safer working environment.

However, while most large organisations conduct risk assessments regularly, smaller organisations, especially micro establishments, are less likely to do so. Use of less formalised OSH management practices in smaller organisations is common across the ESENER results, suggesting that there are alternative ways (in some cases, weaknesses) in the management of the working environment for establishments of this size.

Inevitably, since completion of fieldwork of ESENER 2019 a further concern is the possible OSH management response to the recent transformation of the working environment under COVID-19, given that a quarter of companies reported not conducting risk assessments regularly. The main reason given for not conducting risk assessments was that the 'risks are already known': this was most frequently mentioned by establishments in sectors facing serious health and safety risks such as mining and quarrying, and agriculture, fishing and forestry. Moreover, many risk assessments do not entirely cover all relevant work premises such as homes, nor all persons at risk from hazards in the working environment.

The multivariate analysis showed that the chance for regular risk assessment increases when a health and safety representative is present in the establishment. To improve coverage of workplaces at home in regular risk assessments, it is also important that employees be involved in OSH measures' implementation – this shows that employees play a key 'bottom-up' function in ensuring the completeness of OSH management activities.

Policy pointer

To improve the health and safety culture, the focus must be on establishments that do not conduct risk assessments regularly. Challenging the notion that the 'risks are already known' is key to changing behaviours.

The OSH response to COVID-19 should be used to further embed the practice of regular risk assessments in organisations, and to ensure that all relevant locations and persons at risk are in scope.

The primary suggestion for improving OSH management (such as covering all workplaces in risk assessments), is to broaden employee involvement, for example through the presence of health and safety representatives or the involvement of employees in the design of measures following risk assessments.

The establishments' methods of employee participation not only help identify risks, but also support the adoption of appropriate measures to mitigate risks.

By comparing the findings of previous waves, ESENER 2019 has shown that there has been less engagement with public institutions as regards OSH. This is demonstrated through the reduction in inspectorate visits across the EU-27, and in the retreat in obtaining advice from inspectorates and official OSH institutions. Hopefully, since the COVID-19 pandemic, establishments have taken advantage of the updated guidance and other support offered by inspectorates and other public organisations.

Policy pointer

The ESENER 2019 results are relevant to policy discussions concerning the future scope of inspection regimes. Many organisations do not complete risk assessments regularly, especially MSEs, and sectors that may be considered as having low safety risks are sometimes less committed and introduce fewer measures. The benefits of providing advice alongside checks of compliance are likely to promote risk identification and foster health and safety cultures.

Reassuringly, in terms of the level of commitment shown across the EU-27, there has been a slight increase to over 60 % in top management discussions on OSH, and to about 70 % of establishments where team leaders or line managers continue to receive training. Yet, it is a concern that the 'persons most knowledgeable about OSH' in establishments as selected for interview under ESENER are now less likely to receive training, and OSH is discussed regularly in team meetings only in about a third of establishments.

Multivariate analysis highlighted the importance of OSH commitment. The regular discussion on health and safety issues at top management level, as well as the training on managing health and safety in their teams undertaken by team leaders and line managers are positively related to the adoption of other OSH practices, such as regular risk assessments and the appointment of a health and safety representative.

Policy pointer

The commitment to OSH needs to be strengthened to enhance day-to-day management. Top management should be engaged on ways they can develop more dynamic safety cultures, for example, through regular team discussions on OSH. There is a risk of the person who knows most about OSH in the establishment becoming less qualified; promotion of training generally needs to be far better established.

As expected, digital technologies are a key feature of the EU-27 workplace, with 86 % of companies confirming use of personal computers at fixed workplaces, and 77 % of laptops. It should be stressed that there are further technologies with potential OSH risks in use (albeit to a much lower extent), such as systems controlling the content or pace of work, the monitoring of worker performance, and wearable devices and robots that may interact with workers. These trends in use may not have been fully captured by ESENER 2019, considering the rapid transition to home working and remote monitoring of staff since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

However, in 2019, only about a quarter of companies discussed the OSH impact of such technologies in the workplace.

Policy pointer

OSH management clearly needs to stay apace with digitalisation trends, given the likely risks for the working environment. This is also pertinent considering the significant transition to home working and adoption of new business models. Clearly, OSH services, guidance and inspections can play a role in alerting establishments of their duties to ensure a safe work environment.

Multivariate analysis also showed that employee representation (health and safety representatives) plays a role in the discussion of possible impacts of digital technologies. Therefore, engaging employees directly can also be a good solution for managing emerging digital risks.

Complying with OSH legal obligations can be challenging for some organisations; the complexity of OSH rules was considered a key barrier in fulfilling OSH duties for about 40 % of establishments, but there are remarkable differences across countries.

Simplification of OSH rules may not be possible if it reduces the possibility to effectively control all risks in the working environment. Therefore, solutions are needed to support establishments to fulfil their obligations, especially micro and small organisations. Among other things, this could include online risk assessment procedures, guidance, OSH advice and helplines.

Policy pointer

Methods to facilitate OSH management should be viewed as key in boosting compliance, especially for MSEs, for example online methods designed to allow users to complete risk assessments and update them as needed, such as OiRA (Online Interactive Risk Assessment).