

Managing psychosocial risks in European micro and small enterprises:

Qualitative evidence from the Third European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER 2019)

Report

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Table of Contents

List of Figures and Tables	4
1 Introduction	5
1.1 Main objectives of the study	5
1.2 Methodological summary.....	5
2 Overview of national regulatory approaches related to psychosocial risks.....	7
2.1 Key legal requirements and legislative framework in relation to psychosocial risk management.....	7
2.2 Key policy objectives and approaches to psychosocial risk prevention at work	8
2.3 Inspection regimes.....	11
2.4 Training on psychosocial risks.....	13
2.5 Public awareness campaigns	13
2.6 Collective bargaining initiatives	14
2.7 Worker representation	15
3 Psychosocial risks identified through fieldwork	16
3.1 Psychosocial risks identified through the interviews.....	16
3.2 Awareness of obligations to manage psychosocial risks	20
4 Management of psychosocial risks.....	23
4.1 Specific psychosocial risk management measures.....	23
4.2 Factors shaping the introduction of measures to address psychosocial risks	27
4.3 Dedicated resources and worker participation	29
4.4 Managing psychosocial risks – main drivers and barriers.....	30
5 Summative analysis of results	32
5.1 Typology of establishments	32
5.2 Sentiment analysis.....	35
6 Conclusions and learning points.....	38
7 References	42

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Introduction of action plans to reduce work-related stress (% of establishments with 20-49 workers)	10
Figure 2: Measures for psychosocial risks used in establishments of 5-9 workers (% of establishments)	10
Figure 3: Measures for psychosocial risks used in establishments of 10-49 workers (% of establishments)	11
Figure 4: Establishments reported being visited by the labour inspectorate in the last 3 years – by company size (% of establishments)	12
Figure 5: Health and safety representatives in MSEs by country (% of establishments)	16
Figure 6: Overview of internal and external factors related to establishment types: ‘uninitiated’ & ‘early learners’	33
Figure 7: Distribution of polarity scores per question	37
Figure 8: Mean polarity score per question	38
Table 1: Fieldwork sample.....	6
Table 2: Establishment-level factors	33
Table 3: Country-level factors.....	34
Table 4: Overview of questions selected for sentiment analysis.....	36

1 Introduction

1.1 Main objectives of the study

The main objective of this study was to examine how companies, and in particular micro and small enterprises (MSEs) manage psychosocial risks to better understand what works in managing these risks. The more specific aims of this study were to:

- Complement the Third European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER 2019) survey results by producing additional information that helps explore the ways in which psychosocial risk management is organised in MSEs and the reasons and motivations for this, including what works.
- Provide information, as far as possible, about how psychosocial risk management is shaped by the context in which establishments operate. This can include elements such as national context, economic factors and job-related issues.
- Help define typologies of establishments according to the way psychosocial risks are managed at workplace level.

1.2 Methodological summary

- To achieve these objectives, the study employed the methodology set out below.
- Six EU Member States were selected to study in depth: Denmark, Germany, Spain, Croatia, the Netherlands and Poland. This selection was based on aspects such as an assessment of the policy environment in each country, performance of companies in each country in terms of stress management actions and policy, and a number of pragmatic factors such as the number of MSEs in each country.

1.2.1 National context papers

For each of these six countries, a paper was developed in order to set out the national regulatory context for the management of psychosocial risks and describe the main national policy approaches relevant to encouraging the uptake of psychosocial risk management measures by companies. These national context papers are structured around the following main sections:

- Key policy strategies relating to occupational safety and health (OSH) and psychosocial risk management and details of main evaluation reports in relation to psychosocial risk management in companies in each country.
- Key legal requirements and recent legislative proposals and revisions.
- Psychosocial risk management policy objectives, targets, and monitoring and evaluation approaches.
- Inspection regime for MSEs with a focus on psychosocial risk management.
- Specific policy initiatives targeting MSEs and the management of psychosocial risks.

In addition, the national context papers include an analysis of key variables from the ESENER 2019 data and other sources. These national context papers form the basis for the six independent country reports, which complement this main report.

1.2.2 Fieldwork

To gain insights into the actual practice of how MSEs manage psychosocial risk in the six countries, the study carried out a programme of qualitative fieldwork in these countries. In each country, researchers conducted 40 interviews, with the initial aim to interview a manager and a worker from 20 establishments in each country. The interviews were carried out on the basis of an agreed interview guide, which was translated into the national language of each country. The topics covered by the interviews, based on relevant questions in the ESENER survey, were as follows:

- The links between psychosocial risk management and overall management commitment to OSH.
- Awareness level of psychosocial risk factors and obligation to manage them.
- The extent of psychosocial risk management measures and procedures in place.
- The extent of dedicated resources and the degree of worker participation.
- Barriers and drivers to psychosocial risk management in MSEs and what support they would need, including the availability and quality (if used) of external expertise and guidance.
- The links between workplace culture, productivity, absenteeism and presenteeism and approaches to psychosocial management.

After a briefing of the fieldwork team, piloting took place in the autumn of 2020 and the main fieldwork stage began in November 2020. Companies were contacted by the fieldwork team, using a list of company contacts from the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) who had responded to ESENER 2019 and had indicated that they were happy to be recontacted for further research.

The fieldwork team made uneven progress in countries, due mainly to the impact of COVID-19. To mitigate this impact, the fieldwork period was also extended until April 2021. Further, in agreement with EU-OSHA, the team agreed on two specific flexibility measures in order to support the completion of the fieldwork in all countries. Firstly, when all available ESENER addresses had been used, researchers widened the search and included companies that did not participate in ESENER. This was carried out using an agreed strategy that aimed to minimise any possible selection bias (for example, the researchers were able to approach contacts from previous research, but the researchers would not interview anyone who was a friend or any family members). Further, in some countries, although the total number of interviews was the required 40, often it was not possible to obtain a worker's and manager's interview from the same company. When interpreting the findings it is therefore important to have in mind that the establishments that participated in the research are probably among the better performers, especially the micro enterprises.

Details of the fieldwork sample are presented in the table below.

Table 1: Fieldwork sample

Country	Company fieldwork: 2 interviews	Company fieldwork: 1 interview	Total interviews
Denmark	19	4	42
Germany	15	10	40
Spain	14	17	45
Croatia	20	1	41
The Netherlands	12	17	41
Poland	21	3	45

Using the data gathered from the fieldwork, the team developed six country reports, which offer insights into psychosocial risk management in MSEs in these countries. These six country reports are independent reports that complement this main report.

1.2.3 Establishment typology and sentiment analysis

Once the fieldwork had been carried out, research and analysis were carried out to classify establishments according to a general typology framework considering their stage of development around management of psychosocial risks. Details of this analysis can be found in Chapter 5 of this report.

Sentiment analysis was used to explore the linguistic content of the interview feedback from the 153 establishments studied. Sentiment analysis is a natural language processing (NLP) method used to determine whether qualitative information is emotionally positive, negative or neutral. Sentiment analysis is often performed on textual data to help businesses monitor brand or product sentiment in customer feedback.¹

Sentiment analysis was used to explore two dimensions: the polarity of the feedback, that is, whether the answers contained messages that could be labelled as 'positive' or 'negative'; and primary emotions, namely joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness, anticipation, anger and disgust.

The intention for this project was to use sentiment analysis to explore whether:

1. The polarity of the worker-only feedback is more positive or negative when compared to manager-only feedback. This was carried out by considering the separate manager feedback, worker feedback and common feedback (that is, similarities between the feedback between managers and workers) per question.
2. Certain questions are associated with particular types of emotional responses that may shed light on the establishment context.

In total, 10 questions were selected for analysis. For details, see Chapter 5 of this report.

2 Overview of national regulatory approaches related to psychosocial risks

This chapter provides a brief contextual comparison of the OSH legal and policy landscape that is relevant to psychosocial risk management in the six countries studied. This chapter focuses on the key legal requirements and policy objectives related to psychosocial risks in each of the six countries in this study, existing inspection regimes, information about the training on offer in terms of psychosocial risks, public awareness campaigns, collective bargaining initiatives that are relevant for the management of psychosocial risks, and worker representation arrangements in respect of OSH.

2.1 Key legal requirements and legislative framework in relation to psychosocial risk management

In the context of OSH in general, all EU Member States are governed by the EU OSH regulatory framework and implement the provisions of the relevant directives into their own national legislation. However, the legal provisions in place in relation to the management of psychosocial risk in the six countries studied vary considerably. In **Croatia**, two legal regulations refer to psychosocial risks. The Occupational Health and Safety Act (Article 51) states that if there are indications of stress at work or in relation to work, the employer is obliged to pay special attention to factors such as the organisation of work, working conditions and the working environment, communication within the organisation, and a range of subjective factors, such as social pressure and perceived lack of support. Further, the ordinance on protection of workers exposed to statodynamic, psychophysiological and other exertions at work (Article 13) states that employers are obliged to assess psychosocial risks as part of a risk assessment.

In **Spain**, at present, there is mention of risks related to the organisation of work, the conditions under which work is performed, social relations and the influence of environmental factors at the workplace, in Law 31/1995 of 8 November on the prevention of occupational risks. However, the Spanish legislation does not provide a specific distinction between the physical and psychological conditions of the working environment. Despite the lack of a legal definition of psychosocial risks, however, jurisprudence has recognised that the broad character of these regulations and definitions allows for the applicability of the Spanish legislation to all types of occupational risks. Significantly, according to the Spanish National Institute for Safety and Health at Work (INSST, Instituto Nacional de Seguridad y Salud en el Trabajo),

¹ Sentiment analysis has been used extensively to indicate correlation between brand sentiment and company share price, and news content and GDP growth, and so on.

the rights and obligations contained in Chapter III of the Law on Prevention of Occupational Risks are directly applicable to the area of psychosocial risks.

In **Denmark**, legal requirements to manage the psychosocial working environment have featured in the country's Working Environment Act since first adopted. In 2013, an amendment made the 'physical' and 'psychological' working environment distinct dimensions that individually require recognition, approaches and actions to ensure their effective management. The Danish Strategy of 2019 on Working Environment proposed a new Executive Order focusing specifically on the psychological working environment. For more details, see section 2.2. A political agreement from 2020 sets new national goals for OSH initiatives. There are four new national targets, one of these being that the psychosocial working environment should be safe and healthy and that fewer staff should be exposed to significant psychological working environment problems. As part of the agreement, the social partners are in the process of setting targets that are more specific at sector level.

In **Germany**, the 1996 Occupational Health and Safety Act (*Arbeitsschutzgesetz*, *ArbSchG*) was amended in 2013 to explicitly state that employers must conduct a risk assessment that includes psychosocial risks. It also states that measures that are implemented to follow up on risk assessments have to consider both physical and mental health.

In **the Netherlands**, when work is psychosocially demanding to the extent that it forms a risk to employees' mental wellbeing, employers are required by Dutch labour law to mitigate these risks as much as possible. For example, employers are required to conduct a risk assessment and to evaluate whether company policy minimises psychosocial risks and other risks relating to the working environment. As psychosocial risks are seen to be increasing in the Netherlands, there has been a specific policy focus in this area in the recent past. For example, in 1998, the Dutch Senate adopted an additional section of the general labour law² that focuses on psychosocial risk. This includes disproportionate workloads, bullying, aggression, violence, (sexual) harassment, intimidation, discrimination, work-related depression, burnout and post-traumatic stress disorder (Vollandis, 2018). The section requires employers to develop and implement a company policy, which should address psychosocial risks and should aim to raise awareness among workers.

In **Poland**, management of psychosocial risks is governed by the 1997 Labour Code and the corresponding Ministerial Order issued by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy in September 1997. Some articles of the Labour Code, for example, 15, 78-86 and 129, define and regulate several areas crucial for maintaining a healthy psychosocial environment, such as working conditions, time and wages. Several provisions revolve around the issue of psychosocial health. For example, under Article 16, an employer shall, according to their abilities, satisfy the social and cultural needs of an employee. Moreover, the Labour Code prohibits mobbing and discrimination, stating that an employee who has experienced mobbing has a right to claim damages and seek financial compensation from the employer. However, although employers are obliged to counteract mobbing, their duty in this regard remains unregulated. The Labour Code does not impose any particular responsibilities on employers in terms of counteractions, such as anti-mobbing training and awareness-raising activities, or special units to whom mobbed employees could report. The Labour Code does not provide any further preventive measures other than informing employees on legal regulations concerning equal treatment.

2.2 Key policy objectives and approaches to psychosocial risk prevention at work

There is a range of initiatives in some of the countries studied that focus on psychosocial risk management. Many are contained in overarching national strategies, which are evolving to respond to psychosocial risks and emerging risks in this area. Overall, it seems that in the majority of countries studied for this research project, there is increasing emphasis on psychosocial risks in national policy. In **Denmark**, for example, the 2019 national OSH strategy focuses on six main priorities, of which two focus explicitly on psychosocial risks: more sector-oriented inspection campaigns, with a focus on burnout and fatigue; and new tools for psychosocial working environment initiatives. The context for this is that the 2011 Danish national OSH strategy introduced the key target of reducing the number of

² In Dutch, the *Arbowet*.

psychologically overloaded workers by 20% from 2012 to 2020. However, this target was not met by 2018 and workers who suffer from psychological strain, symptoms of stress and depression actually increased by 6.2% from 2012 to 2018 (Danish Working Environment Authority, 2020).

Germany's Joint OSH Strategy 2013-2018 included as one of its key objectives to improve the protection of work-related mental health, implemented by the work programme 'Psyche: Reducing stress – develop potentials'. The current strategy, which runs from 2019 to 2024, indicates that understanding of psychosocial risks has grown, possibly as a result of the 'Psyche' work programme. In the current period, all psychosocial risk factors are considered rather than mental load only. Accordingly, the 'Psyche' work programme has been developed further, and will reach out in particular to MSEs. It will also develop recommendations on how to ensure appropriate workplace designs to counter stress, such as requirements for design processes, actions and practical examples.

In addition to the regulatory framework governing OSH, in 2018, the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment initiated the programme 'Fair, Healthy and Safe Work', which aims to incentivise employers to provide and maintain good employment practices. This would include, for example, offering appropriate remuneration or providing a safe working environment in which OSH risks are reduced. The programme focuses on prevention and stimulating risk mitigation behaviour among employees.

In **Poland**, the policy framework around psychosocial risk is contained in the Multiannual National Programme 'Improvement of safety and working conditions'. This programme has been running since 2008, with stage 5 (2020-2022) being currently implemented (Central Institute for Labour Protection – National Research Institute, n.d.). The main objectives of the programme are to design innovative organisational and technical solutions aimed at the development of human resources, and – at the same time – the development of technologies that would lead to minimising the number of workers working in hazardous or harmful conditions. The programme's psychosocial risk actions target a number of groups: employers, workers, OSH and human resources specialists, psychologists and other professionals. Preparatory work is currently being carried out for the next stage of the programme, which will run from 2023 to 2025. A number of projects are intended to cover emerging psychosocial risks connected with new forms of employment, increasing job insecurity, social isolation, digitalisation and automation of work processes, increased cognitive workload and increasing time pressure.³ Additionally, the Ministry of Economic Development, Labour and Technology anticipates organising research projects on the changing structure, emergence and disappearance of professions, in order to address emerging psychosocial risks stemming from work automation.⁴

Spain's 2015-2020 National Strategy aimed to develop and disseminate methodologies for the evaluation of psychosocial risks, enabling better knowledge and prevention of these risks. This has been realised in two action plans. Firstly, in the action plan 2015-2016, basic guidelines for the management of psychosocial risks, placing special emphasis on small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs), were prepared. Secondly, under the action plan 2019-2020, the guidelines for the management of psychosocial risks were disseminated.

2.2.1 Key findings from ESENER 2019

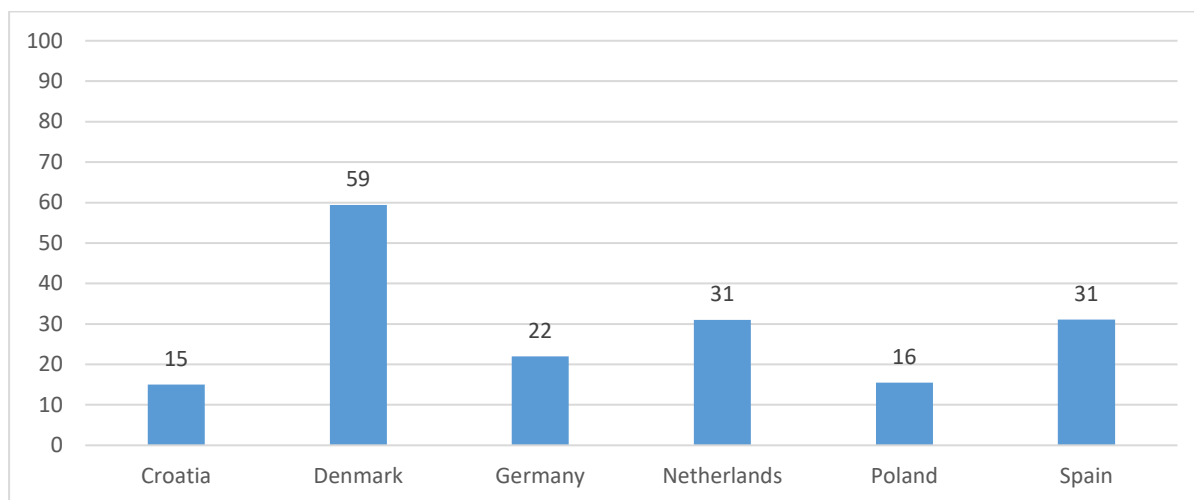
From the ESENER 2019 data, the main psychosocial risk identified by companies of all size classes is 'Having to deal with difficult customers, patients, pupils, etc.' In some countries, such as Poland, MSEs were more likely to report this as the main psychosocial risk than larger companies were. In a few countries, the main psychosocial risk reported by MSEs differed from the overall results. In Denmark, the main risk reported by MSEs was time pressure, and in the Netherlands, the main risk reported was also time pressure, followed by dealing with difficult customers, patients and pupils.

In terms of action plans to reduce work-related stress, the percentage of companies with between 20 and 49 workers that had these in place varied between country, from over 59% in Denmark to 15% in Croatia and 15.5% in Poland. For details, see Figure 1 .

³ E-mail correspondence with the Ministry of Economic Development, Labour and Technology, dated 18 May 2021. On file with the authors of the report.

⁴ Ibidem.

Figure 1: Introduction of action plans to reduce work-related stress (% of establishments with 20-49 workers)

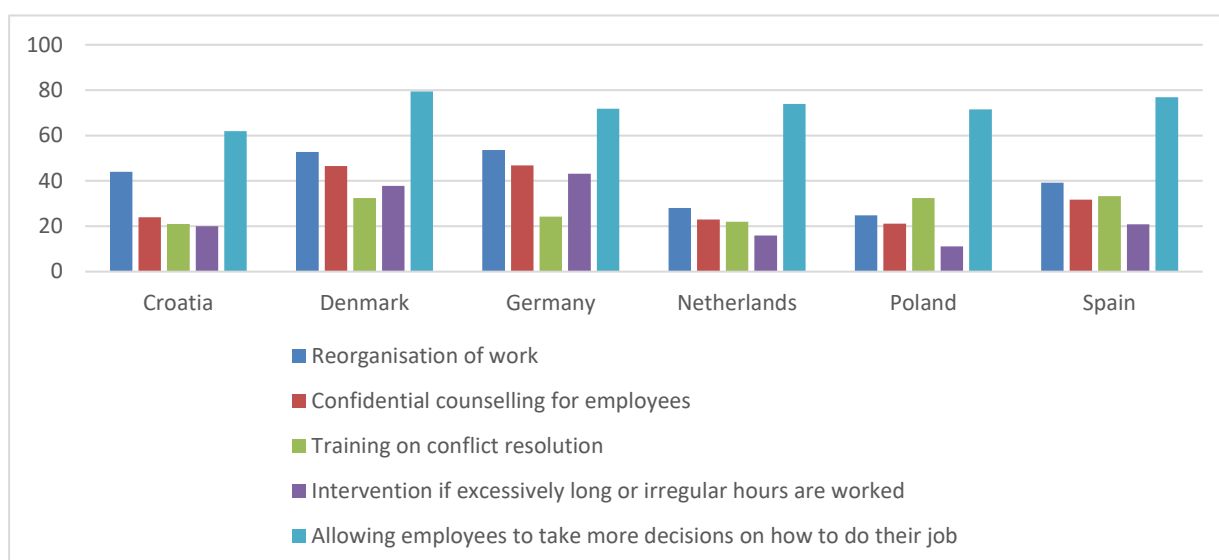


Source: ESENER 2019

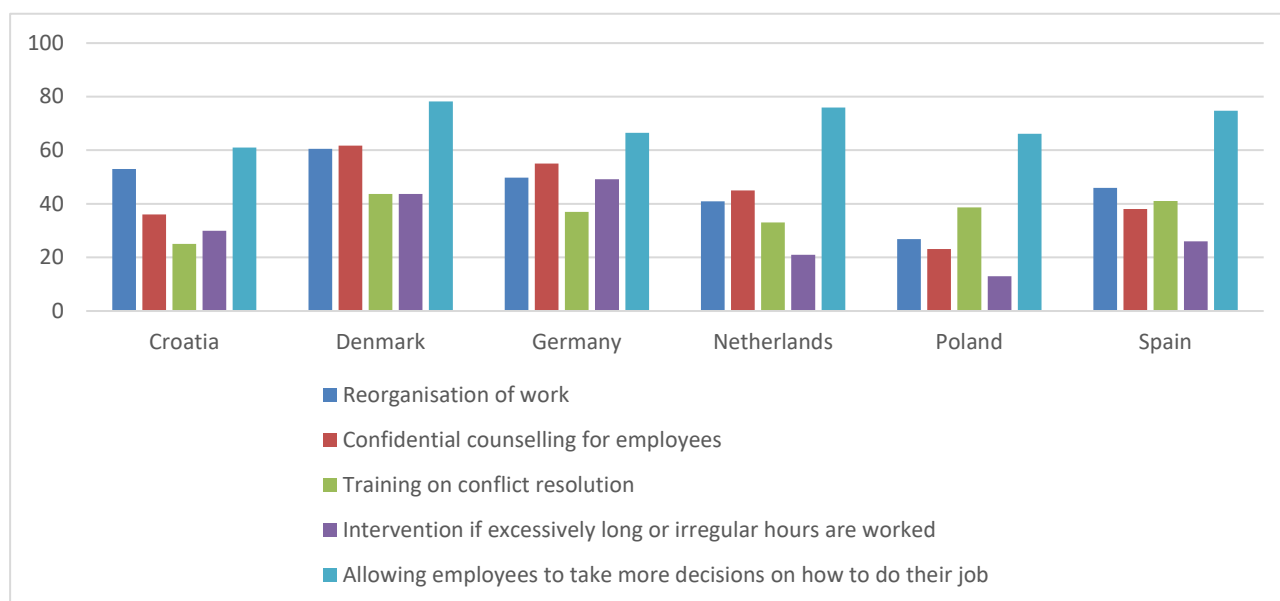
The incidences of company procedures that deal with violence by external persons and procedures that deal with bullying and harassment generally increased in most countries between ESENER 2014 and ESENER 2019. The likelihood of companies having procedures in place for both bullying and harassment and external violence increases with company size. However, there are also differences between countries, ranging from just over 30% in the case of bullying and harassment and just over 40% in the case of external threats in Germany, to 72% in the case of bullying and harassment and 73% in the case of external threats in the Netherlands.

In terms of measures to prevent psychosocial risks, the most commonly reported measure in all countries is allowing workers to take more decisions on how to do their job, followed by reorganisation of work. However, in Germany and the Netherlands, the provision of confidential counselling for workers was the second most common option for small companies. In Poland, training on conflict resolution was the second most common option for both micro and small companies. For details, see Figure 2 for micro establishments and Figure 3 for small establishments. These figures are presented separately by company size for ease of reading.

Figure 2: Measures for psychosocial risks used in establishments of 5-9 workers (% of establishments)



Source: ESENER 2019

Figure 3: Measures for psychosocial risks used in establishments of 10-49 workers (% of establishments)


Source: ESENER 2019

2.3 Inspection regimes

Inspection regimes vary in the countries studied, and often depend on company size and can be targeted to specific sectors. In some countries, such as Germany, a decrease in the overall number of inspections has been experienced in recent years, attributed to factors such as the increasing complexity of inspections and lack of resources, as set out in the accompanying national reports for these countries.

Many countries, such as **Croatia**, report that inspections are carried out more frequently in the case of larger companies. In terms of the focus, in many of the six countries analysed for this study, inspections focus on ensuring that legal OSH compliance is being fulfilled, rather than focusing on issues that may support the management of psychosocial risks. For more details, see the accompanying national report on Croatia.

In **Denmark**, the labour inspectorate chooses enterprises based on different selection methods informed by a risk profile approach⁵ that covers establishments of different sizes. In 2020, it carried out inspections specially focused on psychosocial risks. However, the enterprises chosen for these inspections were larger organisations with specific challenges, including hospitals, schools and enterprises in the care sector.

In **Germany**, while there are no specific inspection regimes for MSEs, the accident insurance companies offer advice and support that is specifically geared towards the needs and circumstances of MSEs. In terms of psychosocial risks specifically in Germany, under the 'Psyche' work programme as mentioned above, inspectors have received training to identify psychosocial risks in the workplace and advise employers of their duties especially concerning risk assessments. However, there may be some gaps in compliance. A recent quantitative study by Beck and Lenhardt (2019)⁶ provided empirical evidence on the extent to which employers comply with these obligations. The study found large deficiencies in the implementation of psychosocial risk assessments, especially for MSEs.⁷

⁵ The WEA has profiled different sectors and special risks that will be used to choose enterprises for inspections. For example, the list includes schools with a special focus on psychosocial risks and slaughterhouses with a focus on ergonomics. See: [Brancherettede tilsyn - Arbejdstilsynet \(at.dk\)](#)

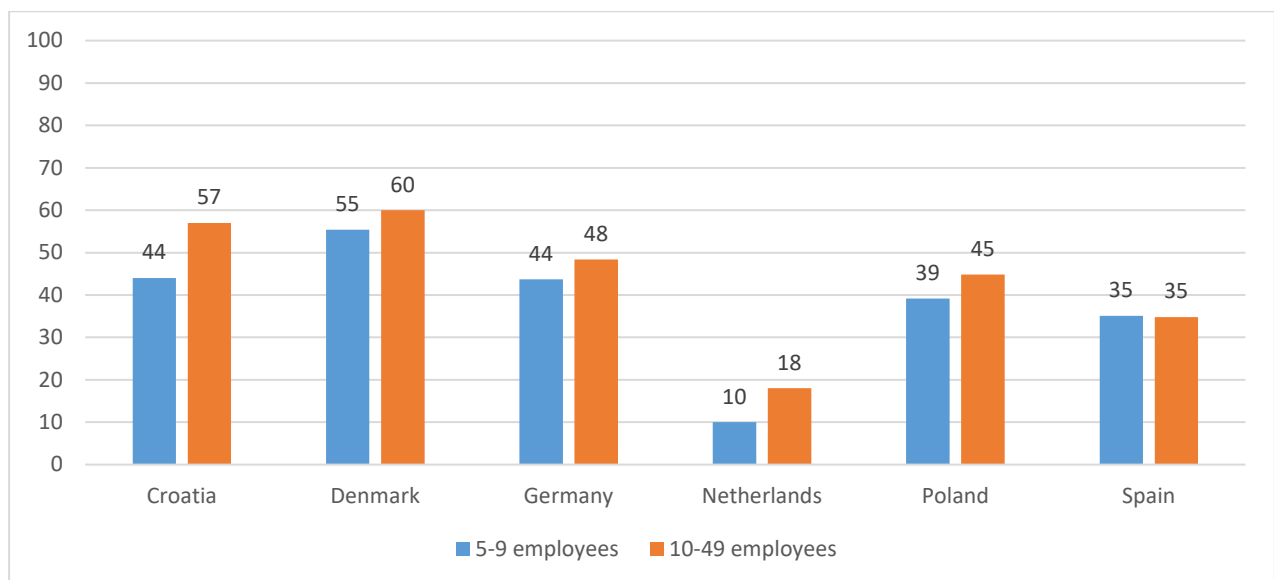
⁶ Methods used: Survey data from 6,500 German companies were used to calculate the prevalence of workplace risk assessments that include psychosocial factors. Furthermore, multinomial logistic regressions were performed to explore which company characteristics influence the chance of psychosocial risk assessment occurrence.

⁷ The findings suggest that enhancing companies' utilisation of professional OSH experts and strengthening the advisory and control capacities of the OSH inspection authorities in the area of psychosocial risks would be beneficial for improving the

In **Poland**, the inspection regime concerns legal aspects of working conditions, including safety and health regulations. Inspections are delivered predominantly on the district level by the labour inspectorate and can be initiated at any time, without prior notice. Usually, companies tend to be notified, which provides them with time to prepare. Visits can be initiated by employees or can be part of a prevention programme. On psychosocial risks specifically, several measures can be taken by labour inspectorates. However, these do not lead to any obligatory actions that need to be taken by the employer. During an inspection, the labour inspectorate can invite employees to fill in an anonymous survey. The survey is designed to provide information on the extent of psychosocial risks (mainly stress) that employees are exposed to in the workplace. The survey results can be communicated to the employer, with non-obligatory recommendations to introduce changes or an invitation to participate in appropriate thematic training. These focus on advice, recommendations, and counselling. This is much more limited compared with other areas such as contracts, where the labour inspectorate has several tools and actions available.

From the ESENER 2019 data, it is also clear that larger companies are inspected more often than their smaller counterparts, although, overall, total visits have decreased. In terms of the percentage of MSEs inspected, this varies, according to ESENER 2019 data, as illustrated in Figure 4. In all countries included in this research, except Spain, inspections are more common in small companies than micro companies. There are significant variations by country as well, with inspections lowest in the Netherlands and highest in Denmark and Croatia.

Figure 4: Establishments reported being visited by the labour inspectorate in the last 3 years – by company size (% of establishments)



Source: ESENER 2019

In terms of reasons for compliance, the ESENER 2019 data show that in most countries the main reason to address health and safety was the fulfilment of legal obligations and to avoid fines from the labour inspectorate. The least cited reason was to increase productivity. This would seem to suggest that there is a lack of awareness of the connection between workers’ health and safety and overall productivity in all countries.

Denmark is an outlier, since for Danish companies the most commonly selected reason for addressing OSH was meeting expectations from workers, which reflects the flat hierarchies and strong union and worker involvement in the Danish work culture. Although company size does not seem to be a main indicator that influences employers’ motivation to address OSH in Denmark, smaller companies seem

current situation. These suggestions have been taken up by the working group of the current work programme of the GDA (in more detail under 2.4).

to be more influenced by potential fines from the labour inspectorate, probably due to their comparative lack of resources.

2.4 Training on psychosocial risks

Although general OSH training tends not to include psychosocial risks in MSEs (see Chapter 5 for details), there is a range of voluntary training initiatives focused specifically on psychosocial risks in the six countries studied, and there would appear to be significant interest in this topic as a focus for training. Private providers also offer training: for example, this is reported in the accompanying national reports for **Denmark** and **Germany**.

In **Spain**, the INSST runs free courses on psychosocial risk prevention and management. The participants on these courses include prevention and human resources technicians, company managers and staff representatives. Recent activities include the course ‘Workplace stress. Prevention and intervention experiences’ regarding the causes of stress, its manifestations and associated behaviours. Another training programme focused on mobbing and other forms of violence at work. The last training programmes took place in March 2020 and the INSST has currently postponed all its training activities due to COVID-19. Courses have now returned in an online format.

In **Poland**, every year, the Chief Labour Inspectorate organises preventive actions focusing on stress and other psychosocial risk management. District labour inspectorates deliver this programme and its implementation varies according to district-level resources. This involves training for workers and employers, and it may include an audit of the company if desired.⁸ In **the Netherlands**, although no official courses are run, the Dutch labour inspection authority has launched a number of websites that cover different psychosocial risk topics, on which a wide variety of information is published. The labour inspectorate has also developed online tools⁹ so that employers can ‘inspect’ themselves.

In **Germany**, the Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (BAuA) offers workshops and trainings. Further, as part of the ‘Psyche’ programme, the Joint German Occupational Safety and Health Strategy (GDA) has made efforts to set standards for further education of OSH professionals on psychosocial risk management, including through definition of training outcomes for different groups and suggesting the course contents (GDA, 2016). Further, the accident insurance institutions offer special OSH training for enterprises of all sizes, including MSEs. Because of the close relationship between accident insurance institutions and the federal and state governments (through the GDA), they can streamline their services, such as supervision of implementation of legal requirements or consultancy for both employers and workers.

In **Denmark**, the approach to training is slightly different to that in some other countries in this study, as employers are obliged legally to offer training, including on the physical and psychosocial working environment, for working environment representatives.

2.5 Public awareness campaigns

Recognising the importance and urgency of dealing with psychosocial risks, all countries studied have put into place some type of public awareness campaign focusing on these risks. These usually take the form of national campaigns. In **the Netherlands**, for example, in 2013, a four-year public awareness campaign on psychosocial risks was launched by the Dutch government. The campaign’s aim was to prevent absence due to work-related psychosocial issues, as well as to enhance the mental resilience, job satisfaction and labour productivity of workers. The campaign first focused on breaking the silence about absence related to psychosocial issues and alerting everyone to this. In **Poland**, the Chief Labour Inspectorate ran between 2015 and 2016 a campaign focused on stress at work, providing educational materials on mitigating stress in the workplace and contact information to relevant institutions.

In **Germany**, a range of public awareness campaigns have been undertaken, including an initiative launched in 2021 by the joint New Quality of Work Initiative (INQA) (a joint undertaking of the federal government, state governments, social insurance partners, social partners, foundations and enterprises)

⁸ Chief Labour Inspectorate, Sprawozdanie Głównego Inspektora Pracy z działalności Państwowej Inspekcji Pracy - 2019 (in Polish); Interview with the representative of the District Labour Inspectorate in Lublin.

⁹ Such a tool can be found here: www.zelfinspectie.nl/

aimed at improving psychological wellbeing. This initiative provides practice-based information on the issue of mental health in the workplace, including information sharing, eLearning tools, concepts for seminars, guidelines and working aids designed to allow companies to organise work in a worker-oriented way, and thus prevent burnout. Further, the German Trade Union Confederation frequently holds events to raise awareness about psychosocial risks in the workplace, and as part of 'Psyche', a range of public awareness campaigns were published between 2014 and 2018, focusing on issues such as psychosocial risk assessments, practical tools and the provision of Internet-based information (GDA, 2018). A number of other private training institutions and trade unions offer practical guidelines, training and seminars on psychosocial risk management in Germany.

In **Denmark**, the Danish Working Environment Authority (WEA) and the five Sectoral Working Environment Councils (BFAs) have implemented a number of awareness campaigns specifically on the management of psychosocial risks and related issues. One recent example from 2019 is the campaign 'When do you cross the line?'¹⁰ The campaign focuses on sexual harassment, the legal requirements that apply, how tools can reduce the risks of sexual harassment, and the mandated responsibilities corresponding to the employer, workers and the working environment representative. The campaign consists of posters, videos, a booklet and a specially designed tool to increase the dialogue in establishments about sexual harassment. The five Sectoral Working Environment Councils, which are set up by law in Denmark to assist enterprises in one or several sectors with information and sector guidance on health and safety, play an important role in raising the awareness of safety and health at workplaces in the different sectors; for example, they published campaigns, tools, guides and other relevant materials for this campaign.

In **Spain**, the INSST promotes awareness campaigns on occupational risks, including the campaign 'Improve your health: 12 issues, 12 months', which emphasises the importance of a proper work-life balance and warns about the consequences such as occupational burnout related to stress, lack of sleep and anxiety. The campaign was launched in 2016 and included posters, action sheets and brochures to be used by companies to raise awareness among their workers and generate a debate on occupational health. The implementation of these campaigns has varied across regions in Spain.¹¹

2.6 Collective bargaining initiatives

In countries where the social partners are strong and there are defined structures and procedures for social dialogue, there is a range of collective bargaining initiatives that focus on reducing psychosocial risks. **Germany** has a tradition of strong social partner involvement in policy and collective bargaining at national and sectoral levels. Trade unions in Germany have been active in this area: the German Trade Union Confederation's annual representative worker survey 'good work' recently indicated the link between digitalisation and stress in the workplace. Collective bargaining also plays a key role in managing psychosocial risks in **Denmark**: here, the social partners have the right to include and enforce measures in relation to the psychosocial working environment, including rules on physical and psychological violence, sexual harassment and other kinds of harassment. Most established collective agreements in Denmark will therefore include provisions and guidelines in relation to the psychosocial working environment.

Similarly, in **the Netherlands**, collective bargaining initiatives in the education sector are focused on the management of psychosocial risks. Here, requirements to prevent and mitigate psychosocial risks have been included in collective bargaining agreements. For example, employers (schools) are required to devise and implement a policy to address psychosocial risks and to raise awareness and provide information around these issues. In addition, they are required to evaluate the effectiveness of their policy on an annual basis, and to make adjustments where necessary. A number of collective agreements in **Spain** refer to psychosocial risks, mostly related to harassment at work, particularly sexual or gender-based harassment. This is influenced by Law 3/2007 on Effective Equality between Women and Men, which requires companies to adopt specific measures to prevent and manage sexual and gender-based harassment in the workplace. For example, the national collective agreement for the extractive, glass and ceramic industries (2017) contains a clause on actions against harassment in the

¹⁰ See the description of the campaign at: [Om kampagnen - Arbejdstilsynet \(at.dk\)](https://www.arbejdstilsynet.dk/om-kampagnen)

¹¹ For instance, the region of Murcia has launched a different campaign since 2016:

[http://www.carm.es/web/pagina?IDCONTENIDO=54963&IDTIPO=100&RASTRO=c\\$m743,52320](http://www.carm.es/web/pagina?IDCONTENIDO=54963&IDTIPO=100&RASTRO=c$m743,52320)

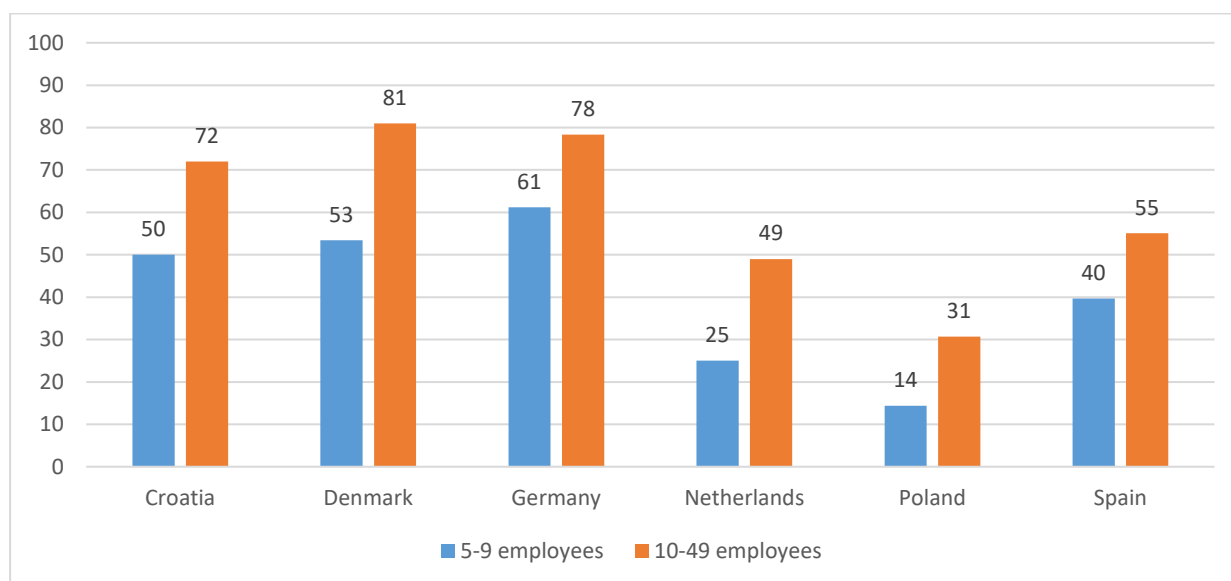
workplace, which includes a series of preventive and awareness raising measures and a complaint mechanism for the victims. Similarly, the state-wide labour agreement for the hospitality sector (2015, extended in 2019) incorporates a code of conduct to prevent harassment at work, as well as a diagnostic template on gender discrimination to apply in individual companies. However, according to the General Union of Workers (UGT, Unión General de Trabajadoras y Trabajadores) most collective agreements in Spain directly duplicate the content of the law, without adapting it to the reality of the firm or sector, thus losing a meaningful opportunity to adequately regulate psychosocial risks (UGT, see references). In **Poland**, collective agreements do not generally contain provisions in relation to psychosocial risks, although national trade unions, mainly the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions and Solidarity, have been actively involved in social dialogue in relation to legal improvements with regard to psychosocial risks.

2.7 Worker representation

From the ESENER 2019 data, one common theme across all countries in this study is that the larger the size of the company, the more likely it is that all forms of worker representation exist (works council, trade union representation, health and safety committee, health and safety representative). However, the most common form of worker representation in MSEs is generally a health and safety representative, with the least common form being a trade union representative, although in Denmark, just over 38% of micro and almost 54% of small companies reported having a trade union representative. By contrast, in Poland, it was reported that 61% of companies in ESENER 2019 did not have any form of worker representation and this is reflected in the relatively low figures for Poland for both micro and small companies. The dominance of health and safety representatives in MSEs in all countries may be linked to the fact that formal bodies are often required in order to comply with legal frameworks and social traditions. This is certainly the case in small companies, and to a lesser extent in micro companies. In terms of the arrangements for appointing health and safety representatives in the countries covered in this study, there are significant differences between countries. The European Trade Union Institute categorises health and safety representation into three categories, as follows:

- A combination of worker health and safety representatives, elected or chosen in some other way, who have their own specific rights, plus a joint worker/employer health and safety committee. The members of this joint committee are typically the worker health and safety representatives, on one side, and, on the other, the employer (or a representative) plus the health and safety professionals in the company (occupational physician/work doctor, safety expert and so on) and, in some cases, other managers. This model is used in **Croatia**, where worker safety representatives must be elected only in companies of 20 workers or more. It is also used in **Spain and Poland**. In Poland, there is a joint committee and elected worker health and safety representatives, but these elected representative are only allowed where a union is present.
- Worker health and safety representation provided through the worker members of a joint worker/employer health and safety committee, and there are no separate health and safety representatives with their own rights. This model is used in **Denmark**.
- Health and safety issues are primarily dealt with through the existing representational structure for other issues (often through a works council). This is the case in **Germany and the Netherlands**. In the Netherlands, the works council plus, in some cases, a subcommittee is all that exists. In Germany, on the other hand, there is also a joint worker/employer health and safety committee, as well as health and safety representatives/delegates, who are appointed by the employer but with the involvement of the works council.

For details of health and safety representatives in MSEs by country, see Figure 5.

Figure 5: Health and safety representatives in MSEs by country (% of establishments)

Source: ESENER 2019

3 Psychosocial risks identified through fieldwork

This chapter offers an overview of the key psychosocial risks reported by MSEs across the six countries studied. The first section overviews the psychosocial risks reported by establishments. In general, Denmark seems to have the strongest company cultures that encourage open communication, proactive responses to encouraging worker wellbeing and worker involvement. The typology in Chapter 5 also shows that Denmark has also established good conditions to promote development of ‘early learners’, such as specific regulation obliging management to assess and prevent psychosocial risks, setting a role for the OSH representative in relation to psychosocial risk management requirements, and in terms of the provision of wider know-how.

The second part of this chapter assesses the level of awareness of psychosocial risk factors and legal responsibilities in relation to managing them.

The study revealed that the most frequently reported psychosocial risks across all countries and sectors in MSEs were **high workload, time pressure and working with demanding clients**. In countries with a higher awareness level concerning psychosocial risks, such as Denmark, interviewees reported more nuanced psychosocial risks, including lack of meaningful work. Enterprises from Spain and Croatia highlighted job insecurity. While excessive workload was cited by both managers and workers, the two groups offered different causes for this phenomenon, as explained in more detail later in this chapter. Further, **the presence of OSH representatives** in companies seems to be linked to **a higher level of awareness of and effectiveness in managing psychosocial risks**. Neither awareness campaigns nor visits from the labour inspectorate seem to directly contribute to the level of psychosocial risks awareness and their management in the companies interviewed. Nevertheless, in cases where inspections took a more encouraging rather than punitive form, some companies reported their positive impact.

3.1 Psychosocial risks identified through the interviews

Interviews in all the six countries and across all the sectors represented in the study revealed that high workload and time pressure are the two most frequently cited psychosocial risks. The intensity of these risks was usually linked to temporal character of companies’ business activities – that is, companies in agriculture have nature-related peaks in workload, those in the tourism sector are the

busiest during the summer holiday period, and public sector/state companies and institutions have peaks mostly at the end of the year due to annual reporting.

Several workers and managers reported the risk of **poor work-life balance and living under stress due to excessive workload and long working hours**. This was especially highlighted in the hospitality sector. Workers from the medical sector complained about constantly increasing patient quotas that they felt were impossible to meet. In the education sector, understaffing was reported to lead to extensive extra hours being assigned to teachers, combined with the stress that no proper care can be provided to pupils

'The main issue is the time pressure and to get everything done that we would like to. We really want to have as much time with the children as possible, but we need to do the administrative parts as well.'

Manager in a small firm (welfare sector, Denmark)

However, the research revealed a certain level of acceptance and awareness of these key risks. This was specifically prevalent in high-stress environments such as the fire service. Further, several interviewees accepted these psychosocial risks as inalienable elements of work, and this was particularly pronounced in the case of representatives of the hospitality sector (necessity of long work hours) and legal services (where stress was reported as a part of the work).

Some interviews indicated a discrepancy between workers' and managers' interpretations of the risk connected to excessive workload. Managers often saw this as a work-related necessity, while workers pointed to poor communication and elements of generally poor work organisation, such as confusing work distribution, unclear instructions and priorities, and lack of communication between different company sectors.

'Management consistently increases the quotas of patients that should be examined during working hours. At the same time, they have high expectations for the workers to deliver quality medical services.'

Worker in small firm (medical industry, Poland)

Poor communication and poor work organisation were reported as separate psychosocial risk factors. In an extreme case, a worker characterised poor communication with middle management as a case of **bullying**. Nonetheless, the issue of bullying and harassment was not reported extensively, and most respondents claimed that this psychosocial risk is not relevant to their workplace. However, the one company interview specifically highlighted that the line between bullying and informal behaviours is sometimes blurred. Therefore, they were confused about whether they should indicate this as a psychosocial risk.

Several interviewees reported **poor social relations in the workplace as a risk**. This has been especially highlighted in relation to the amount of time spent in the office and at work (about 40 hours per week). In the view of the respondents, such long hours spent at work require good social relations with colleagues. Danish interlocutors stressed that the absence of good relations also forms a basis for cooperation difficulties and could increase the risk of bullying, and several interviews identified this as a psychosocial risk.

Another frequently reported risk is **working with difficult and abusive clients**. Several organisations working in the public sector where the main job is to take care of and/or deliver services for the general public emphasised the stress related to the need to cooperate with demanding clients. Having to deal with difficult patients, pupils, customers and so on is found to be a psychosocial risk predominantly in sectors such as welfare provision, retail, education, hospital and tourism. However, exposure to this risk varies depending on the position occupied in a company and the sector. In the case of difficult or abusive patients, a significant risk falls on the medical support staff at the healthcare frontline rather than the doctors. Having to deal with difficult clients is further exacerbated by additional sources of stress such as the responsibility burden for medical professionals.

Many workers working in the service sector reported stress related to high demands or customers confused with how to deal with products that have been delivered. On the other hand, in the construction sector, dealing with demanding clients normally falls on managers and/or the owner rather than workers. In Poland, some workers reported the additional risk of confrontation (possibly violent) with pro-environment activist groups in the forestry sector. In the education sector, teachers are particularly exposed to confrontation with parents who some said sometimes abusively express their dissatisfaction.

COVID-19 contributed further to discomfort connected with lack of direct communication and a focus on online platforms and telephone communication. This is particularly problematic for a large proportion of the older population and for those with poorer access to technology or online connection. Many workers reported new challenges and increased dissatisfaction of customers deriving from the lack of face-to-face contact. In the retail sector, workers reported an increase in the level of stress since customers lacking face-to-face contact were more likely to express their dissatisfaction and use abusive language.

'There has been an increase in stress certainly, digital psychosocial risks have been identified. Educators, members of the professional team and principals are also exposed to direct contact with parents exposed to cooperation with parents, while the technical staff does not have these problems and stress.'

Manager in a small establishment (education sector, Croatia)

Some risks were either predominant or only reported in particular countries. For example, the fear of losing employment was reported by respondents from Spain and Croatia only. In Croatia, this risk was particularly commonly reported due to the national programme of restructuring of the public administration. Several of the public servants working in the municipalities pointed to the fact that Croatia has been planning for a long time to reduce the number of municipalities, so there is an actual risk that they are going to be merged with a larger municipality and the total number of public workers would be reduced. The study indicates that the risk of losing jobs is highly related to the impacts of COVID-19. Market disruption, the unpredictability of governmental decisions regarding lockdown and limitations on business operations make MSEs more prone to cut costs and make redundancies, which explicitly contribute to the increased level of stress and decreased comfort and wellbeing of workers. MSEs in the tourist sector were particularly likely to identify the psychosocial risk of fear of job loss and insecurity.

Data collected through the interviews suggest that a higher level of awareness provides more space to realise and verbalise less straightforward psychosocial risks affecting the health of workers. For instance, among all six countries studied, only Danish workers reported the risk of not feeling adequate for the job and the lack of meaningful work. At the same time, respondents in Poland revealed little concern for or awareness of psychosocial risks.

'All of these questions [interview questions about psychosocial risks] are very "European". In Poland, the labour market is different, nobody thinks about such issues. You go to work, you do your job. Nobody thinks about stress, workload, or bad relationships. There is no time for that.'

Worker in a small establishment (justice sector, Poland)

Several companies participating in the study did not report any psychosocial risks. This points to the possibility of low level of awareness of these risks across several MSEs.

3.1.1 Impact of COVID-19

To prevent the spreading of the virus, companies introduced significant reorganisation of work in some sectors, prompted also by national regulatory frameworks. Actions included the introduction of telework as a possibility, the introduction of rotation of teams at work, and a reduction in opening hours. Special attention was paid to elderly and more vulnerable workers who could work from home or take temporary leave.

Data indicate that several psychosocial risks appeared or intensified due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including excessive workloads and time pressure. Generally, workers focused on specific psychosocial risks, such as time pressure and high workload, whereas managers and highly

qualified experts more often reported to be exposed to stress related to company performance, competition on the market and meeting targets. Managers reported the additional burden coming from the fact that work in times of the pandemic had to be reorganised, accounting for different levels of vulnerability of individual workers, their family status (need to care for small children when schools and kindergartens were closed), and a general sense of insecurity. Interviewed managers also highlighted the stress related to the need to adapt to new governmental restrictions or the uncertainty for their business. The workers brought up the fact that since older colleagues were sent home due to their increased health vulnerability, the existing workload had to be somehow divided among the remaining staff, which led to overwork.

'The company is experiencing an added workload, that is overburdening workers. It is unfortunate but we can't really respond to it since it has to do with COVID-19, so we have no control.'

Manager (Germany)

For the public sector in Poland, the fact that various workshops and trainings attended by the workers before the pandemic had to be cancelled also had an impact on people's ability to network and establish contacts with professionals in similar positions. Extensive telework led to digital fatigue for some.

'The public administration organises regular workshops on the local and regional levels. They connect professionals working in similar positions. They allow us to gather, discuss problems, exchange ideas. Afterward, we stay in touch, we call each other if we have some problems. It is a great support system. Now due to the pandemic, these meetings are stopped. Some other trainings are available, but these are only some lectures online. It is not the same.'

Worker in a small establishment (public administration, Poland)

The impacts of poor work organisation and communication became particularly detrimental due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Several sectors transitioned to teleworking in part or entirely, while others had substantially limited interaction with clients. It has been particularly stressful for private enterprises, where fear of going out of business or of layoffs has added to feeling stressed. While some managers reported their efforts to keep such pressure away from the workers and not communicate business-related fears to the staff, the overall difficult situation was felt and reported across companies.

The research did not show any clear pattern as to whether any group of workers was particularly affected by teleworking. While several respondents in Spain and in the Netherlands indicated that teleworking is favoured by young parents because of the opportunity to spend more time with and take care of their children, equally, in the countries mentioned above and in Poland, respondents frequently raised the danger of blurring the boundary between work and family life. Since some workers complained of isolation resulting from teleworking, several companies introduced the possibility of hybrid work, offering some workspace for workers and the opportunity of meeting other colleagues. At the same time, teleworking was welcomed by some who reported it to be more efficient, thus reducing stress.

'We have had some changes in working methods due to this pandemic. Something we didn't do before and now we do is shift work. We introduced this with the aim of meeting as little as possible in order to avoid the danger of simultaneous infection of many workers and thus bring into question the work of the association. These changes were initiated by the management of the association and accepted by the workers. This led to workers becoming less worried about infection due to minimal exposure. I did not notice that there were any negative impacts resulting from these changes.'

Manager in a small enterprise (Croatia)

The research gathered equally divergent opinions regarding the issue of teleworking among younger workers without family commitments – some prefer to communicate and work online due to the comfort, money saved on commuting to work and so on, while others reported a struggle to balance the time for work and private life and felt overwhelmed by the purely online forms of communication with co-workers. Many workers noticed a deterioration in the quality of communication as a result of teleworking. Workers

reported the reduced human contact and lack of opportunity for dialogue between workers as a reduced opportunity to discuss work-related problems and share their concerns. Many managers also recognised this risk, which is why many MSEs offered workers the opportunity of days in the office and ensured video conferencing with workers.

A final important observation is that many MSEs have taken steps to improve psychosocial working conditions because of the pandemic. For example, some companies hired an external confidential counsellor as a direct result of COVID-19.

'I wanted that all workers talked to an external confidential counsellor to discuss what they thought about the measures we took as a company against COVID-19, if they felt safe about working at the office, if they preferred to work at home or perhaps preferred to come to the office. I wanted that they talked about this with an impartial person, like an external confidential counsellor, because I guessed the lockdown would endure a couple of months and it's important that they felt safe.'

Manager in a small establishment (the Netherlands)

On the other hand, in Croatia, the majority of respondents considered that there were no additional risks in comparison with the time before COVID-19, except for the increased fear of losing one's job as a consequence of market disruptions related to COVID-19. But even there, few respondents reported that they had adapted their business processes to the current situation related to COVID-19.

3.2 Awareness of obligations to manage psychosocial risks

3.2.1 Legal awareness

The research revealed varying degrees of perceived awareness of legal obligations regarding psychosocial risk management. In most countries, only in a few cases did managers and workers of MSEs report understanding their legal obligations in connection with psychosocial risk management. In general, there are traces of a pattern that is relevant for nearly all countries and sectors:

- The majority of respondents reported being familiar with the general OSH regulations and legal obligations but significantly less so with the specific aspects that relate to psychosocial risk management.
- Companies where managers showed more leadership and personal commitment to psychosocial risk management also revealed a better understanding of the legal framework.
- In the establishments that have an OSH representative or OSH committee, a common pattern is that the manager and workers reported that they are aware of what the legal framework mandates.
- Without further OSH initiatives, establishments are not fully aware of what is expected. This indicates that OSH initiatives are needed and can play a role in increasing awareness about the legal framework. Both OSH representatives and managers, therefore, gain awareness and knowledge through authority guidelines and attending (mandatory as well as non-mandatory) OSH courses.

The most common response from the consulted establishments to the identified psychosocial risks in the workplace is the reorganisation of working practices. Both managers and workers in several establishments agreed that the identification of psychosocial risks such as time pressure has led to an organisational change of some kind regarding either OSH management or the structure of the company or the work. For example, one professional services company with 10-49 workers has changed its risk assessments method so that workers are able to always report potential risks in an online, ongoing survey and no longer have to wait for the annual worker survey.

'In our company the [risk assessment] is now "live online", so that we always can report risks factors or other issues as they emerge. We will discuss potential issues at the monthly meetings with the OSH council.'

OSH representative in a small establishment (Denmark)

However, on average, legal awareness of the requirements for psychosocial risks management is low and psychosocial risks receive less formal attention than physical risks and safety concerns in micro and small enterprises.

'I am not familiar, I have read the law on safety at work, but I am not familiar with psychosocial risks.'

Manager in a small establishment (Croatia)

3.2.2 Psychosocial risk awareness

This study suggests a relationship between company size and the level of psychosocial risks awareness among workers and managers. It is particularly relevant in the context of countries with comparatively and relatively high OSH psychosocial management standards (Denmark and the Netherlands), where small public bodies benefit from the resources and information provided by the wider public administration.

In Denmark and the Netherlands only, almost all managers in this study were aware of psychosocial issues and stated that they act on this by trying to stay in touch with people, having regular conversations, holding team meetings and trying to encourage people to open up about their issues in a timely way. Their goal normally was to solve potential issues and make sure that these issues do not escalate. The commonly reported reason behind the lack of new initiatives targeting psychosocial risks is that most people know each other very well and so if a problem arises, it is noticed immediately.

However, **micro firms in the six countries of this study do not have legal requirements to appoint OSH representatives, limiting both awareness and avenues for workers to express concerns vis-à-vis management.** Furthermore, in general, the smaller the company, the less likely it was to have procedures or policy documents in place at the company in relation to managing psychosocial risks.

In the majority of the companies represented in the research sample, the level of awareness and response to psychosocial risks and mental health problems in the workplace is very limited. Most interviewees acknowledged the relevance of these concerns but considered that the lack of resources in their companies makes it difficult to implement actions to address psychosocial risks. These companies tend to focus on more traditional OSH risks, such as chemical or physical risks.

Generally, psychosocial risks management among the researched enterprises is conducted on a needs-based approach – companies lack a comprehensive strategy to address psychosocial risks. Without major crises, there did not appear to be recognition of or a need for initiatives. Thus, the general picture is of managers acting on what they feel: if something is not going well, the manager acts on this. In that sense, they state that they fulfil their legal obligations.

'We act when psychosocial risks happen, because we are too small to create a plan to prevent every potential psychosocial risk. I know all my workers very well, I know they are not susceptible for some potential social risks.'

Manager in a micro establishment (the Netherlands)

The research also suggests a **discrepancy in levels of awareness of psychosocial risks in different sectors.** Generally, representatives of companies where there is a strong engagement with clients (such as health and education, social services and human resources) show higher levels of awareness.

3.2.3 Awareness campaigns

There is no evidence to show that public awareness campaigns play any role regarding the awareness and the management of psychosocial risks in the interviewed companies, regardless of the level of engagement between companies and their sectoral and professional organisations. Companies

reported that they are not aware of national or sectoral public campaigns on psychosocial risks, and most did not remember public campaigns about OSH.

In most of the countries surveyed, there were only a few individuals aware of campaigns on violence and bullying at work, mainly from social media.

'I can't think of a single campaign with that topic, maybe a campaign on the topic of mobbing a couple of years ago, but I don't remember the public response [that is, the reach and effect of the campaign].'

Worker in a micro establishment (Croatia)

One manager from Germany noted wider societal trends on social media leading to changes in how companies manage such risks.

'Five to six years ago the top management started to put more focus on psychosocial risks. It used to be a taboo for us because it is also a taboo in society. But things are changing, and we talk about it more now.'

Manager in a small establishment (Germany)

However, interviews in Denmark suggest that campaigns initiated by either social partners or the municipality brought more tangible outcomes for the establishment. These campaigns may have a bigger impact, as they are more directly targeting the individual company since they are focusing on a specific sector or type of local establishment.

Yet, there was a divergence in the source of knowledge depending on the role in the company. Workers were more likely to receive information from trade unions or the WEA in case they are OSH-representatives, whereas managers mostly receive information from authorities such as the municipality, the region and the WEA.

3.2.4 Role of the labour inspectorate

The majority of the establishments in Spain, Croatia and Poland reported that the quality and frequency of inspections from the labour inspectorate were low and did not address key psychosocial risks in any detail. A significant number of Croatian interviewees stated that they were not visited by the labour inspectorate – some of them even in the last 10 years. Similarly, two-thirds of Spanish interlocutors stated that there had been a lack of any visits in the past three years.

'There were no labour inspections and therefore they are not a motive in strengthening the approach to psychosocial risk management. They have never given us any guidelines or measures, all we are doing is our initiative to provide ourselves with better conditions.'

Manager in a small establishment (Croatia)

Furthermore, a few respondents from Croatia and Poland considered visits by inspectorates discouraging due to their punitive nature and lack of active support in implementing positive changes. In Spain and Poland, several managers considered such inspections to be time-consuming, focused on paperwork and generally highly irrelevant to improving psychosocial risk approaches.

'Labour inspections do not motivate the work [of nursery schools] at all, they should have a partnership relationship, and this mainly comes down to punishment. Most often we [nursery schools] undergo a sanitary inspection - they always come with the attitude that something is wrong. They should not perceive us that way, they should motivate us.'

Manager in a small establishment (Croatia)

Some Polish workers highlighted the systemic problem with trust in labour inspection institutions, stressing that reporting the actual work situation could lead to negative consequences for their company and thus their employment.

'Even if someone had any problems, they would not talk about them with the inspectorate workers, because it could be used against this company.'

Worker in a micro establishment (service sector, Poland)

The evidence collected across all the studied countries indicates that labour inspections continue to focus significantly more on formalities (such as work contracts, payment of taxes and so on) or ergonomic, food, material and physical safety. Also, in countries such as Germany and the Netherlands where the establishments reported more frequent and recent labour inspections than in the countries mentioned above, **both managers and workers agreed that these visits do not focus on psychosocial risks.**

'We had a labour inspectorate visit in our company last year (2020). Nothing was really mentioned about stress. Psychosocial issues were not discussed at all.'

Worker in a small establishment (retail sector, Germany)

However, some interviewees mentioned the positive influence of the visits. In Denmark, on average, these visits were considered necessary and useful in terms of avoiding unfair competition and guaranteeing working conditions. Most of the Danish respondents described the visit as relevant and motivating in relation to general OSH management.

4 Management of psychosocial risks

This chapter provides an assessment of the management of psychosocial risks in the companies in this study, looking at specific psychosocial risk management measures and actions, dedicated action plans, any training initiatives, and the procedures that are in place to deal with bullying and violence. It also looks at the range of external and internal factors that influence the introduction of measures to address psychosocial risks, such as management attitude and commitment and company culture. Finally, this chapter examines the main barriers and drivers to managing psychosocial risks and the solutions that are in place to address these barriers.

Overall, in terms of response to psychosocial risks, there is an evident lack of clearly defined, comprehensive and, most importantly, preventive measures in the interviewed establishments. The identification of psychosocial risks in the workplace has led to changes in psychosocial risk management in several of the companies interviewed. Very few companies described a systematic approach to addressing psychosocial risks and some of the companies, although they lacked a comprehensive strategy, reported some individual changes in risk management derived from the identification of psychosocial risks. Examples include enabling flexible working hours or changing shifts across workers depending on their personal circumstances. The rest of the interviewees did not report any organisational change after the identification of psychosocial risks.

4.1 Specific psychosocial risk management measures

4.1.1 Actions to prevent psychosocial risks

In terms of actions to prevent psychosocial risks, in the case study countries, ESENER 2019 reveals that companies across different sectors and sizes stated that the primary way in which they deal with psychosocial risks in the workplace is through allowing for **more flexibility in the way that workers organise their own tasks and working hours.** In Spain, ESENER 2019 results showed that the most common measure to manage psychosocial risks in small companies is to allow workers to make decisions on how to do their job. The likelihood of this being reported increases the smaller the company is. The interviews confirmed this finding, with managers reporting that allowing workers to adapt to their personal circumstances was a common approach to prevent psychosocial risks. For instance, a microenterprise in the nursing sector reported that workers are able to change their tasks frequently to avoid monotony and burnout. Most managers interviewed in Spain also acknowledged that increasing flexibility in working time is easier with the implementation of teleworking, while others emphasised that teleworking has proven to be an opportunity to improve work-life balance and adapt to personal circumstances. In the Netherlands, 75% of all companies surveyed for ESENER 2019 stated that allowing workers to take decisions on how to do their job is used as a measure to manage psychosocial risks. This does not differ greatly accordingly to company size. In Poland, this figure is 69%, with microenterprises much more likely to employ this approach (71.5%) than companies of 250+ workers (49%).

Many companies interviewed also emphasised **the crucial role of communication** in preventing psychosocial risks. In most of the companies interviewed in Spain, managers reported that they make a concerted effort to promote good relations in the workplace and give space to workers to share work-related and personal concerns. In Denmark, some interviewees stated that the most effective action that can be taken is to have a management team that is open, willing to listen, and clear about tasks, expectations and OSH management. In Germany, while the interviewed companies generally reported very limited actions on psychosocial risk management, in a few instances respondents reported that their company is active in the prevention of psychosocial risks, namely through discussions on these matters. In Croatia, all interviewees reported that communication works well at all levels, between workers as well as between management and workers, and none reported problems in sharing concerns of workers with management. Micro and small companies interviewed in Poland did not mention specific procedures or measures but stated that a good workplace atmosphere and work organisation are due to good leadership and communication. Managers reported investing efforts in maintaining good communication within companies and making sure that workers find them approachable. One worker in a micro company was of the view that such an approach is in fact more effective than standardised procedures:

'I doubt whether, in the case of such a delicate issue, procedures (generally standardised, formalised) are the best way to address psychosocial risks.'

Worker in a micro company (service sector, Poland)

The interview findings suggest that **company size** influences the general approach taken to prevent psychosocial risks. Micro companies are more likely to have general, informal actions that aim to ensure open communication with workers, while larger companies are more likely to have a more organised and structured approach that includes different presentations and training events. In the Netherlands and in Poland, it was clear from the interviews that official actions on prevention are considered unnecessary by smaller organisations, with these companies preferring to use more practical, informal and hands-on approaches to psychosocial risk management. In micro companies in Poland, for example, it was felt that the introduction of formalised procedures does not seem feasible or desirable both due to their size and, as reported by the respondents, the nature of the risks.

'No, the company did not take such [preventive] actions. There was no need. The company is so small that all problems can be solved on a regular basis.'

Worker in a micro company (service sector, Poland)

4.1.2 Action plans to prevent work-related stress

The use of action plans to prevent work-related stress varies by company size, sector and country. ESENER 2019 asked companies with at least 19 workers about the extent to which they have an action plan in place to prevent work-related stress.¹² From the case study countries, results show that Denmark has the highest use of action plans, implemented by 64% of companies with over 19 workers. This is followed by the Netherlands (38%) and Spain (37.2%). Germany (24.9%), Poland (18%) and Croatia (15%) have relatively low use of action plans. This was confirmed by the interviews in Croatia and Poland, where none of the companies interviewed had an action plan in place.

A clear finding is that in all countries – regardless of how often this measure is used in general – **action plans are more likely to be developed and used in larger companies**. For example, in Croatia and Poland, in which the share of companies that introduce action plans is lower than the EU average, they are most often used in organisations with 250+ workers. In Denmark, where the use of action plans is high for all company categories, the share of larger companies that use them is much higher (81%) than the share of smaller companies (59.4% for companies of 20-49 workers).

This finding is logical in that larger companies of that size tend to score highest on psychosocial risk factors identified and are more likely to be subject to more frequent visits from inspectorates, to have higher levels of institutionalised worker representation and to hold more regular discussions on OSH. Furthermore, larger companies are likely to have more human resources and internal expertise in place to develop and implement measures to address psychosocial risks.

¹² There is no specific definition of what constitutes an action plan in the ESENER 2019 survey.

Across the EU-27, ESENER 2019 found that there are also **sectoral differences regarding the use of action plans to tackle work-related stress**. In the sectors of health and social work and education, the use of action plans is most frequent, whereas in construction and manufacturing, such procedures are used least frequently.

4.1.3 Procedures to deal with bullying and violence

Procedures to deal with bullying and violence in companies have become **more common since 2014**, according to ESENER results from 2014 and 2019. For example, in Poland, in 2014 procedures on bullying or harassment were reported in 34% of companies surveyed. In 2019, their reporting increased to 49%. In Spain, the share of companies that have introduced procedures for possible cases of bullying or harassment increased by 12.8 percentage points between 2014 and 2019. In Denmark, ESENER 2019 shows that such procedures have become more common across firms with more than 19 workers, with a total of 76.3% of companies surveyed now having procedures in place that deal with cases of threats, abuse or assault by external persons and 62.8% having procedures in place that address cases of bullying or harassment.

There is a clear **link between company size and introduction of procedures**. In all the case study countries, the introduction of both types of procedures is more common in larger companies, as confirmed by ESENER 2019 results. According to ESENER 2019, in Spain, almost all companies with more than 250 workers (95.8%) have procedures in place to deal with possible cases of bullying or harassment. In Germany, as seen in ESENER 2019 results, large establishments are more likely to have such procedures than small ones are, with 66.7% of companies with 250 staff or more reporting that they have procedures in place to deal with possible cases of bullying and harassment, compared to 30.3% of companies with 20-49 workers. In Denmark, establishments that do have some of these procedures are often a part of a franchise or municipality. In Poland, ESENER 2019 has shown that the presence of both procedures has become more common in larger companies in the last years.

The interviews showed that there is a **difference in awareness of these procedures between workers and managers**, with implications on the actual usefulness of procedures even when they do exist. In Denmark, in a few enterprises interviewed, the workers were of the view that the management has done nothing to manage psychosocial risks, including dealing with bullying and violence, while the managers were of a different opinion. In the Netherlands, in organisations where there are company rules on bullying, for example, a manual or ethics charter, and procedures in place for dealing with bullying, workers were not always aware of the existence of these rules or where to find information on them. In Spain, only a few of the companies interviewed reported having specific procedures in place for bullying, harassment or violence, with very few interviewed workers stating that they knew that these protocols exist in their organisations.

4.1.4 Training initiatives

The research showed that OSH training is generally available in companies across different sectors and in different countries, but that they are often **not focused on psychosocial risks specifically**. In Germany, for example, in the majority of companies interviewed, managers and workers mentioned that some form of OSH training was offered. However, only in one company did both the manager and worker recall a training session offered by a professional association that dealt with the management of psychosocial risks. In Spain, the majority of the companies reported delivering some kind of training for managers and workers, either as part of induction processes or periodic training on risk prevention, covering topics such as the design of the workplace, desk set-up or the use of machines. However, very few of these companies offered training that addresses psychosocial risks. A small enterprise in the retail sector in Spain stated that training is organised upon worker request, which has in the past included requests for training on psychosocial risks. This company also provides incentive payments for weight loss and has sports facilities to improve the mental and physical wellbeing of workers. In Denmark, psychosocial risk training was incorporated into more general types of training, such as leadership courses, which include content on how to avoid stress.

Despite the low prevalence of psychosocial risk training in general in the interviewed companies, the available data suggest that **some sectors, such as the health and care sector, seem more likely to offer psychosocial risk training**. Enterprises in this sector generally recognise that it includes professions that are more likely to be exposed to psychosocial risks, especially in the ongoing COVID-

19 situation. For example, in Spain, a small enterprise in the nursing sector emphasised the relevance of training on emotional intelligence and dealing with situations of stress; in Poland, one manager from the social care sector stated that their company organises several training sessions for workers each year with the topic of psychosocial risks included to some extent, such as stress management and burnout avoidance. Generally, the interviewed companies in which higher levels of awareness of psychosocial risks were observed were also those reporting training availability or interest, while enterprises with low awareness levels reported no training and no interest or need for training.

Further, there was also general agreement that **psychosocial risk training needs to be tailored to the sector** in order to be truly useful for workers. For example, a microenterprise in Spain in the tourist sector emphasised that the training available is usually very generic and does not address the specific needs of the company. Similarly, several companies interviewed reported that they have requested that training be provided by someone with experience in each job position. For example, the manager of a microenterprise in the construction sector complained that training is frequently given by experts on risk prevention who do not have experience in the field. A manager in a small firm in Croatia highlighted the importance of tailored training:

'Further trainings are needed for lower-level management which directly communicates with workers and is familiar with their issues. Trainings should address issues such as how to teach people to cope with stress, how to communicate with workers, how to function in larger working communities.'

Manager in a small establishment (Croatia)

In terms of company size, it appears that there is again a **link between company size and training availability**. In Denmark, it is mostly enterprises that are bigger or a part of a bigger franchise that offer OSH training with a focus on psychosocial risks. In Croatia, most micro companies reported that there is no formal training available, stating that they have insufficient internal resources for these types of training sessions, and where OSH training is offered in micro and small companies, it often does not address psychosocial risks. In small companies in Croatia, the interviewees suggested that this type of training is most often available only to OSH representatives.

This could be due to the larger enterprises having more resources to allocate to training compared to small, independent enterprises. A worker from a micro company in Germany stated:

'I once took part in a training session but then had to stop because the company experienced some financial difficulties and could no longer afford it.'

Worker in a micro company (Germany)

Finally, the research found that there tends to be a **discrepancy between managers and workers on the level of awareness of training opportunities** in the area of psychosocial risk. For example, in the Netherlands, most workers interviewed did not know of any training available on psychosocial risks, whilst managers could list several, including awareness training, first aid training, training on dealing with difficult clients and Insights Discovery training.¹³ The same discrepancy was also noted in Germany, where even though the regular training offered by the respective professional associations was mentioned by managers, workers were not aware of any training taking place. In Poland, the availability of training reported by the management representatives did not always translate to workers benefiting from this. For example, while a manager of a medical enterprise stated that plenty of training was available for all workers, involving issues such as stress management, assertiveness and wellbeing in the workplace, the interviewed worker of the same company stated that no training is available at all. In Denmark, due to OSH training requirements, many managers reported that they have had OSH training due to their role as an OSH representative or OSH manager. However, many worker interviewees stated that they do not consider this mandatory training as a training measure made available by the company, because it is mandatory, implying that there is a perception that OSH training is not sufficiently provided.

¹³ A psychometric and self-awareness training tool.

4.2 Factors shaping the introduction of measures to address psychosocial risks

4.2.1 Links between psychosocial risk management and overall management commitment to OSH

The driving force for management commitment to OSH tends to be **legal requirements** to address OSH issues. In all case study countries, interviewees pointed out that legal requirements are what pushes forward the level of commitment to address OSH issues in their companies. This is supported by ESENER 2019 data. In five of the six case study countries, the primary motivation for addressing risks was reported to be to fulfil obligations, followed by avoiding fines and sanctions arising from legal inspections (Spain, Croatia and Poland), meeting expectations from workers (the Netherlands) and securing the organisation's reputation (Germany).

The interviews conducted in Croatia reveal that in companies that draft annual OSH reports, sections related to psychosocial risks and their management are usually non-existent, with the use of health and safety services mostly related just to occupational health services covering more traditional risks. In Poland, regardless of the levels of organisation and commitment to OSH, the issues of psychosocial risk management are not mentioned in the general OSH frameworks of companies. The only example of an exception that emerged from the interviews was in the medical sector in Poland, where interviewees reported that obligatory comprehensive risk assessments evaluated each worker's exposure to different risks including psychosocial ones, such as physical and verbal aggression, emotional burden, time pressure and responsibility burden. However, it must be noted that this is a tentative conclusion that would require further investigation in order to understand whether this link is present.

4.2.2 Links between workplace culture, productivity, absence and presenteeism

Workplace culture is another key factor influencing the degree of psychosocial risk management in MSEs, as well as the types of measures introduced. In the Netherlands, for companies of all sizes, the culture is relatively flat, with a generally low level of hierarchy and an informal working culture. This appears to translate to a more informal approach to psychosocial risk management, with a preference for regular talks, drinks and meetings with the team, in preference to formal policies and measures that are written down. The majority of both managers and workers interviewed for the study held the view that maintaining a good relationship with workers in this way is the most effective procedure in terms of managing psychosocial risks.

Similarly, in Poland, interviewees in both micro and small companies reported that company culture plays a significant role in how psychosocial risks are understood, approached and managed. In fact, most respondents pointed to the overall company culture as the key framework for dealing with psychosocial risks, highlighting the general atmosphere and direct communication among workers and between workers and management. For the interviewees in the Spanish companies in this study, psychosocial risk management also relies heavily on relationships between workers and managers, reflecting a working culture that is based on informal networks and direct communication.

This is of course also linked to the findings outlined in section 5.1 that smaller companies appear to prefer a more informal approach to psychosocial risk management. The interviews suggest that there is a link between smaller **company size and a positive company culture that allows for informal psychosocial risk management measures**. This is logical, as having fewer than a dozen workers naturally allows for more direct, informal contact between workers and management. Nevertheless, interviewees in several countries suggested that a positive culture does not come about only through having a smaller workforce, but is in fact the result of concerted action by management. In Poland, representatives of one small company indicated that maintaining such a culture as the company grew and expanded was a matter of conscious effort on the part of management and directly due to managers' personal commitment.

However, it is **not clear from the evidence whether a smaller company size does in fact lead to an effective approach to psychosocial risk management**. ESENER data show that the smaller the

company the more often they report that they do not have any psychosocial risks. It could be, therefore, that smaller companies do not in fact have fewer risks that can be dealt with through informal approaches but actually underestimate the frequency and prevalence of these risks, hence believing that an informal approach is enough to address them effectively. The evidence collected as part of this study does not point to a clear picture on this matter, which warrants further investigation.

Linked to this is the finding that an open and informal company culture alone is not enough to guarantee an effective approach to dealing with psychosocial risks. In Germany, for example, the interviews showed that while the company culture is regarded as 'open', conversations between staff about their mental and physical health are not common. It was also pointed out that while smaller companies may have a more supportive environment, this sense of solidarity among staff can sometimes have a negative impact on the way psychosocial risks are approached, as workers worry that if they speak up about their workload, the work, and therefore the burden, will just be handed to another colleague. In Poland, the more manual work-oriented sectors, which also happen to be male-dominated, present a significantly more informal culture, but even though the atmosphere is considered positive, interview results suggest that psychosocial aspects are not discussed internally; one interviewee specifically said 'no hours are spent on discussing issues'. In Denmark, it is often assumed that the working environment is purpose-built for the challenge of managing psychosocial risks effectively, as the opportunity to talk to management informally is hardwired into the system already. However, the research highlighted that this also comes with some challenges. Proactive measures are typically not deemed necessary by management, and there is often an overreliance on workers to bring up potential issues in ad hoc conversations, which may result in risks not being detected and mitigated early on, or being overlooked entirely.

Finally, a positive working culture that allows for psychosocial risks to be addressed and resolved in an informal way is still **not enough to overcome the sense of stigma and shame** of having mental health issues and addressing them in the workplace. In Germany, many workers mentioned stigmatisation and shame as a barrier to managing psychosocial risks, regardless of the type of working culture in the company. One of the managers interviewed in Croatia stressed that psychosocial risks are still a taboo topic in Croatia and that this is clearly reflected at all levels – from state regulation/interventions to the level of the companies that are not addressing this issue appropriately.

Presenteeism, which in this study is understood as the practice of being present at one's place of work for more hours than is required, especially as a manifestation of insecurity about one's job, or going to work while unwell, **and levels of absence** are typically not perceived as a psychosocial risk management issue and tend to not influence the level of psychosocial risk management measures in companies. Nevertheless, high levels of absence from the workplace may be an indicator of stress, and presenteeism can contribute significantly to overwork and burnout or be the consequence of it. In Germany, the existence of absenteeism and presenteeism was identified in most establishments interviewed. There was however a discrepancy between workers' and managers' levels of awareness of the prevalence of presenteeism and absence. Workers are not often aware of levels of absence or the extent of presenteeism, whereas managers tend to have more knowledge on the matter. This may be because supervisors are better informed about worker absence and performance through company monitoring of staff. However, this also highlights the fact that while German company culture is regarded as 'open', by the interviewees, conversations between staff and between staff and management about their mental and physical health are not in fact common.

In Spain, levels of absence were generally reported to be low in the micro and small enterprises in this study, while no cases of presenteeism were mentioned. This may explain why companies lack a systematic approach to dealing with absence, which tends to be solved on an individual basis depending on the circumstances of each worker. In Denmark, the interviews suggested that a decentralised approach to task management that offers significant autonomy to staff means that managers may not be fully aware of the extent of staff workloads and the level of presenteeism in the company. This is especially the case in competitive or performance-orientated workplaces and seems to have increased since the onset of the pandemic due to increased teleworking.

In Poland, overall, levels of absence and presenteeism were not reported as significant phenomena by the majority of the companies in this study. Several enterprises reported no significant absence or presenteeism at all, while others indicated some levels of presenteeism. Presenteeism was especially

noticed among workers working on projects or occupying senior positions with high responsibility for task completion. It has been especially present in companies demanding intellectual work (research or human resources, creative industries), or where workers want to 'be part of a creative process and sometimes find it difficult to let go'. Absence was mainly reported to be an issue in the construction sector or in companies where more manual work is required and among the enterprises dominated by the male workforce. It was also attributed in part to alcohol consumption.

The link between psychosocial wellbeing and productivity at work was recognised across the case study countries by managers and workers alike. In Poland, management representatives recognised the connection, judging that removing stressful elements of the job and addressing any conflicts smoothly are essential for ensuring good workflow and allowing workers to focus on their work. In Denmark, managers are generally well aware that it is crucial to create a welcoming work environment to enable workers to be productive and motivated, to retain staff for longer periods, and also to maintain productivity levels over time.

'Yes, it [management of psychosocial risks] is very important. As we are a farm, we experience periods with increased time pressure and intense workloads due to the harvesting and weather conditions. It is important to be aware of the wellbeing of workers, as happy workers produce better results.'

Manager in a small establishment (Denmark)

However, this level of awareness of the link between psychosocial wellbeing and productivity **often does not influence psychosocial risk management in the workplace.** In Germany, the research found that while generally companies acknowledged the importance of a company culture that addresses psychosocial risks to boost productivity, this area is rarely prioritised in company strategies. One company pointed out that this link has become even more pronounced during lockdown but this has still not led to real changes. Further, many of the workers interviewed in Germany did not recognise the connection between productivity and the management of psychosocial risks, indicating the lack of discussions in the workplace on this matter.

4.3 Dedicated resources and worker participation

Establishments from all countries with the exception of Spain reported the involvement of workers in the management of psychosocial risks. In the majority of cases in Croatia and the Netherlands and (in half of the cases in) Germany, workers are involved in risk identification through informal conversations. The frequency of this varies significantly from respondent to respondent, from daily to annual interactions. In Denmark and Poland, this is organised in a more formal way: in Poland it is discussed in team meetings, whereas in Denmark identification of risks often happens through risk assessment (APV, Arbejdspilsvurdering) and wellbeing surveys, interactions with the OSH representative and OSH committees, but also through more informal conversations. In Spain, on average, companies reported in the interviews low levels of participation of their workers in risk identification, or even a complete lack of worker involvement in this topic. However, most companies in Spain reported that they have informal procedures in place to address psychosocial risks and involve workers. This also is the case for the five other countries in this study, which report involvement of workers in risk identification through informal conversations and meetings. For example, one manager of a company in Denmark stated:

'We have meetings between management and workers once a week now and I focus on the working environment at every meeting.'

Manager in a small firm (Denmark)

However, the way in which workers and managers talk informally with each other and the frequency of this communication differs per country. In Croatia, organisations report a frequency that depends on the worker, from a daily to a monthly basis. In Germany, lunchtime chats were highlighted. Ad hoc conversations were also reported as a way of doing this in Denmark, Spain and the Netherlands. Finally, weekly and monthly meetings (formal and informal) were also highlighted as a way of initiating these conversations in Denmark, the Netherlands and Poland.

'I think the key factor to ensure worker involvement is having accessible managers who listen to workers' concerns.'

Worker in a micro company (Spain)

Interviewees in companies in most of the countries studied identified the risk that workers are not sufficiently consulted because involvement of workers in risk identification is not organised formally. Therefore, it is possible that input from workers is not taken into account. Additionally, workers may not want to talk about psychosocial issues due to the stigma, out of fear of being belittled, humiliated or not believed. Further, it was reported that workers sometimes worry that when they speak up about their workload, the work will just be handed on to someone else, who might be equally busy.

For example, some workers in Croatia mentioned that their views are sometimes ignored. In cases where companies follow an unsystematic and informal approach, workers sometimes feel that they are only involved when issues arise and that their opinions are not consulted regarding a more preventive approach. In Poland, psychosocial challenges, prevention and mitigation often remain the work of managers and owners, without the involvement of workers.

In Denmark, besides an informal culture of worker participation, a more formal method of worker participation is identified through risk assessment (APV) and wellbeing surveys, OSH representatives and OSH committees. In cases where both managers and workers report high levels of worker involvement, reference is usually made to the APV as the main tool for risk identification, alongside the company wellbeing survey.

4.4 Managing psychosocial risks – main drivers and barriers

4.4.1 Main drivers

In all countries, one of the main drivers for raising awareness of and managing psychosocial risks is **ensuring the wellbeing and general satisfaction of the workforce**. Interviewees also referred to a link between wellbeing and productivity. In the case of employees with customer-facing roles, interviewees noted that employees who are happy in their work are more likely to interact well with customers.

Interviewees in some countries also mentioned legal obligations as a key driver. However, the interviewees in the same countries stated a view that inspections by the labour inspectorate are insufficient and do not cover psychosocial risks, so that power of the legal driver seems somewhat limited.

Further, the level of attention that is paid to managing psychosocial risks appears to depend on managers and the extent to which they understand taking care of their workers' wellbeing is part of their **ethical responsibility** and something that needs to be carried out as a core element of their job.

'The most important thing for me is that I can speak to the manager and have a close and good relationship.'

Worker in a small company (Denmark)

Workers especially feel motivated to speak up about their psychosocial issues when they feel that they can have an impact, meaning that they are not only listened to but that their input will also lead to change. This in turn gives them a feeling of being supported and encourages them to seek involvement in the future.

4.4.2 Main barriers

According to data from the ESENER 2019 survey, the main reported reason why establishments find it difficult to deal with psychosocial risks is a reluctance to talk openly about these issues, reported by 60% of establishments that were asked this question (those that had identified one or more psychosocial risks and reporting that psychosocial risks are more difficult to address than other risks). The next most-often reported barrier was a lack of expertise or specialist support, reported by 45.5% of these establishments, and a lack of awareness among staff, reported by 44% of these establishments. A lack of awareness among management was reported by 33% of these establishments.

From the interviews, a range of barriers to the effective management and development of psychosocial risks were evident. These ranged from the delicate nature of these issues and ensuing difficulties in discussing them to low awareness of psychosocial risks and knowledge gaps in how to address them. Lack of reflection on the part of management was also cited as a barrier by some worker interviewees,

particularly in sectors where physical safety is of great concern, such as the construction industry. The research among companies in this sector revealed that psychosocial risks are not considered a priority compared to the ongoing and demanding task of keeping employees safe and physically uninjured.

There was also a frequently expressed view from managers that psychosocial risks are much harder to identify and manage due to their nature and that they require an individual approach, as different people will be affected differently in the same situation. This means that the same approach to problem solving cannot be used to address issues experienced by different employees.

'It is not clear if some risks are indeed a risk or some individual predispositions of the employees. Employers can come up with some actions addressing psychosocial risks at the workplace, but it is unclear if it is needed or desired by the employees.'

Manager in a micro company (Poland)

Some interviewees also stated that one of the main barriers to putting into place a policy or action/prevention plan to manage psychosocial risks was a lack of time and staff, and lack of money, as, for example, stated by interviewees in Germany and Poland:

'Management of psychosocial risks is an additional burden, on top of the existing health and safety regulations. Especially in the pandemic, when resources are limited, and the market situation is difficult. Focusing on the management of psychosocial risks is an additional responsibility.'

Manager in a small company (Poland)

Further, some managers from German companies also felt that the **intensity of their own workload** was the main reason why they were not able to manage psychosocial risks. They didn't feel like there was enough time to manage their own workload and to manage psychosocial risks:

'The work routine, the workload and time pressure are the main barriers to managing psychosocial risks.'

Manager in a small company (Germany)

Another key barrier is that workers feel limited in speaking out about psychosocial issues, due to stigmatisation and the perceived shame of dealing with mental health issues, as mentioned above. Some interviewees reported that another barrier was a lack of trust within the company, which also prevents people from speaking up about problems.

Another main barrier as reported by managers is difficulties in getting to know and being aware of what is happening to workers and what they are dealing with in their lives. Managers often said that not being informed about worker experiences (neither by formal nor informal conversations) is the main barrier to acting in relation to psychosocial risk management and providing support for workers who need it.

'If the workers don't tell you what's going on, you don't know it and you can't help them.'

Manager in a small company (the Netherlands)

Some interviewees recognised that psychosocial risks often concern issues that are difficult to talk about and that solely relying on workers to bring them up in conversations may not lead to sharing of information, even partially. Overall, this is a difficult area, as it also involves judgements about what is appropriate or not to share in the context of a work setting.

'The biggest barrier is that it is a personal and difficult thing to talk about and share. I wouldn't know how my colleagues would react if I shared something personal.'

Worker in a micro company (Denmark)

4.4.3 Mitigating solutions

Interviewees in all countries emphasised the importance of the role of the manager in helping to develop mitigating solutions in relation to the barriers to effective psychosocial risk management in the workplace. The main solutions that were highlighted to overcome these barriers included **building trust and creating a connection with workers**, so that they feel comfortable talking to their manager. Therefore, it was felt that it was extremely important that the manager should be approachable. Another mitigating solution cited was **creating a good atmosphere in the team**, so that people feel comfortable

in sharing issues of concern to them. The importance of **regular dialogue** was also highlighted. Additionally, the **need for specific training and further education in management and leadership** was also seen as important. In all countries, respondents were able to identify different mitigation solutions during the interviews, but only a small number of these were actually implemented.

'As I said earlier, there were no special approaches in preventing and mitigating psychosocial risks. Management is satisfied if there are no problems between workers that may affect the normal operation of the company and customer relations. As long as that is the case, they do not react and the company can function normally.'

Worker in a micro company (Croatia)

'People are not open to share and voice their issues. The psychosocial risks are not seen as a problem unless something bad happens. There is a lack of thinking ahead and prevention actions.'

Worker in a micro company (Poland)

Respondents' potential mitigating solutions to address these barriers most often referred to specific training of workers, although a majority mentioned that psychosocial risks are mostly identified and managed through conversations with workers.

5 Summative analysis of results

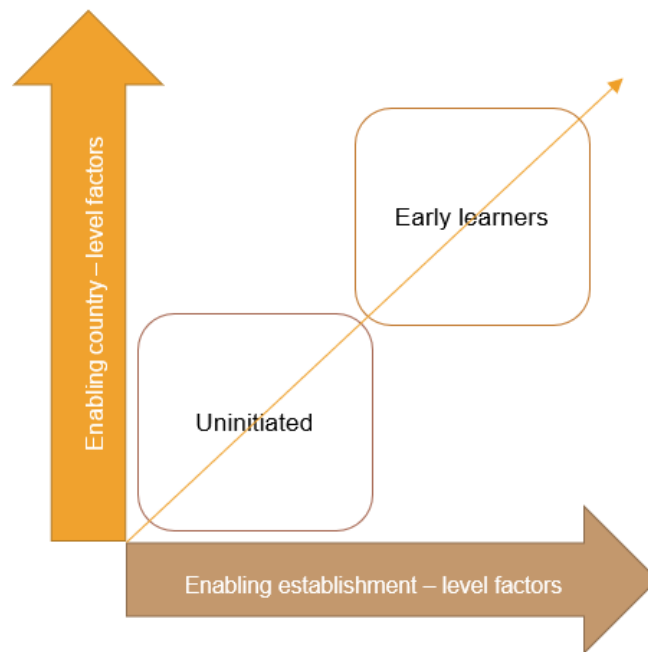
This chapter offers some results based on analysis of the interview results according to a general typology framework, and it provides a sentiment analysis, analysing the emotions expressed in the interviews, to provide some high-level findings.

5.1 Typology of establishments

A key aim of this analysis was to classify establishments according to a general typology framework considering their stage of development around management of psychosocial risks. As explained below, broadly, it has made sense to group companies into two types, as either 'early learners' or 'uninitiated'. This in some way seems to reflect the current level of maturity of psychosocial risk management in MSEs. The analysis has generally classified establishments as early learners when establishment- and country-level factors have combined to encourage a nascent although relatively effective management of psychosocial risks. At the same time, while distinctions can be made between companies that have made initial progress and those that have yet to gain ground, the study does not consider all establishments that are uninitiated as being entirely negligent or unreachable, but rather it may be that they do not feel legally obliged to address this area of OSH, have not yet invested sufficient time, or have not been subject to sufficient persuasion or influence to adapt their practices to this area of OSH to the extent others did (for examples, see below).

As expected, based on the sample, the general stage of maturity of psychosocial risk management in establishments is heavily influenced by a combination of both the country context, such as regulation and culture, and the establishment context, such as the culture around communications, managerial perspectives and personalities. Establishments' maturity of psychosocial risk management thus should be assessed on both levels, resulting in a 2-by-2 typology. Figure 6 depicts how establishments may move from being uninitiated to becoming early learners as they incrementally improve their approach to psychosocial risk management, which is driven by adaptations on both country and establishment level.

Figure 6: Overview of internal and external factors related to establishment types: ‘uninitiated’ & ‘early learners’



Source: Authors’ own drawing

Establishments’ positions are shaped by both micro (establishment) and macro (country) level factors. The following two tables give an overview of the main factors on both levels, how they enable effective management of psychosocial risks and where the study found them to be most prevalent according to its sample.

Table 2: Establishment-level factors

Establishment-level factors	
Culture of open communication	<p>This research clearly showed that both workers and managers find that a good work culture, that is, openness, a feeling of understanding, good communication, safety and stability, lead the company towards a better response to psychosocial risks.</p> <p>A company culture of open and regular communication is often found where hierarchies are relatively flat, superiors approachable and, importantly, where psychosocial issues are not seen as a weakness or private matter, but rather are addressed proactively and with management via regular informal discussions.</p>
High worker involvement	<p>The research showed that workers feel that measures targeting psychosocial risks are more effective if workers are involved in the identification and formulation of measures. This also includes the extent to which managers support OSH representatives advocating for workers’ concerns.</p> <p>In establishments where worker involvement is based on formalised processes (for example, regular worker surveys) rather than ad hoc conversations, and where management is supportive of OSH representatives’ mandate, workers feel most comfortable speaking up and find their suggestions are taken seriously.</p>
Proactive responses	<p>Establishments may introduce action plans and other measures targeting psychosocial risks proactively and independent of legal obligations. This is mostly the case in companies where the link between improved worker wellbeing, mental health and increased productivity is recognised. For example, removing stressing elements and addressing any conflicts early on ensures good workflow and allows workers to focus on their work, which in turn spurs productivity</p>

Establishment-level factors

Awareness of legal obligations	The research highlighted that though regulation is in place, establishments may not be aware of it or may feel it does not concern them because they only have few workers, for instance. Early learner establishments thus typically are well aware of their legal obligations. Across cases, establishments' awareness of their OSH responsibilities pertaining to physical risks is generally good but less so when it comes to psychosocial risks.
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Even though the study found different micro-level factors to be more pronounced in some countries than others, it is important to note that whether an establishment fosters a culture of open communication, ensures high worker involvement, responds to arising risks proactively and is aware of its legal obligations is not *defined* by the country context. This means that at micro level, early learners may exist anywhere. However, the research also showed that macro-level factors, which are specific to the country context, may further enable establishments to become early learners or, conversely, present a barrier. These country-level factors are explained in more detail in Table 3.

Table 3: Country-level factors

Country-level factors

Psychosocial regulation	Results from the interviews indicate that psychosocial risks might be addressed and tackled more frequently and more systematically in countries where they are addressed and highlighted specifically in the legislation.
Role of OSH representatives	<p>The role of OSH representatives is crucial as they create avenues for workers to express concerns to management and raise awareness. In line with the previous point, OSH representatives should have a clear mandate concerning psychosocial risks as part of their overall OSH responsibilities in order to make the most of their presence in the workplace.</p> <p>In addition, the legal requirement to appoint an OSH representative is sometimes linked to specific worker number thresholds that often do not cover small and micro establishments, which may have an adverse effect on these establishments' psychosocial risk management.</p>
Knowledge building regulation and accessible knowledge resources	Effective psychosocial risk management in many ways depends on managers' skills and knowledge. Whether managers are obliged to receive specific training and have access to knowledge resources therefore drives establishments' psychosocial risk management maturity. Legally required training for managers on psychosocial risks at work seems to have a great impact on how psychosocial risks are taken into account in companies.
Industrial relations systems	Industrial relations systems where union density and collective bargaining coverage are relatively high support workers in voicing their concerns and advocating for their rights. Though industrial relations systems are to some extent sector-dependent, national tendencies can be identified.

Overall, the research has shown that country conditions play a significant role in shaping establishments' general approach and agility in managing psychosocial risks. Although awareness of psychosocial issues is growing in all study countries, the policy approaches taken to address psychosocial risks differ widely on country level. At the same time, receptiveness to psychosocial risk management is intertwined with national company cultures, particularly concerning whether managers are aware of the links between workers' mental health and wellbeing and their productivity and therefore manage psychosocial risks proactively regardless of legal obligations to do so.

Conversely, the study labelled establishments as 'uninitiated' in cases . Such establishments are less aware of their responsibilities or mistakenly believe that they are not subject to legal requirements

mandating specific duties. Establishments falling into this category do not seem to have a great deal of in-house knowledge, either due to lack of training or because they mostly rely on external OSH services. These establishments often have steep hierarchies or relatively rigid structures where workers consider psychosocial issues as a personal matter or even a weakness.

In this establishment context, legal obligations, for example, obligatory risk assessments, tend to be treated as a ‘tick box exercise’ by management and are therefore less effective in building up procedures to address issues as they emerge. Moreover, inspectorates may not focus on psychosocial risk management during inspections. In addition, the industrial relations systems in these countries have less coverage of workers in micro and small enterprises, reducing the opportunities for knowledge sharing and representation.

While all factors play a role in shaping a company’s approach to psychosocial risk assessment, early learners also exist in country contexts that do not actively enable psychosocial risk management and vice versa. For example, even when the inclusion of psychosocial risks is not specifically pointed out in the legislation, establishments that are aware of the link between psychosocial risk and productivity may still set focus on these risks and address them proactively.

Therefore, while there is some variation between establishments in the same country, the typology of establishments is informed by the general national factors that were observed during the comparative analysis (See Chapter 4). Accordingly, the geographical distribution of companies that may be classified as either ‘early learners’ or ‘uninitiated’ is heavily influenced by national dynamics. However, this observation is based on the limited sample examined, which is not representative for the whole country. Further, it is also clear that not all MSEs in a country will be in the same category even though national context plays an influencing role.

5.2 Sentiment analysis

In recent years, researchers have taken advantage of data science software to enhance their qualitative research. While such approaches cannot replace in-depth interpretation of findings offered by the manual analysis of qualitative data, they can provide additional higher-level complementary findings that may not be detected otherwise.

For this project, sentiment analysis was applied to explore the linguistic content of the interview feedback from the 153 establishments studied. Sentiment analysis was used to explore the polarity of the feedback, that is, whether the answers contained messages that could be labelled as ‘positive’ or ‘negative’. This let us confirm the working hypothesis that workers feel less positively about psychosocial risk management at their workplace than their managers do. In this context, sentiment analysis is particularly useful as it lets us assess all interview responses objectively using the same method. This also provides transparency of the results by showing that analyses were produced by an algorithm.

5.2.1 Methodology

Sentiment analysis is an NLP method used to determine whether qualitative information is emotionally positive, negative or neutral. Sentiment analysis is often performed on textual data to help businesses monitor brand or product sentiment in customer feedback.

The intention for this project was to use sentiment analysis to explore whether workers carry different sentiments towards psychosocial risk management at their workplace compared to their managers. Considering answers given by workers and managers separately, the polarity of the worker-only feedback may be more positive or negative when compared to manager-only feedback.

The analysis was conducted using the *Sentimentr* package available for the R statistical programme. This package was selected because the algorithm is designed to assign polarity scores to sentences and not only individual words as is normally the case with other sentiment analysis packages. This offers greater accuracy around the assessment of key messages as evidently several words need to be understood in combination to understand their underlying meaning.

To begin, the interview feedback was rearranged from paragraphs into sentences. A sentiment dictionary was used to tag words with ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ scores. Where polarised words were identified, the polarised context was examined. This means that the two words before and after are taken into consideration to determine whether the context changes the polarity. For example, a sentence containing ‘very happy’ is positively weighted with a higher score than the original score allocated to the

individual word 'happy'; 'not happy' changes the positive score to a negative one. In calculating the overall polarity of a sentence, neutral words have no value but are considered as part of a multiplier – the number of words – to take into account the extent to which sentences contain polarised words. Adversative conjunctions (that is, 'but', 'however', and 'although') are also considered as acting upon the polarised word and are assigned weights. Pause locations (commas, colons and semicolons) are also considered because they indicate a change in thought and words prior to are not necessarily connected with words after these punctuation marks.

The range of scores allocated per sentence is normally from -1 to +1; however, long sentences can result in scores higher than this.¹⁴ A score of 0 means that the sentence is neutral.

In this case, interview write-ups¹⁵ were used for the analysis and not original transcripts, which would have been preferable although were not possible to produce given the timeframe of the project and language aspects. However, this approach has been used by other academic studies, given similar constraints (Leeson et al., 2019). It is important to note that while interviews were conducted in national languages, researchers translated their statements to English when producing the write-ups.

This, however, likely affected the overall polarity scoring although not the direction of the scores, as positive and negative sentiment would still be conveyed per question in the interview write-ups provided by the research team, although in a more formalised and perhaps more qualified form.

With respect to the scoring, one must consider the type of feedback provided in an interview concerning OSH, which is likely to contain some polarisation, however less than political debates, for instance.

5.2.2 Results

In total, 10 questions were selected for analysis that were considered as possibly containing some polarised feedback. The selected questions are numbered in Table 4 according to their position in the original questionnaire.

Table 4: Overview of questions selected for sentiment analysis

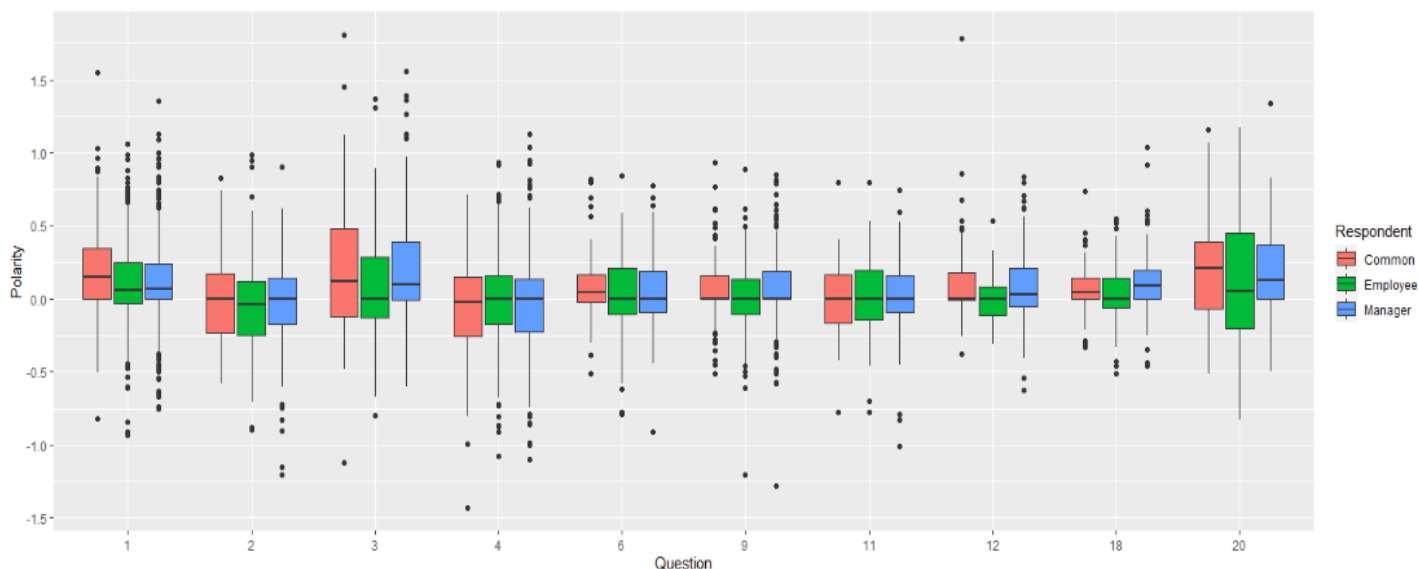
No in questionnaire	Question	Number of words	Number of sentences
(1)	Tell us about the overall culture at your company.	21,480	1,757
(2)	Have you observed any absenteeism or presenteeism in your company?	12,593	1,030
(3)	Is management of psychosocial risks recognised as important for maintaining good productivity at your company?	6,815	555
(4)	What do you consider to be the most significant psychosocial risks faced by the workers at your company? Why?	23,096	1,906
(6)	Has the identification of psychosocial or other types of social or mental health-related risks led to a changed approach to psychosocial risk management?	5,942	485
(9)	How is management of OSH organised at your company?	8,986	701
(11)	If your company conducts workplace risk assessments, to what extent do they address psychosocial risks?	5,170	422
(12)	Has your company taken any action to prevent, at an organisational level, the occurrence of psychosocial risks?	1,599	130
(18)	How have workers been involved in the identification and management of psychosocial risks?	6,341	518
(20)	What do you think were the main drivers leading your company/you towards adopting a response to psychosocial risks?	3,389	277
	Total	94,511	7,781

¹⁴ For example, using the Sentimentr package, the sentence of 'I am positive, motivated and very happy today' resulted in a score of 0.79, whereas the sentence 'The weather is dull, miserable and very boring' is allocated -0.85.

¹⁵ The purpose of an interview write-up is to document the main points and statements of what was said and to organise the points for efficient analysis of interviews. In contrast, a transcript restates the exact words of what was said in an interview.

The distribution of the polarity scores were reviewed and the results per question showed that the median responses were mostly slightly positive or neutral, with remaining results obtaining slightly positive or negative results (See Figure 7). The median response refers to the 50th percentile, meaning that half of responses are on either side of the spectrum. It therefore represents a more typical answer than the average answer, which is more influenced by outliers. Questions 3 and 20 produced the highest positive median scores (both scored 0.08), the highest maximum scores were associated with questions 3 and 12 (1.80 and 1.78 respectively), and the lowest minimum scores were obtained by questions 4 and 9 (-1.4 and -1.2).

Figure 7: Distribution of polarity scores per question



Source: R output based on interview data

In the following paragraphs some specific examples are given of how sentences are analysed under some of the questions. Please note that as the analysis focuses on sentences and not paragraphs, the sentences indicated do not give a complete picture of what was mentioned.

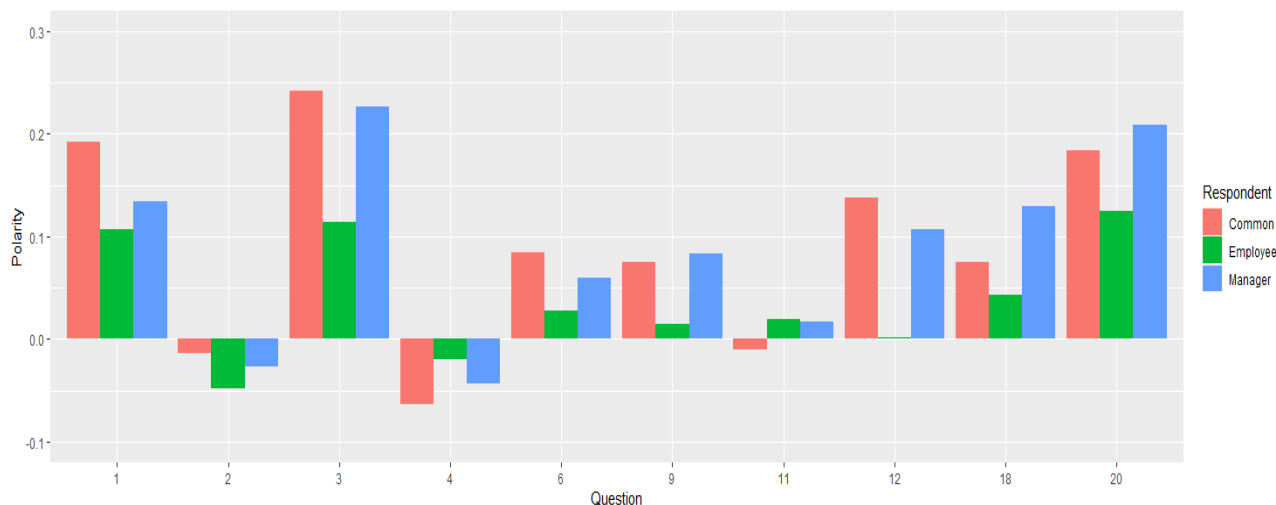
For question 2 (have you observed presenteeism or absenteeism), one sentence from a Danish worker indicates 'this is especially stressful as changes are constantly being made at short notice' (polarity score -0.25), while another from a Polish manager indicates 'for this reason it is important that the manager is available to her team, and has a flexible approach' (0.06).

For question 3 (is management of psychosocial risks recognised as important for productivity), a Polish manager suggested that 'if workers like the manager/owner, they have better attitudes towards the work they do, they are more personally invested, and engaged' (0.47). A German worker when asked about the relationship between productivity and psychosocial risks indicated that the link between psychosocial risks and productivity may not be taken seriously at their establishment since 'bullying is seen as a bit of a joke which happens everywhere' (-0.06). In the context of the question on productivity, this therefore resulted in a negative score.

When looking at the mean results, one can see that the common and manager-only responses are typically more positive than the worker-only responses in 8 out of the 10 questions, that is, in questions 1, 2, 3, 6, 9, 12, 18 and 20. Given the set of questions that the analysis is based on, this may reflect that managers and workers interpret the quality of the establishment context differently. For instance, managers are more likely to describe the company culture as contributing positively to the management of psychosocial risks, see absenteeism and presenteeism as less of a problem, and see the overall organisation of the management of OSH at their company more positively. In addition, the analysis reveals that answers to certain questions were more polarising than others. For instance, views on whether the company recognises that managing psychosocial risks is important to maintain productivity (question 3) as well as views on what the main drivers for the adaptation of measures are (question 20) diverge more significantly between managers and employees than in other answers. Overall, this result

therefore confirms the study's working hypothesis that workers feel less positively about psychosocial risk management at their workplace than their managers do.

Figure 8: Mean polarity score per question



Source: R output based on interview data

6 Conclusions and learning points

- The most frequently reported psychosocial risks across all countries and sectors in MSEs in this study were **high workload, time pressure and working with demanding clients**. In countries in this study that have a weaker economic status, such as Croatia and Poland, workers in the establishments interviewed for this study were more likely to mention fear of losing one's job as the main psychosocial risk. Conversely, in countries with a stronger economy and higher awareness level of psychosocial risks, such as Denmark, interviewees reported more nuanced psychosocial risks such as lack of meaningful work, or poor social relationships at the workplace, rather than just the risk created by job insecurity.
- This study suggests that MSEs in this study in countries with comparatively and relatively high OSH psychosocial management standards fare relatively well in terms of psychosocial risk management. Accordingly, micro firms are most at risk in countries with less-developed standards. This suggests that national legislative developments have a role as one of the factors that influence the management of psychosocial risks in establishments, and can be one of the factors that contributes to the maturing of psychosocial risk management. Specifically, if MSEs are not subject to a legal requirement to appoint OSH representatives, this limits both awareness and avenues for workers to express concerns to management.
- Company size plays a significant role in all areas related to the management of psychosocial risks, with micro companies often at a disadvantage due to factors such as level of resources, limits on availability of staff and lack of formal procedures. Micro companies therefore need extra help and support from policy-makers and OSH organisations. Policy-makers therefore need to work more closely with MSEs in order to devise solutions that work for them in terms of managing psychosocial risks in their workplaces. Related to this, it is clear from this study that MSEs do not tend to work with formalised procedures as often as larger companies do. It would therefore be beneficial for stakeholders to work with MSEs to try to devise an approach to psychosocial risk management that works for and supports them.
- In relation to the management of psychosocial risks, the main tool used by companies in this study is allowing workers to adapt to their personal circumstances in order to prevent psychosocial risks. This confirms ESENER findings that cite **allowing more flexibility in the way that workers organise their own tasks and working hours** as the main way of

preventing psychosocial risks. This element of control over work organisation and task content, where possible, is a recognised factor in reducing stress at work.

- The results of the interviews which show that even in cases where there is ‘commitment’ to OSH management in terms of physical risks and awareness of the more traditional physical OSH risks, this does not directly translate to ‘commitment’ to management of psychosocial risks.
- Nevertheless, this study also shows that legal OSH requirements alone are not enough: **company culture plays an important role in dictating whether psychosocial risks can be discussed in the first instance**. In relation to this, it is important to note that psychosocial risks still carry with them a significant **sense of stigma and shame**, which is difficult to eradicate, even in very open and informal cultures. Companies and policy-makers should therefore continue their efforts in developing company cultures in which workers feel that they can talk openly about any mental health issues that they have, and for which they are offered appropriate support. In particular, focusing on **improving trust** in organisations could be a key to helping to develop this type of open culture. Actions such as organising seminars on the issue of mental health, line manager training on dealing with mental health issues and providing a confidential helpline could contribute to building a more open culture. COVID-19 has actually made a contribution to raising awareness of mental health issues, with discussion of this more prominent over the past two years. This could be a good foundation on which to build lasting awareness of mental health issues.
- Further, this study reveals that it is often the **managers’ personalities and their type of leadership** that define an organisation’s approach to psychosocial risks, including identification and awareness of these risks. Managers tend to report that they respond to issues by trying to stay in touch with workers, having regular conversations, holding team meetings and trying to encourage people to open up. The effectiveness of this ‘human dimension’ depends on the person in charge and not so much on the systems in place. If a worker works for a company managed by an empathic and committed manager, they will benefit from a more effective approach to psychosocial risk management. However, if this is not the case, psychosocial risk management is likely to be poor. While the influence of the conducive personality of managers on psychosocial risk management is to be welcomed, **companies should be encouraged to carry out training for managers** to ensure that all managers are aware of psychosocial risks and can put into place effective strategies to manage them. This will mean that they will not rely solely on their instincts, which will vary between individuals. In addition, the recognised **link between psychosocial wellbeing and good levels of productivity** is something that could underpin all measures to manage psychosocial risks and should be promoted as such. This would help to encourage managers in small and micro companies to devote time to managing psychosocial risks.
- **Communication** plays a crucial role in preventing psychosocial risks, and this is linked to leadership style. Here, smaller companies could have an advantage, in that they are more likely to rely on general, informal actions that aim to ensure open communication with workers. Conversely, larger companies are more likely to adopt a more organised and structured approach. There are advantages to both of these approaches, however: the more informal approach, resulting from the style of the senior managers, can foster good and open communication within organisations, and the more structured approach, which is more often seen in larger companies, can result in the development of formal practices and the implementation of more structural initiatives such as action plans. Further, policy focus should be on **encouraging employers to develop an open company culture, within the context of the relevant legal framework**. This could be achieved by actions such as targeted and locally focused communication, awareness raising and information campaigns.
- The typology analysis shows that the general stage of maturity of psychosocial risk management in establishments is **heavily influenced by a combination of external factors** such as country specific institutional context and culture, and **internal factors**, such as managerial perspectives and personalities. In particular, country conditions play a significant role in shaping establishments’ general approach and agility in managing psychosocial risks. Further, receptiveness to psychosocial risk management is intertwined with national company

cultures, particularly concerning whether psychosocial wellbeing of workers is instinctively embedded in managerial thinking and approaches. It is clear that the establishments in the six countries analysed in this study are at different points on the journey in terms of the management of psychosocial risks. It may therefore be useful to **encourage good practice sharing** so that MSEs and policy-makers can learn from what works elsewhere, even though many factors may not be directly transferable to different country contexts.

- The sentiment analysis shows that the common and manager-only responses are typically more positive than the worker-only responses in 8 out of the 10 questions analysed for this study. This may reflect that there are different interpretations of the quality of the establishment's approach to managing psychosocial risks – **seemingly, managers hold more positive views around the psychosocial working environment than workers do**, which confirms the study's working hypothesis.
- **Presenteeism and levels of absence** are typically not perceived as an issue being directly linked to psychosocial risk management issues by the companies interviewed. However, high levels of absence from the workplace may be an indicator of stress, and presenteeism has been linked to overwork and burnout. This study, however, found that the scientifically recognised **link between psychosocial wellbeing and productivity at work** is often not acknowledged in practice.
- Interviewees for this study in some countries reported that their general experience with **the labour inspectorates was rather formal**, and in the majority of cases labour inspectors focused on sanctions rather than education and support. Interviewees reported that **psychosocial risks tend not to be a focus** of inspections. Also, there was a great variation in the frequency of labour inspections within the companies interviewed. While some companies are visited on an annual basis, others have not been visited for at least 10 years. In general, a more supportive and counselling role of the labour inspectorate instead of solely punitive actions would have been appreciated by many companies in this study. In order to **optimise the role of the labour inspectorates**, therefore, MSEs pointed out that more support and practical advice would be helpful.
- There is a great deal of OSH training in place across different sectors and in all countries, but this study shows that this training is not specifically focused on psychosocial risks or does not reach companies if it is focused on psychosocial risks. An exception seems to be the health and care sector, as companies in this sector generally recognise that the sector includes professions that are exposed to a high degree of psychosocial risks, especially in the ongoing COVID-19 situation. It may therefore be beneficial for policy-makers and companies to consider how to cover psychosocial risks more comprehensively, alongside tailoring any psychosocial risk training to the sector in order to be truly useful for workers.
- Workers in the companies interviewed were mostly not involved in the management of psychosocial risks in a structured or formalised approach. This seems to depend highly on the way worker involvement is organised generally and in terms of OSH in the country and respective company. Interviewed companies show, however, varying degrees and a range of often informal ways of involvement. Although involving workers in the identification and management of psychosocial risks is very effective, it would seem that some effectiveness may be lost as a result of the informal nature of much of this involvement. Encouraging companies to **formalise worker involvement in some way**, for example, in terms of regular meetings or more regular communication channels, may therefore increase the effectiveness of worker involvement in the management of psychosocial risks.
- This study found that the main driver for the management of psychosocial risks in the companies interviewed was **ensuring the wellbeing of the workforce**. Interviewees in most of the countries in this study also cited **legal** obligations, where employers are aware of them, as a key driver.
- Conversely, a range of barriers to the effective management and development of psychosocial risks were evident. These ranged from the delicate nature of these issues and ensuing difficulties in discussing them to low awareness of psychosocial risks and knowledge gaps in

how to address them. There was also a frequently expressed view from managers interviewed that psychosocial risks are much harder to identify and manage due to their nature and that they require an individual approach, as different people will be affected differently in the same situation. Lack of trust within the company was also reported to be a barrier that prevents people from speaking up about problems related to mental health. Managers tended to report barriers to gaining awareness of workers' issues and difficulties, which makes it difficult to provide appropriate support.

- Finally, **COVID-19** has had a significant impact in terms of increasing psychosocial risks in a number of ways. Stress has increased due to work intensification and/or increasing working hours to cover for colleagues who are off sick or to cover for older and more vulnerable colleagues. Stress levels increased due to the uncertain health and economic situation, and possibly the impact of lockdowns. Overall, market disruption, the unpredictability of governmental decisions regarding lockdown and limitations on business operations made MSEs more likely to cut costs and make redundancies, which contribute to the increased level of stress, job insecurity and poorer wellbeing of workers. Workers also reported increased stress due to lack of face-to-face communication with colleagues and managers, or having to face abusive customers who were frustrated as a result of implemented restrictions. While it is very difficult to cope with the effects on psychosocial risks of a sudden and severe crisis, such as the one caused by COVID-19, many organisations reported having taken steps to improve working conditions in relation to psychosocial risks as a direct result of the pandemic. Actions included hiring an external confidential counsellor, for example. This might have helped to raise the general awareness of psychosocial risks and reduce the stigma. Going forward, it may now be easier for some companies to **take stock of and boost their psychosocial risk management procedures**.

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