

ESENER 2019 reveals biggest concerns for European workplaces – musculoskeletal disorders and psychosocial risks

Commenting on the Survey, EU Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, Nicolas Schmit said: *“Protecting and promoting occupational safety and health for workers, companies, and society at large has become even more vital over recent months. There is no doubt that concerns put forward in this study have been exacerbated by the Covid19 crisis. We need to redouble our efforts to address issues related to workers’ mental health and to deal with the challenges posed by digitalisation, given the recent sharp increase in teleworking. The upcoming OSH strategy framework will provide the opportunity to address these issues.”*

EU-OSHA’s Executive Director, Dr Christa Sedlatschek, highlights that *‘during the current coronavirus crisis, all businesses, regardless of size, are facing serious economic threats. But safety and health at work remains essential in these critical times and the more attention companies pay to this, the better they can recover from the effects of the pandemic. ESENER is a valuable resource, which policy-makers and workplaces can use to ensure effective evidence-based prevention’.*

The findings reveal that musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) and psychosocial risks are the issues most frequently reported by European workplaces. Repetitive hand or arm movements (reported by 65 % of workplaces in the EU27_2020), prolonged sitting (61 %) – a new item in the survey – and having to deal with difficult customers, patients, pupils, etc. (59 %) are the three most frequently reported risks.

The survey also looks at how companies tackle these risks, and identifies some worrying trends. For instance, despite the high proportion of workplaces reporting MSD risks, there has been a slight decrease since 2014 in the number of workplaces adopting measures to prevent them. Moreover, only 29 % of companies say they would intervene to stop employees working excessively long hours to manage psychosocial risks.

Some companies report having no risk factors at all. This is particularly true for small businesses – the smaller the enterprise, the more likely it is to report having no risk factors, particularly psychosocial risk factors, which highlights a concerning lack of awareness of this type of risk. A reluctance to talk openly about issues appears to be the main obstacle to tackling these risks.

ESENER 2019 clearly shows further OSH issues for concern. More than a third of EU workplaces report having no form of employee representation, and more than a third report a lack of time or staff as a barrier to OSH management.

Between 2014 and 2019, the proportion of workplaces reporting a visit by the labour inspectorate in the previous 3 years fell in almost all countries.

The emerging issue of digitalisation and its impact on workers' safety and health is included for the first time in ESENER 2019. This reveals, for instance, that only 24% of workplaces using a digital technology reported having discussed the potential impact of such technologies on the safety and health of their workers. Focusing on the possible impacts that have been discussed, the need for continuous training to keep skills up to date comes first (77 % of workplaces in the EU27_2020), followed by prolonged sitting (65 %) and more flexibility for employees in terms of place of work and working time (63 %).

EU-OSHA's projects on digitalisation aim to make sure that policy-makers and workplaces have the information they need to take advantage of the benefits of technological developments while protecting employees. Digitalisation will also be the focus of EU-OSHA's 2023 Healthy Workplaces Campaign, as the Agency joins forces with its partners to raise awareness of the opportunities and risks associated with digitalisation.

Links: