

# 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)  
Country Report (Denmark)

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# 1 Introduction

This report presents the country case study for Denmark in the framework of the study: Management of psychosocial risks in European workplaces – qualitative evidence from the Third European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER 2019).

## 2 Legal and policy context

This chapter provides an overview of the national policy context concerning the:

- main laws and policies;
- existence of any objectives, targets, monitoring and evaluation approaches;
- inspection regime concerning micro and small establishments (MSEs) and psychosocial risks;
- specific policy initiatives targeting MSEs on the issue of psychosocial risks;
- training and courses on psychosocial risk management;
- public awareness campaigns; and
- sector or collective bargaining initiatives that have a focus on psychosocial risks management.

### 2.1 Overview of the legal and policy context

The most recent national strategy on occupational safety and health (OSH) in Denmark was adopted in April 2019 by the parliament: Agreement on new and improved occupational safety and health initiatives and orderly labour market conditions.<sup>1</sup> The strategy sets out the approach to a safe and healthy working environment in Denmark up until 2022. The strategy is called Strategy 2020 and builds on recommendations from an Expert Committee<sup>2</sup> tasked to identify appropriate OSH initiatives. Furthermore, the strategy was adopted in the light of an evaluation of the previous national OSH strategy that in some areas highlighted the need for improvements, especially with respect to the psychosocial working environment.<sup>3</sup>

The **Agreement on new and improved occupational safety and health initiatives and orderly labour market conditions** replaced the two prior agreements:

- Agreement on stronger health and safety initiatives – everyone is entitled to a safe and healthy working environment (2015); and
- A strategy for working environment efforts up to 2020 (2011).<sup>4</sup>

Another political agreement from 2019 on early retirement for those who have suffered burnouts or physical repercussions due to their work also contains a fund that can grant awards to projects in smaller firms. The projects funded have the goal of creating a good working environment, ensuring a long working life for staff and reducing absenteeism.<sup>5</sup>

A political agreement from 2020 sets new national goals for OSH initiatives<sup>6</sup>. 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 psychosocial working environment problems. As part of the agreement, social partners are in the process of setting targets that are more specific at sector level.

Other more specific national strategies remain in place; these are:

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://at.dk/en/about-us/about-the-wea/strategy-2020/>

<sup>2</sup> The Expert Committee was set up by the government after a report from The National Research Centre for Working Environment showed that the working environment in Denmark was not improving as planned. The Expert Committee made a report including a list of recommendations published in September 2018. See: [Et nyt og forbedret arbejdsmiljø \(bm.dk\)](https://at.dk/media/5493/3-evaluering-2020-maal.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://at.dk/media/5493/3-evaluering-2020-maal.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://at.dk/media/2953/strategy-working-environment-efforts-2020.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> For more information on the fund, see the website of the Danish Working Environment Authority (WEA), in Danish: [Bekendtgørelse om pulje til forebyggelse af nedslidning og arbejdsulykker i små private virksomheder - Arbejdstilsynet](https://at.dk/media/5493/3-evaluering-2020-maal.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://bm.dk/media/15538/aftale-om-nye-nationale-maal.pdf>

- Agreement on asbestos recommendations (2018);
- Agreement on occupational safety and health for firefighters (2018);
- Agreement on enhanced smiley scheme (2017); and
- Agreement on enhanced working environment certification (2016).

The Danish Working Environment Authority (WEA) has the main responsibility regarding implementing and controlling compliance with the Working Environment Act.<sup>7</sup> It is an agency under the Ministry for Employment, with the function of contributing to the creation of safe and healthy workplaces in Denmark. The WEA has the authority to draw up rules and provide information on health and safety at work; furthermore, the WEA carries out inspections at enterprises and can penalise enterprises for non-compliance.

In Denmark, the working environment is subject to various types of regulations. The Working Environment Act<sup>8</sup> is a framework act laying down the main rules and restrictions in Denmark. The framework act is implemented through executive orders. Executive orders are rules that are legally binding for enterprises. Furthermore, WEA guidelines are interpretations of the act and executive orders developed for enterprises and individuals to understand the regulations and implement necessary requirements. The WEA guidelines are not legal documents in themselves, but they are based on binding legal acts and therefore are considered as providing a robust legal interpretation of how the requirements should be followed.

The Working Environment Council is an independent council guiding and advising the Minister of Employment about current working environment challenges. The Working Environment Council consists of representations from the employers' organisations and the trade unions (social partners). Every year, the council provides the Minister of Employment with a review of developments in the area of working environment and an orientation on how the resources for the working environment area should be distributed.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, there exist five Sectoral Working Environment Councils playing a significant role in the working environment efforts in the different sectors.

The Council of Appeal on Health and Safety at Work deals with appeals or complaints against decisions made by the WEA in relation to the Danish Working Environment Act. The decisions taken by the council are binding for both enterprises and employees. If an employee or employer disagrees with the decision made by the Council of Appeal on Health and Safety at Work, the person can direct an inquiry to the Danish Parliamentary 'Ombudsman' or a court of law.

The National Research Centre for Working Environment (NFA) is an independent centre under the Ministry for Employment. The NFA researches, communicates and provides training on ensuring a safe and healthy working environment. Together with the WEA, the NFA evaluated the 2011 national strategy (A strategy for working environment efforts up to 2020).

Finally, the Danish Working Environment Research Fund supports research initiatives focusing on improving the working environment in Danish workplaces. During the period 2021-2023, the fund supported research and development projects within the themes: 'Relationships between work environment and health', 'OSH activities at company level', and 'Implementation and dissemination of OSH interventions and initiatives'.

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<sup>7</sup> See description of the WEA and the Working Environment Act at: [The working environment legislation – Arbejdstilsynet](#)

<sup>8</sup> See: [Working Environment Act – Arbejdstilsynet \(at.dk\)](#)

<sup>9</sup> Read more about the Working Environment Council and its assignments at: [Arbejdsmiljørådets § 66-redegørelse til beskæftigelsesministeren \(amr.dk\)](#)

As part of the 'Danish Model'<sup>10</sup>, it should be noted that the social partners<sup>11</sup> have a significant and institutionalised policy-making influence on the legal framework covering the working environment. The social partners are consulted about all amendments and were also represented in the committee responsible for the executive order on psychosocial working environment.

## 2.2 Key legal requirements, and recent legislative proposals and revisions

Requirements to manage the psychosocial working environment have featured in the 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.<sup>12</sup>

As part of the implementation of the Strategy 2020 on Working Environment,<sup>13</sup> an executive order<sup>14</sup> focusing specifically on the psychosocial working environment was published in November 2020. The executive order aims to:

- clarify the existing regulations on preventing risks in the psychosocial working environment to ease communication of the requirements to employers; and
- make it clear to employers that the WEA will react to poor psychosocial risk management and outcomes.

The executive order does not change the legal status of psychosocial risks at workplaces but clarifies and elaborates the relevant rules and requirements to enhance their clarity for employers. In doing so, it aims to increase the awareness of the importance of the psychosocial working environment among enterprises.

The executive order has prompted the WEA to develop three new guidelines about psychosocial risks. The new guidelines will focus on high workload and time pressure, unclear and conflicting demands at work, and high emotional demands when working with people. The first of the new guidelines was published in the winter of 2021<sup>15</sup> while the two remaining guidelines are expected to be published in 2022. The existing WEA guidelines focusing on psychosocial risks address work-related violence and offensive behaviour, including bullying and sexual harassment.

Other recent legislative revisions in the psychosocial risk management area include:

- 2016: An amendment in the law of the Working Environment Act covering work-related violence outside of office hours, making violence outside office hours the employer's responsibility.
- 2017: The national strategy 'Strengthening of the Occupational and Health Certification' introduced an amendment to the Working Environment Act on the certification of enterprises, focusing on the psychosocial working environment.<sup>16</sup> Strengthened further with a later amendment in 2018, it was decided that accredited bodies that wish to award enterprises with recognised working environment certificates must ensure that their auditors have a minimum of four days training in the psychosocial working environment.

<sup>10</sup> The Danish labour market model is built on a division between the state and the social partners. The social partners have a large degree of influence on employment policy, age and working conditions through collective agreements and tripartite cooperation, as well as the high degree of organisation (organisation of employees and employers is essential for a collective bargaining system to work).

<sup>11</sup> The social partners are employers and employees organised in various types of associations.

<sup>12</sup> See: [https://www.ft.dk/ripdf/samling/20121/lovforslag/l112/20121\\_l112\\_som\\_fremsat.pdf](https://www.ft.dk/ripdf/samling/20121/lovforslag/l112/20121_l112_som_fremsat.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> See: [Strategy 2020 – Arbejdstilsynet](#)

<sup>14</sup> See: [Executive order on psychosocial working environment – Arbejdstilsynet \(at.dk\)](#)

<sup>15</sup> See: <https://at.dk/regler/at-vejledninger/stor-arbejdsmaengde-tidspres-4-1-1/>

<sup>16</sup> The executive order, in Danish: <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20171/lovforslag/l21/index.htm>

- 2018: An amendment entered into force empowering the WEA to talk to employees about physical and psychosocial risks during inspections without others, including when the employer is present.<sup>17</sup>
- 2019: The WEA was empowered to make judgements on cases of offensive behaviour that are not bullying in nature. Prior to this, the WEA could only manage cases on the types of offensive behaviour that were bullying in nature.

## 2.3 Psychosocial risk management policy objectives, targets, monitoring and evaluation approaches

The Strategy 2020 focuses on six main priorities:

- Higher priority for orderly conditions on the labour market
- More sector-oriented inspection campaigns, with a focus on burnout and fatigue
- New tools for psychological working environment initiatives
- Clear regulations on occupational safety and health
- Regulations for children and young people
- More focus on chemicals<sup>18</sup>

The evaluation managed by the WEA and NFA in 2019 showed that the key target for psychosocial risks was not met by 2018. The progress made was measured against an impact index measuring the psychosocial environment. The comparison showed that employees who suffer from psychological strain, symptoms of stress and depression have increased by 6.2% from 2012 to 2018.<sup>19</sup>

The parties behind the Strategy 2020 discuss annually the status of the national goals, including progress made. For example, working environment monitoring will be part of the follow-up on the goals for OSH.

## 2.4 Inspection regime for MSEs with a focus on psychosocial risks management

The WEA carries out inspections of both Danish and foreign enterprises based in Denmark. These inspections take the form of 'normal inspections' that are exploratory in nature or 'special inspections' that are mostly carried out as a result of evidence from earlier injunctions or the occurrence of accidents.

The WEA chooses enterprises based on different selection methods informed by a risk profile approach<sup>20</sup> that covers establishments of different sizes. In 2020 and 2021, the WEA carried out inspections specially focused on psychosocial risks. The enterprises chosen for these inspections are larger organisations with specific challenges, including hospitals, schools, prisons and enterprises in the care sector.

**In general, an inspection consists of three main elements:**

- Firstly, the WEA examines the establishment's working environment. This includes its risk assessment (Arbejdspladsvurdering, APV) and the annual discussion of the working environment at the workplace.
- The WEA then assesses the specific working conditions at the workplace. This element of the inspection varies according to the specific sector and workplace.

<sup>17</sup> See: [https://www.ft.dk/samling/20171/lovforslag/l181/20171\\_l181\\_som\\_fremsat.htm](https://www.ft.dk/samling/20171/lovforslag/l181/20171_l181_som_fremsat.htm)

<sup>18</sup> See: [Strategy 2020 – Arbejdstilsynet](#)

<sup>19</sup> See: <https://at.dk/media/5493/3-evaluering-2020-maal.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> 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 \(at.dk\)](#)



- Lastly, the WEA briefs the employer and employees about the consequences of the visit and summarises the inspection in a written report.

**The enterprise's own working environment responsibilities** include the APV a risk assessment and an annual discussion of the working environment. These requirements correspond to establishments of all sizes. It is the responsibility of the employer to prepare an APV at least every three years and to ensure that employees are involved in the process.

The APV consists of several questions concerning both the physical and the psychosocial working environment, and it differs from sector to sector. Exactly which method an enterprise uses to prepare the APV is decided individually but must include:

- identification and mapping of the enterprise's entire working environment;
- description and assessment of risks or problems facing the working environment;
- description of the approach to managing and monitoring sick leave;
- risk mitigation initiatives and a corresponding action plan; and
- guidelines on how to follow up on the action plan.

The APV should consider and ideally measure psychosocial risk factors such as levels of trust and credibility between employers and employees, levels of stress, and incidents of violence or sexual harassment.

The APV and the description of the working environment at the enterprise should be discussed annually. In enterprises with fewer than 10 employees, these discussions will include all employees, while other enterprises have the option of holding discussions in a Working Environment Organisation (WEO<sup>21</sup>). The WEO should include the employer (or a representative of the employer), one or more working environment representatives, and assigned leaders. The working environment representative is selected by the employees and will represent their collective view in the discussion. The number of assigned leaders will depend on the size of the company. The assigned leaders are appointed by the employer. They are employees whose main responsibility is to manage different departments of the firm, and they will therefore more likely represent the manager's view in OSH discussions. Furthermore, the working environment representative has different assignments during the year to ensure and improve the physical and psychosocial working environment.

Enterprises with fewer than 10 employees do not need to organise the OSH discussions in a WEO and are not obliged to appoint a Working Environment Representative. However, they do need to conduct an APV at least every third year.

## 2.5 Specific policy initiatives targeting MSEs and psychosocial risks

- The Danish agreement (2019) contains multiple initiatives to support MSEs to comply with the relevant requirements, including:
- New communication efforts and digital tools to support compliance efforts in the psychological working environment area, including a new online tool for carrying out the APV.
- A focus on the development and provision of training for employers on psychosocial risks and the psychosocial working environment. In collaboration with the social partners, the Ministry for Employment will gather and share knowledge and experiences with relevant training programmes and services.
- Companies can enter an 'Agreement Process' with the WEA to go beyond minimum standards relating to psychosocial risks.

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.hst.aau.dk/safety/>

- Inspections that target problems in the working environment in sectors that are particularly exposed to health and safety issues.

2019 Agreement on early retirement:

- A fund that is part of the agreement gives grants to access authorised health and safety consultants, advice on physical exercise or testing of technical equipment.

The initiatives from 2019 have a specific remit to target smaller firms with comparatively less resources. Both the 'Agreement Process' initiative and the grants for specific projects will help smaller firms to improve their working environments in a more proactive way.

The NFA has in 2020 developed a new digital tool to help companies, especially smaller ones, to manage psychosocial risk at the workplace.<sup>22</sup> The tool is called 'DPQ-workplace scheme on psychological working environment and wellbeing' and consists of a survey developed by researchers at the NFA. Companies can complete the survey and compare the results with a national average based on responses from 5,000 employees in Denmark.

## 2.6 Training and courses focusing on psychosocial risks

Enterprises with more than 9 employees in Denmark should establish a WEO consisting of, among others, assigned leaders and working environment representatives selected by the employees. All working environment representatives and leaders are obligated to attend a three-day course in safety and health at work within three months of their appointment.

Furthermore, the employer should offer further training for the second and third year of their appointment. The employer is obligated to pay for the course held by a provider approved by the WEA. The courses cover the physical and psychosocial working environment, including the special tasks and responsibilities of the working environment representative.

Lots of other courses focusing specifically on the psychosocial working environment are offered by private providers. A particular focus is on courses for leaders and directors at workplaces. These are not legal requirements. One example is the course called 'The voluntary leader education in psychological working environment' especially targeting public leaders.

## 2.7 Public awareness campaigns

The WEA and the five Sector Working Environment Committees have implemented several 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?' published by the WEA in collaboration with the five Sector Working Environment Committees.<sup>23</sup> The campaign focuses on sexual harassment, the legal requirements that apply (the Working Environment Act and the Gender Equality Act), how tools like the APV can reduce the risks of sexual harassment, and the mandated responsibilities corresponding to the employer, employees 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.

In 2021, the WEA launched a new campaign on sexual harassment: 'Sexual harassment must be stopped. We can help'. The campaign informs employers and employees about the possibly to contact the WEA hotline and about tools and guides on the WEA website. Furthermore, the WEA holds information meetings and will relaunch the campaign 'When do you cross the line?' In 2021 and 2022,

<sup>22</sup> See: <https://nfa.dk/da/nyt/nyheder/2020/arbejdspladsens-psykosociale-arbejdsmiljoe-kan-nu-sammenlignes-med-nationalt-gennemsnit>

<sup>23</sup> See description of the campaign at: [Om kampagnen - Arbejdstilsynet \(at.dk\)](#)

the WEA will, via inspections, have an increased focus on guiding companies on how to prevent sexual harassment and other offensive behaviour.

The five Sector Working Environment Committees play an important role in raising the awareness of safety and health at workplaces in the different sectors; for instance, they publish campaigns, tools, guides and other relevant materials. For example, the Council for Welfare and Public Administration prepared the campaign 'Psychological Risk Assessment'.<sup>24</sup> The campaign focuses on how APV is an important tool to improve the psychosocial working environment and how different enterprises in the sector use APV in their daily work.

## 2.8 Sector or collective bargaining initiatives that have a focus on psychosocial risk management

According to the Working Environment Act, collective agreements between social partners can limit the WEA's right to inspect some areas of the working environment in an enterprise. However, only designated areas of the Working Environment Act can be included in collective agreements and fall under the responsibility of social partners. Therefore, social partners have the right to include and enforce restrictions on the psychosocial working environment excluding rules on physical and psychological violence, sexual harassment and other kinds of harassment<sup>25</sup>.

Most of the established collective agreements will therefore include restrictions and guidelines about the psychosocial working environment. For example, the Confederation of Danish Industry and CO-Industri concluded such a collective agreement that covers the industrial sector. The collective agreement states that even though the employer has the overall responsibility of the psychosocial working environment, the Cooperation Committee (consisting of employees and leaders) is responsible to develop guidelines and new initiatives improving the psychosocial working environment.

## 3 ESENER 2019 country-level results

This chapter provides an analysis of the ESENER 2019 country-level results to provide an overview of key national trends in MSEs, including the:

- inspection regime and reasons for compliance;
- employee representation methods; and
- establishment-level responses to psychosocial risk management.

We also consider how the situation has changed since 2014, when the ESENER 2014 survey was conducted.

### 3.1 Inspection regime and reasons for compliance

#### *Frequency of inspections*

The results of ESENER 2014 suggested that the possibility of being inspected for workplace health and safety conditions in many cases is a strong motivator for employers to act on OSH matters. Furthermore, they showed that the countries reporting a high frequency of labour inspectorate visits typically also use the inspectorates as a source of information on OSH, even though the primary role of labour inspectorates is enforcement of legal obligations.

In ESENER 2014, the proportion of establishments in Denmark reporting that they had been visited by the labour inspectorate within the three previous years was one of the highest in the EU (77.2%).

<sup>24</sup> See description of the campaign at: [Psyisk APV + \(arbejdsmiljoweb.dk\)](https://psykiskapv.dk/)

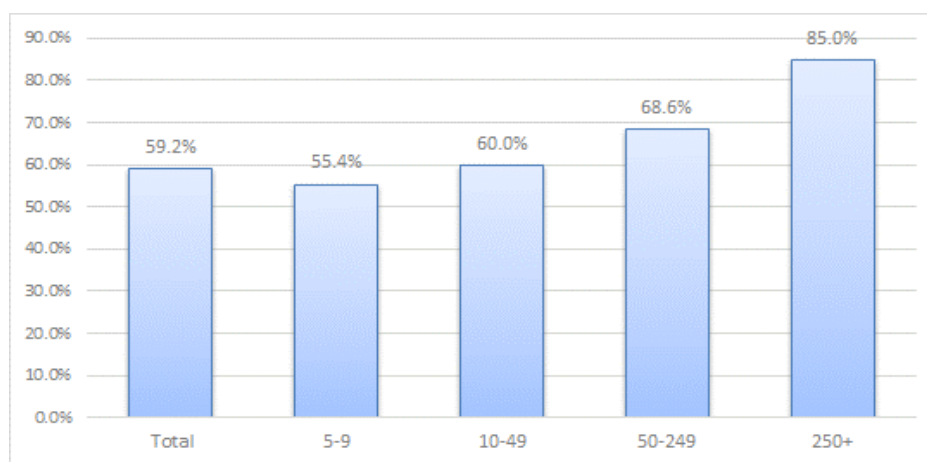
<sup>25</sup> See guidelines here: <https://at.dk/regler/at-vejledninger/aftaler-begraenser-arbejdstilsynets-tilsyn-f-0-8/>

According to ESENER 2019, the share of establishments reporting an inspection decreased to 59.2%, which, however, still is well above the EU average of 41%.<sup>26</sup>

This suggests a slightly worrying trend considering the overall reduction in establishments reporting inspections and the reduced opportunities to obtain advice from the labour inspectorate. However, the trend can also be connected to a new and more risk-based selection of companies for inspections.<sup>27</sup>

Similar to previous ESENER rounds, the likelihood of labour inspectorate visits is directly linked to company size, which indicates particularly high levels of compliance and opportunities to acquire new knowledge from the inspectorate among large firms in Denmark.

**Figure 1: Establishments visited by the labour inspectorate in the last 3 years – by company size (% of establishments)**



Source: Ecorys analysis of ESENER 2019 results

## Reasons for compliance

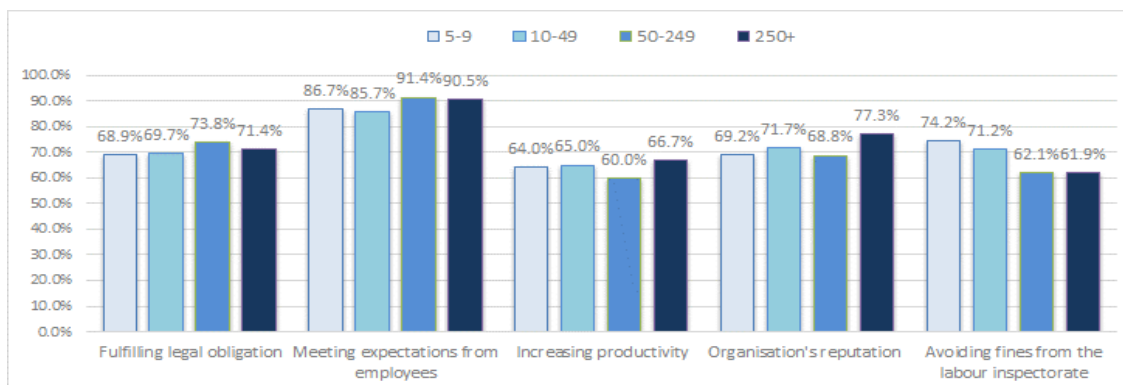
As mentioned previously, the likelihood of a visit from the labour inspectorate motivates employers to improve OSH. It is therefore not surprising that ESENER 2014 found that one of the main reasons for addressing OSH was to fulfil legal obligations. This was the case especially in the Mining and Quarrying sector, here in 93% of Danish establishments this was reported to be the main reason.

ESENER 2014 found that in Denmark, the most commonly selected reasons for addressing OSH were meeting expectations from employees or their representatives (85.1%) and avoiding fines (71.7%). ESENER 2019 findings suggest that the main reason for addressing OSH across establishment sizes also concern meeting employees' expectations (86.7%), which reflects the flat hierarchies and strong union and employee involvement in the Danish work culture. Company size does not seem to be a main driver of employers' motivation to address OSH. However, smaller companies seem to be more influenced by potential fines from the labour inspectorate, probably due to their comparative lack of resources.

<sup>26</sup> EU-OSHA (2019) First Findings: European Survey of New and Emerging Risks at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/third-european-survey-enterprises-new-and-emerging-risks-esener-3/view>

<sup>27</sup> Read more about the special inspections and the selection of companies here: [Hvad er specialtilsyn? - Arbejdstilsynet \(at.dk\)](https://www.arbejdstilsynet.dk/Hvad-er-specialtilsyn?_ga=2.151111111.151111111.151111111-151111111.151111111)

**Figure 2: Reasons for addressing health and safety in the establishments – by company size (% of establishments)**



Source: Ecorys analysis of ESENER 2019 results

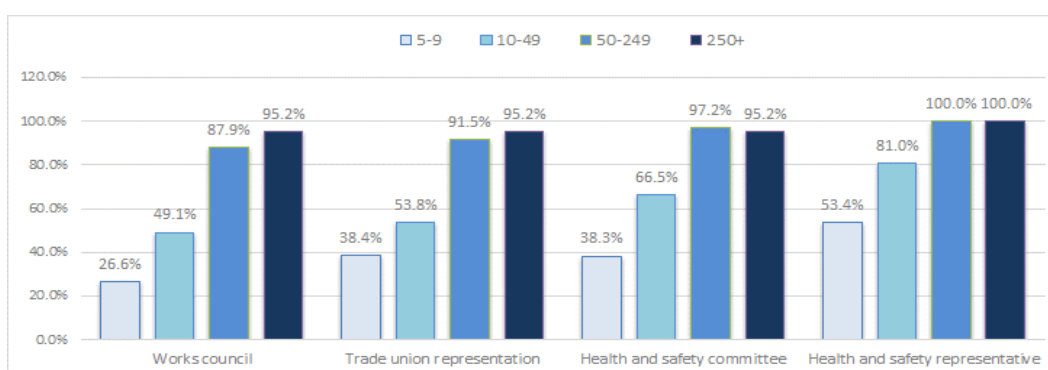
## 3.2 Employee representation methods

### Forms of representation

As already indicated in previous ESENER reports, there is strong evidence that generally workplaces with formal employee representation have better OSH management outcomes. In addition, ESENER 2014 results for Denmark indicated that larger companies (94.7%) when compared to micro establishments (45.5%) are more likely to have specific OSH representatives in place.<sup>28</sup> ESENER 2019 results also show that in Denmark, 95.2% of companies do have some form of employee representation and that this is strongly driven by company size. For the smaller entities, it now shows also that there are more employee representatives. For example, 53.4% of micro firms indicated having OSH representation.

This is not surprising since only enterprises with more than nine employees are obliged to establish a WEO consisting of assigned leaders and working environment representatives. However, it seems that some small companies with more than 10 employees do not have an OSH representative.

**Figure 3: Forms of employee representation in the establishments – by company size (% of establishments)**



Source: Ecorys analysis of ESENER 2019 results

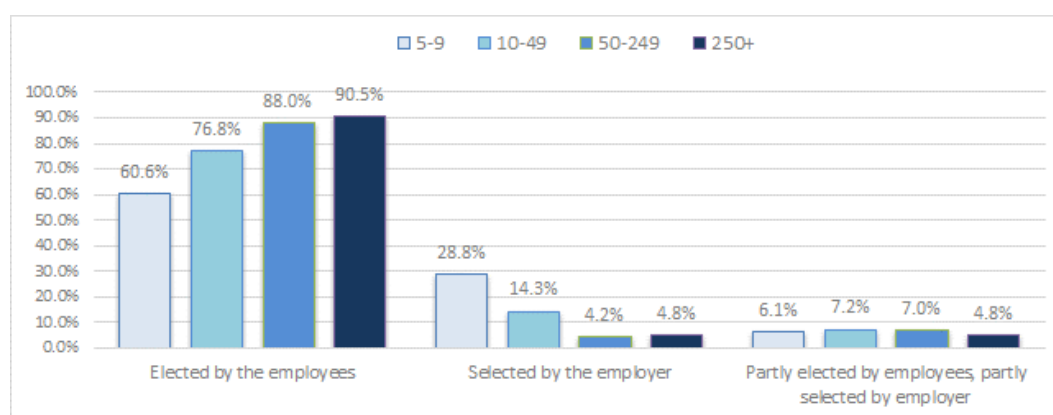
<sup>28</sup> ESENER 2014 Overview Report at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/second-european-survey-enterprises-new-and-emerging-risks-esener-2-overview-report/view>.

## Representative election methods

ESENER 2019 found that the appointment methods of OSH representatives reflect the diversity of national frameworks. In the EU-27, the OSH representative is selected by the employer in most cases (56%), followed by bottom-up election methods where employees select the OSH representative (34%). Denmark, along with the other Nordic countries and Italy, shows the highest share of OSH representatives elected by employees (72%).<sup>29</sup> As shown in Figure 4, this is driven by company size, where large enterprises are more likely to have OSH representatives elected by the employer.

Overall, this suggests compliance with the obligation to allow employees to select representatives for the WEO in cases where an employer has five or more temporary employees at a workplace and the work continues for longer than 14 days.

**Figure 4: The ways that health and safety representatives are elected in the establishments – by company size (% of establishments)**



Source: Ecorys analysis of ESENER 2019 results

## Frequency of discussions between management and employee representatives

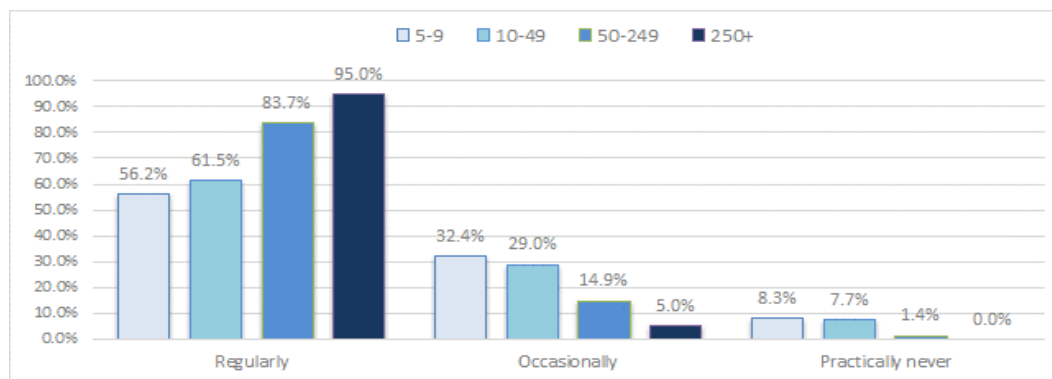
ESENER 2014 found that OSH issues were discussed regularly between employee representatives and management in more than half of establishments that have some form of employee representation and that the frequency of discussion is positively related to enterprise size.<sup>30</sup> For smaller enterprises, it was found to be more of an ad hoc approach and seemingly only to address OSH issues whenever certain problems arise.

In Denmark, companies with more than nine employees are legally obliged to send WEO representatives and leaders to attend a three-day course in safety and health at work within three months of their appointment and to also further training regularly, which due to the knowledge obtained is likely to facilitate frequent discussions between representatives and the management. This is reflected in the results of ESENER 2019 that show a relatively high frequency, with a total of 63% of enterprises reporting regular discussions and 28% reporting occasional discussions. This frequency is again driven by company size. Compared to ESENER 2014, the results have remained relatively constant.

<sup>29</sup> EU-OSHA (2019) First Findings: European Survey of New and Emerging Risks.

<sup>30</sup> ESENER 2014 Overview Report.

**Figure 5: Frequency of discussion of health and safety matters between employee representatives and the management – by company size (% of establishments)**



Source: Ecorys analysis of ESENER 2019 results

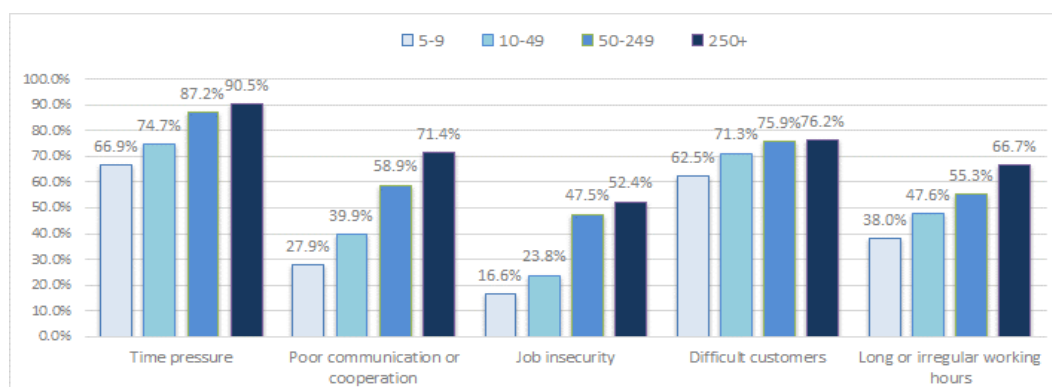
### 3.3 Establishment-level responses to psychosocial risk management

#### *Identification of psychosocial risks*

ESENER 2014 findings suggested that the psychosocial risk factors most commonly present in establishments were 'having to deal with difficult customers', followed by 'time pressure' and 'long or irregular working hours'.<sup>31</sup> ESENER 2019 shows that at the EU level, long or irregular working hours have decreased but other risk factors have largely remained unchanged.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, ESENER 2019 found that in Denmark, the psychosocial risks listed are driven by company size with employees of large companies struggling more with time pressure (72.9%), difficult customers (68.2%), and long or irregular working hours (44.7%). Compared to ESENER 2014, there has been an increase in poor communication or cooperation of 9 percentage points, and job insecurity is increasingly being reported in firms with 50+ employees, while there is a perceived decrease of this psychosocial risk among smaller companies. Please note that the data was collected before the COVID-19 crisis and may need to be treated with caution given the changed nature of the working environment.

**Figure 6: Psychosocial risks identified in the establishments – by company size (% of establishments)**



Source: Ecorys analysis of ESENER 2019 results

<sup>31</sup> ESENER 2014 Overview Report.

<sup>32</sup> EU-OSHA (2019) First Findings: European Survey of New and Emerging Risks.

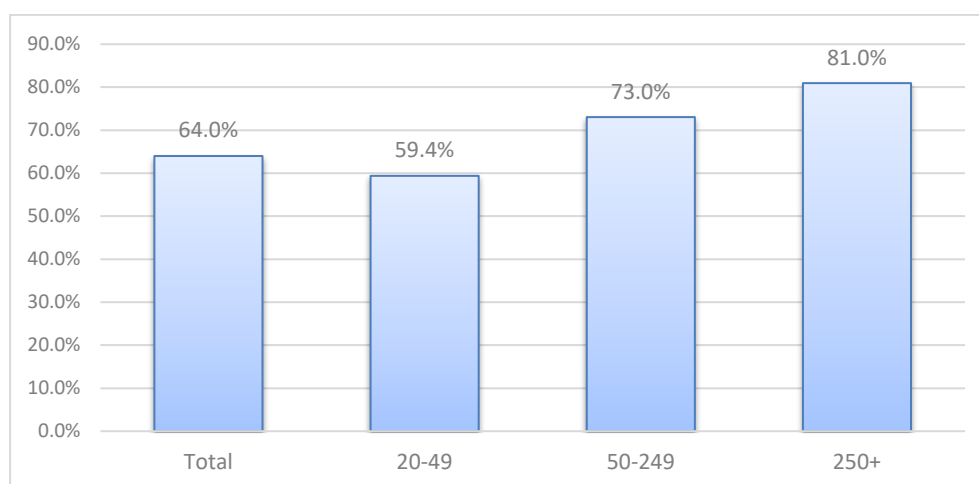


### ***Introduction of action plans to prevent work-related stress***

Across the EU-27, ESENER 2019 found that there are sectoral differences regarding the use of action plans to tackle psychosocial risks. 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. This result is consistent with ESENER 2009 and ESENER 2014. ESENER 2014 also found that across the EU-27 action plans are most commonly used in large companies (72%) compared to 52% of small enterprises that had an action plan in place.

In Denmark, the introduction of action plans to reduce work-related stress is relatively high for all categories but most common among larger companies (81%). This may be a reflection of those companies being under more pressure due to their higher psychosocial risks identified as well as frequent visits from authorities. In addition, these companies have the highest levels of institutionalised employee representation which most likely develop and implement such action plans. In total, 64% of enterprises reported having an action plan in place compared to only 51% in ESENER 2014.

**Figure 7: Introduction of action plans to reduce work-related stress in the establishments – by company size**



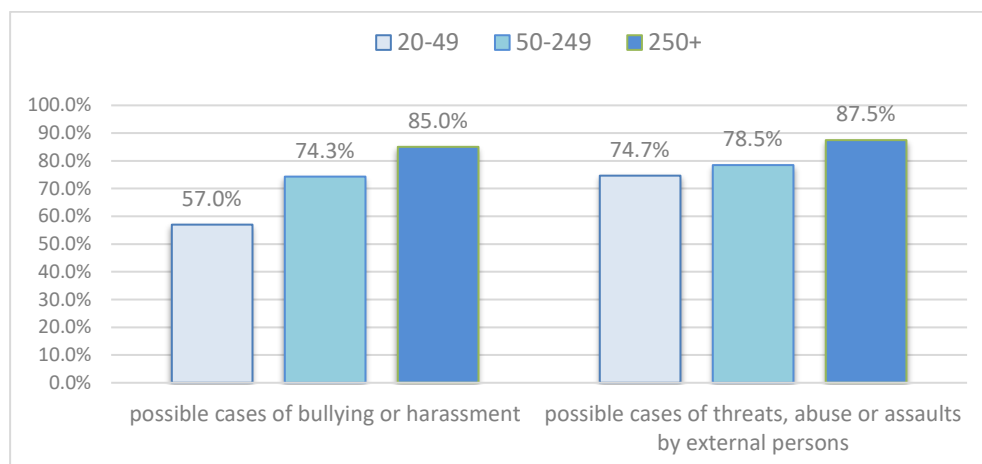
Source: Ecorys analysis of ESENER 2019 results

### ***Introduction of procedures to deal with bullying and violence***

In ESENER 2014, enterprises in Denmark reported a relatively low introduction of procedures that deal with violence by external persons (65.1%) and procedures that deal with bullying or harassment (54.2%).

ESENER 2019 shows that such procedures have since become more common across firm sizes. A total of 76.3% of companies now have procedures in place that deal with cases of threats, abuse or assault by external persons and 62.8% have procedures in place that address cases of bullying or harassment. These procedures are again positively related to company size.



**Figure 8: Establishments with procedures for dealing with possible risks – by company size**

Source: Ecorys analysis of ESENER 2019 results

### ***Introduction of measures to prevent psychosocial risks***

The following ESENER item provides insight to the extent of measures introduced to mitigate psychosocial risks. ESENER 2019 results show that overall, 'allowing employees to take more decisions on how to do their job' was adopted most commonly by 78.4% of all companies having implemented such measures. Interestingly, this is likely due to the Danish work culture that typically allows for independent working and decentralised decision-making and would be expected generally by employees.

Other measures that are commonly used are reorganising work (58%), confidential counselling for employees (56.9%), and intervention if excessively long or irregular hours are worked (42.4%). Compared to ESENER 2014, measures aimed at conflict resolution have become more common across company sizes, and larger companies have increased their efforts to intervene if excessively long or irregular hours are worked by 13.5 percentage points.

**Figure 9: Measures for psychosocial risks used in the establishments – by company size**

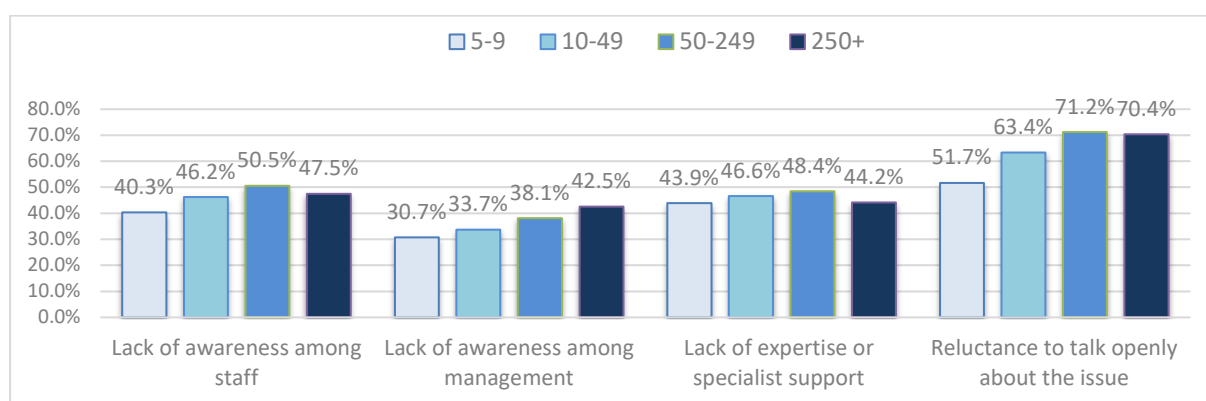
Source: Ecorys analysis of ESENER 2019 results

## Main barriers and difficulties in addressing OSH

Building on ESENER 2019, Figure 10 shows which main barriers and difficulties the establishments in Denmark encounter when addressing psychosocial risks in the company. As the figure shows, the most common difficulty across company size is reluctance to talk openly about issues connected to psychosocial risks. The same picture was true for ESENER 2014. Psychosocial risks are connected to issues like workload, time pressure, bullying, communication, harassment and difficult clients. Clearly, these are sensitive issues and therefore much harder to talk about.

As ESENER 2019 shows, this barrier is especially present in medium-size and larger companies (70%). The literature shows that smaller companies often have a more informal and open culture, and it is therefore perceived as easier to bring up sensitive topics like psychosocial risks.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, around four out of five enterprises consider lack of expertise or specialist support as a main difficulty when addressing psychosocial risks. This barrier is consistent across company size.

**Figure 10: Main barriers and difficulties in addressing psychosocial risks in the establishment – by company size**



Source: Ecorys analysis of ESENER 2019 results<sup>34</sup>

## 4 Main findings from the qualitative study

This chapter provides an analysis of feedback from establishments, considering common views reported by both managers and employees, and areas where key differences can be detected. The key areas assessed included:

1. the links between workplace culture, COVID-19, productivity, absenteeism and presenteeism and approaches to psychosocial management;
2. awareness level of psychosocial risk factors and obligation to manage them;
3. the links between psychosocial risk management and overall management commitment to OSH;
4. extent of psychosocial risk management and procedures in place;
5. dedicated resources and degree of worker participation; and
6. barriers and drivers to psychosocial risk management and support needed.

<sup>33</sup> D'Urso, P. A., Graham, D., Krell, R., Paradise Maul, J., Pernsteiner, C., Shelton, D. K., & Piercy, G. W. (2015). An exploration of organizational structure and strategy in virtual organizations: A literature review. *Journal of Perspectives in Organizational Behavior, Management, & Leadership*, 1(1), 25-40. Or read more here: [Flat hierarchy \(sdu.dk\)](https://sdu.dk/flat-hierarchy)

<sup>34</sup> Only those companies that consider psychosocial risks as more difficult than other risks were invited to answer this question. The sample size is therefore lower than for the other questions (the sample is normally 1,500 companies in Denmark although it is 608 companies for this question).

The chapter provides an analysis of the main similarities and differences between establishments according to sector, sizes and so on.

## 4.1 Sample of in-depth interviews

All interviewed companies are selected based on their size, sector and answers to the ESENER 2019 survey. Overall, a total of 62 companies were contacted (by email and follow-up phone calls). As the interview requests were made between November 2020 and April 2021, the companies were under a lot of restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown. While many employees were working from home, some managers also had to send employees home on a wage compensation from the state or in the last instance let employees go. Many companies were under a lot of stress due to the changed circumstances, and it was therefore harder than normal to recruit companies for interviews.

In total, 42 interviews were carried out with small and micro-sized enterprises.<sup>35</sup> These included 19 double interviews (with a manager and an employee of the same company) and four single interviews (with either a manager or employee). Interviews were carried out either by phone or online through 'Teams'. Face-to-face interviews were not possible due to the need to limit contact due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1 indicates the sector and size of establishments recruited for the interview programme.

**Table 1: Interviews by size class and sector**

No	Firm size	Sector	Double/single interview
1	Micro	Agriculture: Animal and plant production	Double
2	Micro	Construction: painting	Single
3	Micro	Financial and insurance activities: bank	Single
4	Micro	Restaurants	Single
5	Micro	Wholesale of pharmaceutical goods	Double
6	Micro	Wholesale of household goods	Double
7	Micro	Wholesale of agricultural machinery, equipment and supplies	Double
8	Micro	Public sector: Child day-care activities	Double
9	Micro	Public sector: Human health and social work activities: School	Double
10	Micro	Public sector: Child day-care activities	Double
11	Small	Arts, entertainment and recreation: Museum activities	Double

<sup>35</sup> Small enterprises are defined as companies with 10-49 employees, micro-sized enterprises are defined as companies with fewer than 10 employees.

No	Firm size	Sector	Double/single interview
12	Small	Buying and selling of own real estate	Double
13	Small	Engineering activities and related technical consultancy	Double
14	Small	Engineering activities and related technical consultancy	Double
15	Small	Museum activities	Double
16	Small	Other services activities: Church	Double
17	Small	Trade union	Double
18	Small	Waste management	Double
19	Small	Water supply	Single
20	Small	Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	Double
21	Small	Public sector: Child day-care activities	Double
22	Small	Public sector: Residential care activities for the mentally ill and substance abuse	Double
23	Small	Public sector: Residential care activities for mental retardation, mental health and substance abuse	Double

## 4.2 The links between workplace culture, productivity, absenteeism and presenteeism and approaches to psychosocial risk management

This section describes the links between workplace culture, COVID-19, productivity, absenteeism and presenteeism and the approaches to psychosocial risk management among MSEs in Denmark.

Danish establishments, including MSEs, are characterised by a flat organisational hierarchy and an informal and open approach to communication between management and employees. The work culture also actively encourages measures to promote employee wellbeing, employee participation, and decentralised decision-making around working methods and approaches. Responsibility is often placed on employees to achieve results without significant involvement or micromanagement from senior colleagues. Moreover, many companies pride themselves with professionalism and robust quality management, which was felt also to be related to a positive approach to OSH management generally.

The feedback of the interviewed establishments suggests that the work culture in Denmark provides immediate opportunities to develop a stronger approach to psychosocial risk management considering that employers are open to new ideas to strengthen organisational performance and are already supportive of staff who wish to raise concerns around psychosocial risks.

At the same time, it seems that the culture of decentralised decision-making and worker independence may be an obstacle to reform, considering that managers expect workers to take the initiative when issues arise. Also, employees do not feel comfortable or supported in talking to management or colleagues about psychosocial risks. This is even a feature of the establishments where existing

company policies or working methods are purportedly conducive to receiving suggestions or feedback from employees.

## Company culture

Company culture has a huge effect on the relations and dialogue between employees and management, the relative openness to new ideas, and the degree to which employees can raise concerns and talk about psychosocial risks with colleagues. Compared to other countries, Danish MSEs are often characterised by a less hierarchical and flat organisational structure, open dialogue, and an informal approach to communication between management and employees.<sup>36</sup> This research shows how these organisational features can have both positive and negative impacts on psychosocial risk management.

### Common view

In most organisations, managers and employees agreed that the culture is informal but professional, and that hierarchies are flat and superiors are approachable. Many also stressed the open and friendly relations among employees, and a shared feeling of trust and teamwork resulting in a sense of 'belonging'.

This positive working environment is highly valued and appreciated by managers and employees. Both find that it makes establishments 'better' than what they could be otherwise. A core aspect is that managers take an active and sincere interest in learning about the needs of their employees and the overall wellbeing of the organisation.

Many interviewees also stressed the high degree of worker independence. This means that employees can take control over their own time, place of work, and choice of and approach to managing assignments, responsibilities and personal development. The latter feature often forms part of formal employee contractual relations and employee reviews.

Overall, the flat hierarchies, informality, independence and openness clearly reflect the typical Danish work culture. Moreover, they are conducive to a positive and sociable working environment. Nevertheless, the Danish work culture has some weak spots. Employees' high level of independence may not only create more freedom but may also lead to work overload or time pressure. Sometimes employees do not take enough time off. This is the case especially in highly professional, competitive or goal-orientated working environments where status or recognition can be attained through scaling up one's workload or achieving excellent results over sustained periods. Thus, decentralised and collaborative methods of working need to be navigated carefully by staff who are keen to establish themselves as effective team players.

In many cases, it is assumed that the Danish 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, other proactive or reactive measures are typically not deemed necessary or have not been considered.

In addition, psychosocial issues are often stigmatised and hard to talk about. Therefore, relying too much on employees to bring up potential issues in ad hoc conversations may result in risks not being detected and mitigated early on, or are overlooked entirely without the knowledge of management. Thus, it is more essential than ever to beef up the approach to psychosocial risk management, by establishing its rationale and measures more clearly and purposively in the Danish work culture and environment.

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<sup>36</sup> D'Urso, P. A., Graham, D., Krell, R., Paradise Maul, J., Pernsteiner, C., Shelton, D. K., & Piercy, G. W. (2015). An exploration of organizational structure and strategy in virtual organizations: A literature review. *Journal of Perspectives in Organizational Behavior, Management, & Leadership*, 1(1), 25-40. Or read more here: [Flat hierarchy \(sdu.dk\)](http://Flat%20hierarchy%20(sdu.dk))

### Differences between managers and employee representatives

Often managers rely on the familiar and friendly work culture to boost company morale, especially in small companies, and therefore assume that employees will bring up psychosocial issues in conversations. The occasional internal company 'Friday bar' is also generally recognised as a good practice in supporting positive interaction between colleagues.

Most of the interviewed employees appreciated the key features of the Danish working environment. However, several employees expressed a different opinion. For example, some managers mentioned weekly meetings as an opportunity to address any issues. However, when psychosocial risks are not included in meeting agendas, it is unlikely that people speak up. Another possibility is that when issues are placed on the agenda, the likelihood is that they are already quite serious and may have already caused some harm.

One case showed that if a manager controls the agenda setting for the meeting, then the possibilities to voice concerns are reduced. For example, a small company provided feedback where bullying and poor manager–employee relations have caused significant problems for a long period of time. The employee described the meeting between management and employees as follows:

#### Employee in a small firm:

*'Previously, we had staff meetings every month but now they are held every sixth month instead. It is the "bully" who controls the meetings and the other employees do not dare to speak.'*

Other managers think that employees are all getting on well, managing their workload appropriately, talking daily and attending the 'Friday bars'. All of these suggest to the managers that the psychosocial work environment is under control. However, simultaneously, the employees of such firms have reported unsatisfactory APV results on employee survey measures for psychosocial risks. According to them, poor communication among managers and poor collaboration with employees may be reasons for this discrepancy, as one employee explains below:

#### Employee OSH representative in a small firm:

*'We are having a good and open dialogue generally at meetings and so on, but we are doing APVs continuously and they are actually not showing good results in terms of the survey feedback obtained from staff. This is due to management and problems with collaboration'*

In a similar way, some employees also stressed the overall good level of communication. They however also pointed out that communication across divisions/sections sometimes is lacking, which managers do not always pick up on. In some cases, this causes problems when employees need to collaborate or obtain work outputs from colleagues in other departments. This could be seen as part of the Danish work culture where the practice of decentralised decision-making may not be supportive of managerial interventions between departments or in areas where managers do not, or feel they do not have, responsibilities.

### COVID-19

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic affected various aspects of employees' and managers' psychosocial working environments. First, increased social isolation and working from home had a negative impact on social relations, both between employees and between employees and management. In addition, there was less room for ad hoc conversations, which form an important part of the work culture in many Danish establishments. However, the interviews have also shown that through this, many have become more aware of the importance of social relations; this experience may therefore have a positive effect in the future.

Second, recent job losses and fear regarding the future of the company have resulted in job insecurity among employees. Not being able to talk about these worries at work has made these feelings of job insecurity worse and has also prevented employees from speaking up about psychosocial concerns in general.

Third, feelings of job insecurity have resulted in some employees working while sick (presenteeism) and in cases of increased stress and workload resulting in absenteeism. In some cases, this has been acknowledged and addressed by management through, for example, the introduction of new measures. Companies that have a preventive approach, rather than try to tackle problems once they arise, are perceived as supportive by employees. In other cases, employees report that the financial pressures in connection with the pandemic have caused managers to shift focus away from psychosocial risk management and towards ensuring the survival of the company.

## **Absenteeism / Presenteeism**

### **Common view**

Most of the cases report neither high levels of absenteeism nor presenteeism. Some companies have experienced a few cases of absenteeism with the most frequent reason being stress, caused by time pressure, workload and/or issues in private life.

### **Differences between managers and employee representatives**

The answers reveal that there are some discrepancies between managers' and employees' experiences. In many cases, managers acknowledge absenteeism or presenteeism but they do not address either effectively or act on psychosocial risks when pointed out by employees. The lack of actions taken impacts employees' wellbeing and their feeling of trust in the management, sometimes to the extent that they are too afraid to take sick leave when they need it. In one of the interviewed companies, the new manager explained how problems with the old management have increased insecurity and lack of trust in the current management, increasing psychosocial risks:

#### **Manager in a small firm:**

*'We have not experienced any cases of absenteeism lately, but I think it is because the employees are too insecure to talk or stay at home if they are feeling sick.'*

The interviews show that insecurity and lack of trust in management will have the biggest impact in the smallest establishments with no OSH representative among the employees. In these cases, the employees do not share concerns with either a representative or the management, which means that potential risks and issues will not be identified and mitigated.

## **Productivity**

### **Common view**

The large majority agreed that there is a strong connection between psychosocial wellbeing and productivity at work. Managers are generally well aware that it is crucial to create a welcoming work environment to enable employees to be productive and motivated, to retain staff for longer periods and also maintain the productivity level over time:

#### **Manager in a small firm:**

*'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 employees, as happy employees produce better results.'*



Some interviewees reported that psychosocial risks are not always taken into account to the same extent as physical risks but that the general awareness has increased recently.

### 4.3 Awareness level of psychosocial risk factors and obligation to manage them

The following section presents the key findings about the level of awareness of psychosocial risk factors and the obligation to manage them in MSEs. The discussion shows that the awareness in Denmark is generally high, especially in companies with an OSH representative or OSH committee. Furthermore, most managers and OSH representatives have a decent level of knowledge on the legal responsibilities in relation to both physical and psychosocial risk management. The interviews show that even though many of the MSEs have a good awareness and identification of key risks, employees experience a lack of action or adequate responses to potential risks and issues from management.

#### **Risks identified**

Identifying risks is the first step in psychosocial risk management. Therefore, it is necessary for the establishments to identify potential risks. The purpose of this subsection is therefore to illustrate what risks are identified by employees and management.

##### **Common view**

The interviews highlight some general psychosocial risks in the establishments. The three most common risks are time pressure, workload and poor social relations in the workplace.

Firstly, employees and managers often agree that poor relations in the workplace pose a psychosocial risk. Since having a job takes up about 37 hours each week, good social relations are important in and of themselves. However, the absence of good relations also forms a basis for cooperation difficulties, bullying and so on, which several interviewees identified as psychosocial risks. Many interviewees mentioned that the role of social relations in the workplace is an integral part of the psychosocial work environment. Therefore, this type of risk transcends sectors and sizes.

Secondly, both managers and employees point to stress, time pressure and high workload as significant and interrelated psychosocial risks. As one manager in the welfare sector explained:

##### **Manager in a small firm:**

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

These psychosocial risks are identified in several sectors such as welfare provision, manual work and professional companies.

The abovementioned psychosocial risks are the main ones mentioned in the interviews. However, a couple interviewees also pointed to the significance of psychosocial risks such as not feeling adequate for the job or the lack of meaningful work. Likewise, having to deal with difficult patients, pupils, customers and so on is also found to be a psychosocial risk in sectors such as welfare provision and retail, where the main job is to take care of and/or service the general public.

#### **Legal awareness and response**

This subsection zooms in on the extent of legal awareness in establishments. Legal awareness is one of the things that differs greatly from establishment to establishment. All interviewed companies indicated awareness of what is legally expected of them. Yet, it was noticed that establishments have different levels of legal awareness around managing psychosocial risks.



### Common view

Most of the respondents agreed that they are aware of the legal framework that applies to them. Firstly, a common view in the establishments that have an OSH representative or OSH committee is that the manager and employees consider that they are aware of what the legal framework mandates. On the other hand, it is also a common view that without further OSH initiatives they 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. According to some interviewees, the reason for the awareness is that they have received OSH training and they occasionally receive OSH-related information from the WEA, a municipality or other authorities:

#### Manager in a small firm:

*‘Yes, both the OSH representative and I know about the laws, guidelines and so on. We have obtained most knowledge from the different courses, the guidelines received from the WEA and also from the municipality.’*

Both OSH representatives and managers therefore gain awareness and knowledge through authority guidelines and attending mandatory OSH courses.<sup>37</sup> Of course, there may be limits as to the extent to which this information is shared with employees.

The most common response to the identification of psychosocial risks in the workplace is reorganisation of working practices. Both managers and employees in several establishments agreed that the identification of psychosocial risks, such as time pressure, has led to an organisational change of some kind in regard to either OSH management or company or work structure.

For example, a professional services company with 10-49 employees has changed its risk assessments method, so that employees are able to always report potential risks in an online, ongoing survey and no longer have to wait for the annual employee survey.

#### OSH representative in a small firm

*‘In our company the APV is now “live online”, so that we always can report risk factors or other issues as they emerge. We will discuss potential issues at the monthly meetings with the OSH council.’*

Additionally, some establishments reported in the interviews that they had experienced a change in management. One example is a welfare provision establishment, where the previous management was removed as a means to change otherwise poor work culture. In this example, the employee and the new manager agreed that it improved the working environment.

Furthermore, some of the companies interviewed pointed to the open possibilities for dialogue as their main response to the identification of psychosocial risks in the workplace as they emerge. This might be due to these companies not having the resources to address concerns differently or the fact that in small companies, hierarchies are often flat, which makes it easier to open a dialogue with the manager.

### Differences between managers and employee representatives

The interviews do not point to any major differences between the employees and the managers regarding awareness of the legal framework, while the response and effectiveness of measures taken varies. Here managers’ responses underlined the fact that more action has been taken to solve any identified issue, while some employees experienced a lack of action from the management. An example of this is a company with 10-49 employees, where the employee stated that even though the

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<sup>37</sup> The Working Environment Act §9: [Working Environment Act – Arbejdsmiljøloven \(at.dk\)](https://www.arbejdsmiljøloven.dk/Arbejdsmiljøloven/Arbejdsmiljøloven-2017-06-01)

management recognises stress and heavy workloads as psychosocial risks, there is merely talk on the matter and no action.

#### **OSH representative in a small firm:**

*‘The management wants to acknowledge the issues with workload, but they are not putting actions behind words.’*

This indicates that what is considered an adequate response varies depending on someone's role. Managers explained how they have raised different issues at the weekly meetings to increase awareness and discussed potential risks and solutions, whereas employees felt that the management is only talking about potential issues instead of solving or preventing them.

### **Awareness campaigns**

OSH in Denmark is heavily regulated via collective agreements. Therefore, different sectors are exposed to different rules often related to the type and severity of their risk profiles. This means that the national Danish authorities are not the only key actors when it comes to informing about legal obligations and/or rights related to OSH. In that sense, regional and local authorities as well as social partners play an important role.

Overall, it seems that micro firms without OSH representatives or trade union involvement may benefit the least from OSH advice from external organisations.

#### **Common view**

Generally, public awareness campaigns did not play a role regarding management of psychosocial risks in the interviewed companies. Most of them did not even remember public campaigns about occupational health and safety. It is common for most of the establishments that if they remembered campaigns, they were initiated by either social partners or the municipality. These campaigns may have a bigger impact, as they are more directly targeting the individual company as they focus on a specific sector or type of local establishment.

#### **Differences between managers and employee representatives**

There was no difference in the attitude towards public campaigns and their role in increasing awareness on psychosocial risks in the workplace, but they did receive information about OSH from different sources. Employees only received information from trade unions or the WEA in case they were OSH representatives, whereas managers mostly received information from authorities such as the municipality, the region or the WEA.

### **Role of inspectorate**

The WEA is the main authority with responsibilities for workplace inspections, therefore, most interviewees referred to this body. However, other authorities, such as municipalities, can also inspect workplaces concerning OSH.

#### **Common view**

Around half of the interviewed establishments received a visit from the WEA within the last three years. Some of these inspections were announced while others were unexpected. In several of the establishments in the retail sector that received visits from the WEA, managers and employees pointed out that the WEA did not focus on psychosocial risks but on physical risks such as heavy lifting.

Only in some instances did the WEA go through the parts of the risk assessment (APV) on the psychosocial working environment. However, a few respondents pointed out that the WEA did refer to quality of the social environment and atmosphere in the workplace.

Another sector-specific finding in the interviews regarding inspection is that some welfare providers received visits from other authorities such as the municipality.

Most of the respondents described the visit as relevant and motivating in relation to general OSH management. Only very few respondents had a poor or demotivating experience, for example, in relation to an on-site inspection. Those receiving advice on psychosocial risks management thought that the experience was generally positive and useful.

#### 4.4 The links between psychosocial risk management and overall management commitment to occupational health and safety

In Denmark, some of the legal responsibilities on OSH management cover micro, small and large enterprises. This means that enterprises with fewer than five employees also have legal responsibilities, and therefore must follow at least a small number of essential structured procedures on the management of OSH. All enterprises in Denmark with at least one employee must complete a risk assessment (APV) at least every three years. The APV has a huge impact on the OSH management in smaller firms, as many companies use wellbeing surveys or involve employees in other ways throughout the process.

In principle, there are good reasons for all establishments to manage psychosocial risks given the requirements in place. However, requirements alone are not enough as the company culture seems to play an important role in dictating whether psychosocial risks can be discussed in the first instance.

Moreover, welfare providers, public administrations and other enterprises that are part of the public administration or larger groups often have some additional procedures and guidelines impacting their overall OSH management, including for psychosocial risks.

#### OSH management organisation

##### Common view

Despite the fact that OSH management in smaller enterprises is often less structured, most of the establishments described their OSH management as systematic and organised. A common point across all establishments is that weekly meetings between management and employees allowed all employees to bring up issues relating to psychosocial risks.

In some of the establishments, especially the ones with strong dialogue practices, OSH was discussed occasionally if not regularly. However, it seems that to have good psychosocial risk management, OSH commitment needs to be combined with openness to explore issues around psychosocial risks, given the obstacles to bringing up issues at the weekly meetings.

As explained by a manager in the welfare sector, OSH commitment, open dialogue and culture are important to secure identification of psychosocial risks:

##### Manager in a small firm:

*'We are now talking about such issues, but it takes time to make sure that employees feel secure and dare to speak their minds. It mostly concerns the relationship to the management and the culture of the firm.'*

Moreover, the structured procedures around the APV have a huge impact on the establishments' organisation of OSH management in Denmark. The APV will be explained in more detail in the section on risk assessments.

The interviews show that many of the enterprises in the welfare or public sector are influenced by public administration duties corresponding to the municipality, the region or the state. OSH management in these enterprises is often more systematic and structured around working environment representatives,

working environment committees (like the co-determination and co-influence committees<sup>38</sup>), risk assessments, and other elements like fixed meetings and discussions about OSH. The SU/MED system is an OSH management system under the state, the municipalities and the regions in Denmark. The system is based on public agreements to secure involvement, influence and impacts for all employees. One example is the manager in a kindergarten explaining how the MED system provides a systematic approach to OSH management:

**Manager in a small firm:**

*'The MED system provides systematic discussions of everything regarding security and OSH 4-6 times a year. It includes both physical and mental wellbeing and ensures that we are working systematically with the management of OSH.'*

As illustrated in the quote above, the welfare providers and enterprises in public administration often have a more systematic approach to OSH management. This also applies to private companies, for example, retail stores, that are part of bigger chains and therefore have access to more procedures and guidance.

The smallest companies with 1-5 employees in the private sector have the least systematic approach to OSH management. In these smaller enterprises, weekly meetings or eventually the APV is the only structured procedure to manage OSH. These enterprises only very rarely have a health and safety representative among the employees, and employees therefore need to go directly to their manager to talk about potential risks or issues. The interviews show that an open culture and dialogue is important in these enterprises to secure good management of potential risks. An employee in a small firm explained how psychosocial risk management is approached:

**Employee in a small firm:**

*'I would firstly go and speak to my manager and after that I would bring it up at a weekly meeting. I am quite sure that the manager would take it seriously, but it is mainly because we have a close relationship and a good culture here.'*

This example suggests that a close and trustful relationship between employee and manager is important to secure a dialogue and identification of potential risks, especially in smaller enterprises with no formal OSH representative.

**Differences between managers and employee representatives**

Across all establishments with more than five employees, the employees all emphasised the importance of a working environment representative. To have an employee with relevant education, knowledge and experiences with OSH management is important and, moreover, the trustworthy relationship is key to making sure that employees dare to speak their minds and tell others about potential issues in the working environment.

The responses of managers and employee representatives were significantly different in relation to the existence of guidelines and documents. Another difference in responses was the degree to which the management reacted and responded to potential psychosocial risks. Many of the managers pointed out that they had accessible documents and procedures especially in relation to time pressure, workload and other risks in relation to stress; however, only a few employees knew about these documents and, in some cases, there is a mismatch between the answers concerning accessible documents on OSH. Furthermore, a central point is that several employees pointed to the fact that the management were very reluctant to take action in relation to identified risks, as illustrated by one employee:

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<sup>38</sup> Co-determination and co-influence committees (MED committees) or cooperation committees (SU committees) are groups of managers and employees in municipalities, the region and the state, working to improve the influence and involvement of employees.

### **Employee representative in a small firm:**

*'To be completely honest with you, nothing ever happens. Yes, we do have meetings and we make the APV, but nothing happens, and the management takes no responsibility.'*

Only in cases with several working environment problems was there a difference between management and employees' responses. However, as the quote above shows, in these cases there is a difference between how the management and employees understand the management of OSH and the degree to which the management is taking action.

## **External OSH services**

### **Common view**

The results of the sample suggest that some companies do not use external OSH services in relation to the management of psychosocial risks. Although not representative, our sample indicates that this is especially the case for the smallest enterprises (1-5 employees), while the larger enterprises (10-49) have some experience with external services.

However, the interviews show that enterprises in the welfare sector/public sector are using services from the municipality or at governmental level to cover both psychosocial and other risks. One example is a department at a school where both manager and employee stated that they have access to supervision from a work environment specialist at the municipality:

### **Manager in a small firm:**

*'We do use the specialist at the municipality from time to time and we are able to call if we need specific advice or guidance on all matters.'*

A small number of the companies used psychosocial risk management services from their trade union, while one private enterprise used an external health and safety provider to help with the composition of its stress policy. The enterprises with experience with external OSH providers were generally satisfied with the services.

### **Differences between managers and employee representatives**

There were no significant differences between managers' and employees' responses.

## **Risk assessments**

The risk assessment, also referred to as the APV, is a key feature of the OSH management approach in Denmark as all companies are obliged to conduct risk assessments at least every third year.<sup>39</sup>

Based on the other responses, the quality of management of psychosocial risks is dependent on company culture and employee involvement. However, 'paper-based compliance' via the APV around psychosocial risk management seems to be followed by those without a proactive attitude.

### **Common view**

The interviews show that many of the companies refer to the APV when explaining how their OSH management is organised. As explained in the Working Environment Act, the APV needs to include different aspects such as the identification and mapping of the working environment, and employees need to be involved in the process.<sup>40</sup> The different elements around the APV are not always systematically organised in the smaller enterprises, but all enterprises need to complete the APV.

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<sup>39</sup> See: [Working Environment Act – Arbejdstilsynet \(at.dk\)](#)

<sup>40</sup> See: [Working Environment Act - Arbejdstilsynet \(at.dk\)](#)

Moreover, many of the establishments with more than five employees were using wellbeing surveys among all employees to cover the identification of potential risks in the working environment.

The wellbeing survey typically covers physical and psychosocial risks identification, and the results of the survey are shared with employees and discussed with relevant representatives.

If the APV reveals any key issues or risks in the company, the company should produce an action plan. The interviews indicated that action plans are produced only to some extent and very few action plans are actually used in everyday management.

## 4.5 Extent of psychosocial risk management and procedures in place

This section presents the results from the interviews regarding the concrete actions and procedures that the establishments use in their management of psychosocial risks.

Unfortunately, this subject did not generate very much feedback and not all establishments responded. Additionally, the establishments' answers to these questions tend to include several aspects of their approach to psychosocial risk management obtained from other responses. Therefore, some of the analytical themes below have been combined from several questions to be true to the interviewees' broader descriptions.

### ***Actions to prevent psychosocial risks, action plans, procedures for bullying, and effectiveness of the actions and procedures***

This subsection illustrates which actions the interviewed enterprises take regarding psychosocial risk management. The following touch upon concrete actions and, where possible, highlight the effectiveness of these actions. The actions to prevent psychosocial risks are mostly risk assessments (APVs), action plans to prevent work-related stress and procedures for dealing with psychosocial risks.

#### **Common view**

In the interviews, the reported most common action to help manage and prevent psychosocial risks is conducting APVs. This is the type of action that most enterprises mentioned, and both managers and employee representatives stated that this action helps to manage and/or prevent psychosocial risks.

In relation to the law, many enterprises reported that the effectiveness of the APV lies in its ability to inform OSH management and make action plans or procedures that ensure a good work environment. Generally, the APV is one of the most effective OSH management procedures mentioned in the interviews, and that regards both physical and psychosocial wellbeing.

#### **Manager in a small firm:**

*'We made an action plan on our collaboration. We had some problems in the different teams, and we are currently working to improve this.'*

However, it should be noted that interviewees from some enterprises answered that they either do not have action plans or are not aware of the existence of action plans regarding psychosocial risk management. This does not seem to correlate with the size of the company or sector.

Likewise, several establishments pointed out in the interviews that they do not have procedures for dealing with bullying or stress, but that they deal with these psychosocial risks in a more informal way. The establishments that have such procedures can be divided into two groups: those that are a part of a franchise or municipality have such procedures at a higher organisational level, and others that have their own procedures.



In some interviews, reorganisation was highlighted as an action taken to prevent psychosocial risks from reoccurring. In some establishments, the focus is on reorganisation of tasks to prevent stress, whereas in other establishments changes in the management team may be used.

#### **Manager in a small firm:**

*‘The main message I give is that employee wellbeing is equally as important as the job.’*

In addition to that, 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

#### **Differences between managers and employee representatives**

The most prominent difference in the interviews regarding actions, action plans, or procedures to prevent or deal with psychosocial risks is whether any action has been taken. This is only observed in a few enterprises, such as a small retail enterprise, where the employee representative said that the management has done nothing to manage psychosocial risks, but the manager is of a different opinion.

Due to the limited interview data on this subject, this is the only difference that emerges from the interviews.

#### **Available training and types of training needed**

The type of OSH training and courses in the workplace can help improve the management of psychosocial risks. Therefore, whether training is available, what training is available and whether there is a wish for further training can say something about the establishments' approach to OSH management. However, it should be noted that in Denmark, OSH representatives and OSH managers need to attend a mandatory training session for 22 hours. Moreover, the OSH representatives and managers receive follow-up courses and training based on their responsibilities.

#### **Common view**

Due to the OSH training requirements in Denmark, many establishments reported that they have had OSH training due to their role as OSH representative or manager. This is the type of training that was mentioned in the interviews. However, not all the interviewees saw the mandatory OSH training as something that the enterprise had available. For example, one employee representative from a small enterprise in the retail sector considered that the mandatory OSH training cannot be seen as the enterprise having training available because it is mandatory. This employee representative went on to stress that there is no training available, and he is not the only one saying that there is no training.

A few of the companies stated that they have training other than OSH training made available to employees. It is mostly enterprises that are of a certain size or a part of a bigger franchise or municipality that offer such training. This could be due to these enterprises having more resources to allocate to training compared to small, independent enterprises. From the interviews, it is found that the type of training being provided is leadership courses, which includes courses on how to avoid stress, and training that is related to the employees' profession. These types of training are all relevant for the management of psychosocial risks.

### **4.6 Dedicated resources and degree of worker participation**

To better understand establishments' approaches to psychosocial risk management, the interviews focused on employee involvement: how and how often they have been involved in the identification and management of psychosocial risks; whether the followed approach improved the identification of work-related stress, bullying, harassment or violence; and the impact of employee consultation on the resulting measures.

## Employee involvement in risk identification

All interviewed employees and managers stated that employees are involved in risk identification. Most often, this identification happens through risk assessment (APV) and wellbeing surveys, the OSH representative and OSH committees, as well as through weekly meetings and more informal conversations. Only one concrete example showed that one of the establishments had previously taken a key decision concerning the organisation of work without involving the employees. This reorganisation led to massive mistrust and frustration among the employees, as they weren't aware of the rationale for change. The new manager in the establishment subsequently worked to improve relations and trust through a strong collaboration and involvement of employees.

### Common view

The cases where both managers and employees reported high levels of employee involvement usually refer to the APV as the main tool for risk identification and sometimes the wellbeing survey. Since the latter is not a legal obligation, it is a key sign of the company's willingness to go beyond minimum requirements to include employees' perceptions so as to improve their psychosocial work environment. Some also refer to OSH representatives and OSH committees.

Besides the APV and wellbeing surveys, involvement is in many cases expected to happen informally through ad hoc conversations between management and OSH representatives. Some enterprises have also recently increased their efforts to involve employees in weekly or monthly meetings, where they focus on improving the work environment:

### Manager in a small firm:

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

While this may be an effective approach for companies with few employees, it is questionable whether this leads to impact in larger companies, if no other structures are in place that systematically process and follow up on concerns raised during meetings. Furthermore, whether or not employees feel able to speak up in such meetings greatly depends on the overall culture at the company.

### Differences between managers and employee representatives

In two establishments where OSH representatives are in place, employees did not always feel that their concerns reach top management. This is problematic because if employees feel they are not being taken seriously when they speak up, it will discourage them to do so in the future. In the cases where companies follow an unsystematic and informal approach, employees sometimes felt that they are only involved when issues arise and that their opinions are not consulted regarding prevention and actions.

## 4.7 Barriers and drivers to psychosocial risk management and support needed

### Main drivers

To better understand the determinants of the implementation of psychosocial mitigation measures, respondents were asked what they consider to be the main drivers.

### Common view

When asked about the main drivers, managers and employees agreed 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:



**Employee in a small firm:**

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

Again, the connection between social wellbeing and productivity was pointed out, which should incentivise managers to take action. Furthermore, the responses have shown that the way in which management reacts to employee inputs is crucial. When employees feel that they have an impact, meaning that they are not only listened to but that their input also leads to change, it gives them a feeling of support and is encouraging to seek involvement in the future.

**Differences between managers and employee representatives**

Some managers pointed to the importance of being approachable to employees. This attitude has to be considered in any aspect of management. For instance, body language can make a manager seem more approachable to employees. In that sense, certain leadership skills are essential drivers of psychosocial risk management.

Furthermore, employees not being able to speak openly was mentioned as a major barrier to psychosocial risk management. This obstacle, however, could significantly be reduced if employee involvement is not based on ad hoc conversations and employees seeking out conversations themselves. This again highlights the importance of following a structured approach in terms of employee involvement.

**Government or sectoral responsibilities**

To improve establishments' psychosocial risk management, it is essential for authorities to support them in the best way possible. Therefore, the interviews also focused on what government or sectoral initiatives were useful from managers' and employees' perspectives.

**Common view**

For all interviewed companies, managers and employees did not have many ideas for further external measures to improve the management of psychosocial risks. As pointed out, many of the companies are aware of their possibilities and support from municipalities, regions, trade unions and employer organisations.

Some of the welfare providers in the public sector pointed to a lack of resources, since in their minds time and money are key barriers to the management of psychosocial risks. But when prompted, the question of how additional resources could be best invested did not generate any tangible suggestions.

**Main barriers****Common view**

In terms of barriers to effective psychosocial risk management, three points stand out the most. Firstly, and most interestingly, is that even though many companies have previously stated that they follow a very informal strategy for the management of psychosocial risk, it is exactly this lack of structured approach that both managers and employees see as a barrier to managing psychosocial risks.

Some interviewees recognised that psychosocial risks often concern issues that are difficult to talk about and that solely relying on employees to bring them up in conversations may not lead to sharing of information even partially.

**Employee in a micro firm:**

*'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.'*

This problem is made worse when there is a general feeling of mistrust and poor relationships among employees. Secondly, there is often not enough time to discuss psychosocial concerns and such issues often take a backseat during busy periods.

Lastly, it was pointed out that the positive impact of new measures is sometimes undermined because management do not take ownership of new initiatives and there is limited follow-up with employees on whether targets have been reached. Clear implementation plans where management take responsibility should therefore be part of an effective psychosocial risk management strategy.

### **Differences between managers and employee representatives**

While some employees would welcome more guidelines and tools, a manager in fact sees too many detailed rules as barriers when it comes to managing psychosocial risks. This underlines the need to recognise the different environments companies operate in with different types of risks facing employees. Different risks will sometimes have to be met with different management strategies, which requires a high degree of flexibility in policy and regulation to account for a company's or sector's specific challenges.

In some instances, managers feel that because they are physically distanced from employees, top-down decisions are not well received, which creates conflict and misunderstandings. Such barriers are likely to have intensified during the pandemic. It is also clear that employees are more open to changes if they have been involved in decision-making processes and prevention actions.

#### **Manager in a small firm:**

*'It seems that for some employees it is a long way from my office to the workplace. Sometimes they feel like we are making top-down decisions even though we are trying to increase involvement of employees.'*

These barriers are also reflected in employees' responses, but they see the problem in terms of changing management practices without employee engagement, and management exposed to too much pressure or other concerns, and therefore neglecting employees' interests. Furthermore, they feel that there is a lack of leadership and responsibility in resolving issues such as co-worker bullying. A few employees explained that they feel unsupported because they are unable to resolve these issues themselves.

### **Mitigating solutions**

Respondents were asked what steps could be taken to mitigate and overcome existing barriers to psychosocial risk management and whether their company has already adopted such solutions. Furthermore, they were asked whether they have access to enough resources and information that support them in the implementation of mitigating solutions and what their preferred source of information would be.

#### **Common view**

It is clear from the responses that there are two main points that both managers and employees see as crucial steps that should be taken to mitigate psychosocial risks. First, the importance of regular dialogue and generally measures that encourage an open and trusting culture were highlighted. This may even include increased involvement of OSH representatives. Second, many have recognised that to achieve this, they need specific training and further education in management and leadership. Some managers clearly do not feel competent or comfortable enough with the topic and thus either deflect issues or avoid taking responsibility. Furthermore, they struggle with resource and time management with respect to core business activities, meaning that psychosocial risks are not seen as a priority.

### **Differences between managers and employee representatives**

Employees reported that they would appreciate a trusted third party external to the company who could mediate in cases of conflict or bullying, which illustrates the lack of trust in their own management to handle these conflicts. Even though the flat hierarchies and informal culture are often described as something positive, responses have also revealed that this may sometimes lead to employees feeling that there are no solid structures on how work is organised and tasks are distributed.

## **5 Reflections on the internal and external dynamics of psychosocial risk management**

This chapter provides further reflections on the internal and external dynamics impacting OSH management, and a review of the ESENER 2019 results compared to the in-depth qualitative responses from establishments.

Please note that the sample consulted was relatively small and non-representative. Therefore, the judgements made cannot be generalised to the OSH policy context in Denmark.

### **5.1 Influence of the policy context on establishments**

#### ***Key legal measures***

The findings of this report suggest that two key legal measures affect the MSEs' management of psychosocial risks: the workplace risk assessment (APV), and the working environment representative.

The results show that the obligation to conduct APVs regardless of company size encourages a more structured and thorough approach towards OSH management. This can be seen especially among micro enterprises that generally have the least systematic approach. For them, the APV is normally the only structured procedure in place to encourage frequent discussions on working environment issues and risks. The interviews show that the risk assessments typically focus on the management of both physical and psychosocial risks in establishments. The obligation to involve employees in the risk assessment also ensures a wider discussion on psychosocial risks; this is especially the case in the bigger establishments that use wellbeing surveys among employees.

If the APV highlights key risks or issues in the working environment, companies need to draw up action plans to prevent and resolve safety and health issues. Even though most MSEs have experience with drawing up action plans, the interview responses show that the management in smaller firms do not always take further subsequent responsibilities or formulate and implement follow-up actions. Some manager responses have revealed very little knowledge about the use of action plans. Among the interviewed establishments, very few action plans are used in everyday management in MSEs. Therefore, the effectiveness of the APV could be strengthened if guidance or procedures regarding implementation strategies, management and follow-ups on action plans were improved.

The appointment of a working environment representative is a key legal measure supporting OSH management among the smaller enterprises in Denmark. The OSH representative is the employees' main conduit in securing a healthy and safe working environment in cooperation with the management team. The interviews show that a trusted OSH representative will improve the regularity of discussions on psychosocial risks. Many employees feel more secure taking to an OSH representative about potential risks or issues especially in relation to psychosocial risks, rather than directly with the management. Only companies with more than nine employees are legally obligated to appoint and elect an OSH representative, whereas employees in smaller companies need to go directly to the management or bring up potential risks at meetings. Given the sensitive nature of the issues to be discussed, employees in micro firms are clearly at a disadvantage in expressing their concerns.

Lastly, the in-depth interviews show a discrepancy between public and private enterprises. In Denmark, the public welfare providers are linked to either the municipality (social care and education) or the regional administration (health sector). Through the wider public administration, municipalities and regions receive support on OSH via counterparts with specific responsibilities. The interviews show that the municipality or regional OSH systems often have a positive effect on the management of psychosocial risks in smaller public organisations, given that resources are made available, information shared, and objectives and requirements made clear.

### ***Effects due to external support***

Where external support was accessed, such as from sectoral bodies or via parts of the public administration, MSEs were able to point to having a higher level of awareness of and insights into how to better manage psychosocial risks. However, accessing external support is not a common practice in smaller private companies, although there was the suggestion that employees of these companies were interested in receiving advice from third parties. There seems to be some untapped potential in offering services to this group.

### ***Effects due to enforcement approach***

The WEA mainly enforces compliance with legal measures by conducting (announced and unannounced) company visits. About half of the interview respondents reported having been visited by a labour inspectorate within the last three years. Nevertheless, although the experience was found to be helpful in advising on better approaches to OSH management, respondents pointed out that the inspections rarely focused on psychosocial risks. Thus, the companies interviewed would have benefited from receipt of focused advice on psychosocial risk management via inspectors.

### ***Training***

Companies are legally obliged to send OSH representatives and leaders to attend a three-day course on safety and health at work within three months of their appointment, as well as to facilitate further training regularly. However, the interviews show that some employees are not aware if or whether their company will offer them any other training beyond the initial three-day course. Employees are generally aware of the organisations offering training, such as the WEA, the municipalities or social partners. They however investigate such opportunities to a limited extent. It might therefore make sense to raise awareness of these offerings, especially since OSH training has been shown to increase general awareness of the national legal framework.

Furthermore, more training might be needed in areas indirectly related to OSH management, such as leadership and management training to equip managers with the tools needed to successfully implement action plans, take ownership and be accountable. One of the initiatives in the Strategy 2020 is to offer training of managers and staff representatives on the psychosocial working environment<sup>41</sup>.

### ***Public awareness***

The Danish system of industrial relations is characterised by a low level of state involvement when it comes to labour law and regulation. The system is therefore built on strong involvement of both trade unions and employer associations in collective bargaining. As a result, OSH is mostly regulated through sector-specific collective agreements. Because of this structure, enterprises as well as individual employees and managers already are relatively better connected to social partners when compared to government authorities. Public awareness campaigns run by these social partners therefore have a larger impact, which is also reflected in interview responses. Many are not aware of the campaigns organised by the WEA but have heard about initiatives by social partners. In addition, campaigns

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<sup>41</sup> See: <https://at.dk/en/about-us/about-the-wea/strategy-2020/>

organised by lower levels of government, such as municipalities, have also been shown to have a broader reach, probably because they are 'closer to the people'. It might therefore make sense to encourage closer collaboration between social partners in different sectors, municipalities and the WEA when running future public awareness campaigns on OSH matters.

## 5.2 Reflections on the ESENER 2019 establishments' responses

Overall, the ESENER 2019 survey gives a comprehensive and thorough overview of the management of psychosocial risks in the interviewed MSEs. Comparing the interviewee sample responses and their qualitative feedback to ESENER 2019, ESENER 2019 gives a generally accurate picture on the extent of establishments' knowledge and management of psychosocial risks. However, going deeper into some of the specific risks and OSH management measures, the interviews show that the ESENER 2019 responses provide a rosier picture of the management of psychosocial risks than when examined in-depth qualitatively. Furthermore, the interviews provide further insight into how COVID-19 has had a huge impact on the working environment and specifically the management of psychosocial risks, revealing that some of the ESENER 2019 results have become outdated to some degree.

### *The links between workplace culture, productivity, absenteeism and presenteeism and approaches to psychosocial management*

#### **Employee and management, and team discussions**

The interviewee sample responses to ESENER 2019 clearly reflect that the discussions on OSH occur frequently in the companies. Even though general OSH and employees' wellbeing are discussed or touched upon at weekly meetings, it does not mean that 'real' psychosocial risks are brought to the attention of the management frequently. In this respect, the qualitative feedback shows that some employees do not always agree that psychosocial risks are discussed often or even occasionally with management.

#### ***Awareness level of psychosocial risk factors and obligation to manage them***

This subsection focuses on the awareness level of psychosocial risk factors in the interviewed MSEs. The company reports show that the picture changed slightly since ESENER 2019 was conducted, regarding the awareness and presence of psychosocial risks. COVID-19 has had a huge impact on many of the interviewed enterprises, which affected the psychosocial working environment and its management.

#### **Risks due to the way work is organised**

ESENER 2019 accurately indicates that time pressure, work overload and stress are the main risk factors for both managers and employees in the interviewed companies. Yet, COVID-19 has likely influenced and changed the intensity of these risks.

During the pandemic, some sectors experienced an increase in time pressure and workload especially in the health sector and in other welfare sectors. Other sectors experienced a decline in workload and had to send employees home or in the worst case fire employees. In these instances, many employees experienced an increase in job insecurity. As the qualitative responses from some of the affected MSEs show, the presence of job insecurity is much higher today compared to the answers given at the time of ESENER 2019.

Furthermore, the growing number of people working from home during the pandemic has increased problems with poor communication or cooperation in many companies. The interviewed OSH representatives said that many employees miss their colleagues, feel isolated, and can easily misinterpret messages from management through online platforms or messaging systems. Thus, we see an increase in poor communication in the MSEs today.

Lastly, considering that COVID-19 has reduced physical contact with pupils and customers, some sectors seem to be less affected by risks from these groups.

### **Reasons for addressing OSH**

The companies' own responses to ESENER 2019 around the main reason for addressing OSH were similar to their qualitative feedback, namely, meeting expectations and securing the wellbeing of employees. These dimensions are seemingly hardwired into the mentality of the Danish company culture.

However, the qualitative feedback shows that there can be a mismatch between whether the manager thinks that the company is fulfilling its legal obligations and whether the company is addressing and managing psychosocial risks. Considering the feedback, some MSEs are focused on addressing OSH without considering psychosocial risks.

### **Main difficulties in addressing OSH**

The ESENER 2019 survey lists seven options that enterprises can identify as a major, minor or not a difficulty at all in addressing OSH. Generally, establishments interviewed in ESENER 2019 rarely identified something as a major difficulty. However, there seems to be some bias around the challenges of managing psychosocial risks

The qualitative feedback shows that psychosocial risks are difficult to manage. Some MSEs are struggling with creating truly open and trustful dialogues with employees on psychosocial risks and with taking full responsibility.

### **Use of measures**

In comparison to the samples' own ESENER 2019 responses, qualitative feedback revealed that the picture is more nuanced regarding the use of measures. Discussions up to a point are taking place, and there is an embedded cultural approach of allowing employees to work flexibly and make decisions on their involvement and approach to tasks, but there is lack of action in developing comprehensive strategies to manage psychosocial risks or intervening in cases of long hours.

Interviews with employees show that even though management state that they are using different measures to create a healthy working environment, the employees do not see any truly comprehensive actions or direct responsibility being taken.

## ***The links between psychosocial risk management and overall management commitment to occupational health and safety***

### **Risk assessments**

In relation to the risk assessments (APV), the companies' own responses to ESENER 2019 correspond with the qualitative responses showing that the risk assessment is a key legal measurement in Denmark used by almost all Danish companies. Even though the structure and process around the APV are less systematic in the smaller companies, all interviewed companies conduct the risk assessment at least every third year. However, the involvement of employees and the practical ongoing use of the risk assessment vary. With respect to psychosocial risks, the establishment reports show that risk assessment only rarely leads to deeper changes.



## 6 Conclusions

### **The links between workplace culture, productivity, absenteeism and presenteeism and approaches to psychosocial management**

Danish company culture, including in MSEs, is renowned for its open and collaborative approach and firm recognition that employee wellbeing is linked to productivity and organisational performance.

There is existing confidence in the current company culture around its ability to 'problem solve' psychosocial risk issues. To some degree, this is already demonstrated through various activities, including weekly meetings between management and staff.

Yet, the overall approach, while having several strengths, is lacking in its strategic maturity and ability to mitigate and address specific issues. This is partly due to the disconnect between management's understanding of the quality of the psychosocial work environment and the experience and needs of employees. Psychosocial risks remain a difficult issue to discuss in some workplaces, and managerial prioritisation and skills in managing such issues are not always matched to the task.

The extent of presenteeism due to stress or burnout seems to have been overlooked prior to and since the onset of the pandemic. This is due to the new method of increased home working but also the decentralised approach to employee task management that offers significant staff autonomy. Consequently, managers may not be fully aware of the extent of staff workloads especially in competitive or performance-oriented workplaces.

Absenteeism, while not a frequent phenomenon, is typically not perceived as a psychosocial risk management issue or investigated as such.

Overall, considering that psychosocial risk management is regarded as an important issue, there appears to be openness to or demand for new approaches or advice from management.

### **Awareness level of psychosocial risk factors and obligation to manage**

There is a good level of awareness of the need to manage employee wellbeing, and this is backed up by cultural efforts to introduce participatory company practices. Yet, robust systems to detect and manage such risks have not been introduced, and underlying problems in establishments are not always spotted.

Awareness of what is expected under the legal framework is not as strong as it could be, despite the obligations set and the positive legal and policy reforms that have been introduced in recent years. This corresponds to both management and OSH representatives.

Small public bodies that benefit from the resources and information provided by the wider public administration demonstrated greater knowledge of their responsibilities and had introduced better systems to manage such risks.

Micro firms are most at risk considering that they do not need to appoint OSH representatives, limiting both awareness and avenues for employees to express concerns vis-à-vis management.

Some sectors exposed to severe physical risks such as construction and agriculture were also seemingly not up to speed on psychosocial risk management but recognised the importance of OSH management generally.

The existing Danish OSH strategy has been reformed significantly to allow legislation and policy to better cover psychosocial risk management. However, some of the initiatives are not known to establishments.

Awareness of relevant WEA information campaigns was limited, although some key messages had been detected via social partner and municipality campaigns.

Based on the feedback of the interviewed establishments, WEA inspections are not covering psychosocial risks in depth, limiting the amount of official information sharing with establishments.

### **The links between psychosocial risk management and overall management commitment to OSH**

The qualitative interviews show that the risk assessment (APV) is conducted extensively and frequently across the interviewed MSEs. This provides the opportunity for information to be collected from staff on psychosocial risk issues, with the results collated by the OSH representative and discussed between management and employees.

The OSH representative plays an important function between management and staff in communicating the results of the APV, and with respect to discussing psychosocial risks with management on an ongoing basis.

While some initiatives have been introduced to provide staff with flexibility on how they approach their work and in response to reported problems, design and implementation of comprehensive action plans and supporting measures are lacking at the MSEs in this study.



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