



# Management of psychosocial risks in European workplaces - evidence from the second European survey of enterprises on new and emerging risks (ESENER-2)

European Risk Observatory

Summary

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This summary was commissioned by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA). Its contents, including any opinions and/or conclusions expressed, are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of EU-OSHA.

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## Executive summary

In recent decades, the world of work has gone through some major changes due to globalisation, tertiarisation and technological changes. Potential indirect effects of globalisation may be intensification of work, job insecurity and reduced autonomy. Tertiarisation, i.e. the increase of work in the service sector, resulted in more ‘emotional labour’<sup>(1)</sup>, which is associated with higher risk of violence and harassment. Technological changes may lead to ‘techno-stress’, which means an individual’s anxiety about the ability to use technology effectively or frustration if technology fails. In summary, these changes have increased the exposure of employees to psychosocial risks.

Psychosocial risks that relate to the way work is designed, organised and managed, as well as to the social context of work (EU-OSHA, 2000), may have severe consequences for workers’ health and well-being. Research has shown that work-related psychosocial risks and stress may lead to a deterioration in mental health, depression, cardiovascular disease and musculoskeletal disorders. Therefore, appropriate management of these risks is necessary.

Earlier research has identified several drivers of and barriers to psychosocial risk management at the organisational level. It has also been shown that organisational characteristics such as size and sector activities, as well as the national context in which organisations operate, are related to how organisations deal with psychosocial risks.

Large organisations appear to have more measures and procedures in place to deal with psychosocial risks than small and medium- sized enterprises (SMEs) do. That could be because they have larger budgets available for risk prevention and a higher level of knowledge and awareness on the presence of safety and health risks (EU-OSHA, 2010a; EU-OSHA, 2016a; Houtman et al., 2012). There is a strong correlation between sector activities and the reported prevalence of psychosocial risks. The reported prevalence is, for example, relatively high in the education, healthcare and service sectors. However, sectors also differ in terms of psychosocial risk management and the level of support that is available from sectoral organisations in this area. Sectors that put a relatively large amount of effort into managing psychosocial risks are, again, the healthcare sector, the education sector and the financial sector. In sectors such as mining, agriculture and construction, organisations have relatively few procedures and measures in place to deal with psychosocial risks (EU-OSHA, 2010a; EU-OSHA, 2016a).

In addition, the level of psychosocial risk management differs among countries. In general, northern European countries appear to have a more comprehensive approach than eastern European countries (EU-OSHA, 2010a). Nevertheless, research on the specific effects of national contextual factors is scarce, especially on the role of national culture on psychosocial risk management in organisations. In the present study, we have tried to fill this gap by looking deeper into the relation between several contextual factors and psychosocial risk management.

The following research questions are addressed in this study:

1. Is the level of psychosocial risk management related to drivers and barriers at the organisational level?
2. What is the link between national culture and psychosocial risk management?
3. **Is cultural context related to drivers of and barriers to psychosocial risk management and is the relationship between drivers and barriers and psychosocial risk management dependent on the cultural context?**
4. What are types of organisations in terms of their approach to psychosocial risk management and in reference to factors that are related to psychosocial risk management, taking the context into account?

To answer these questions, we carried out quantitative analyses on data from the second European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER-2), supplemented with data on the national context: cultural dimensions, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, and national initiatives with regard to safety and health, in particular with regard to psychosocial risks. Cultural dimensions were based on the work of Hofstede, who studied national cultural values and their influence on behaviour

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<sup>(1)</sup> Emotional labour is defined as the process of managing feelings and expressions to fulfill the emotional requirements of a job (Hochschild, 1983).

and identified several cultural dimensions (Hofstede et al., 2010). Previous research shows that these national cultural dimensions affect organisational cultures and we assume that national cultural dimensions also affect the presence of organisational level drivers of and barriers to psychosocial risk management and the level of psychosocial risk management itself.

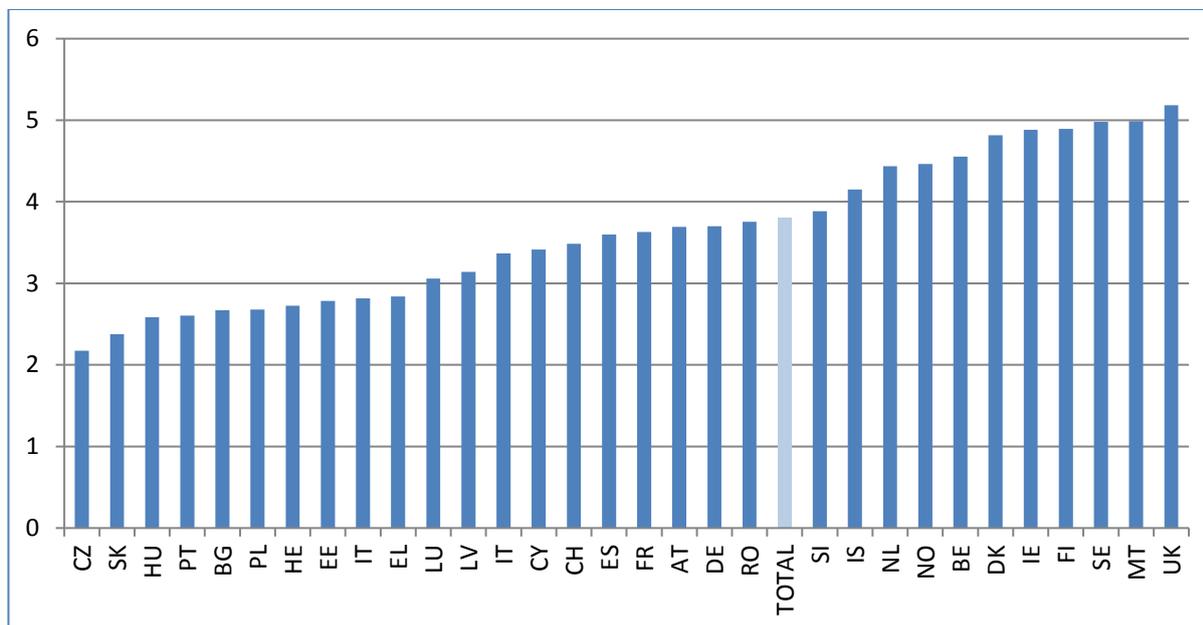
Three dimensions were included in the analysis: power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity. Power distance refers to the level of unequal distribution of power that is acceptable to subordinates and leaders in a society. Uncertainty avoidance refers to the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations. With regard to masculinity, a distinction is made between a preference for achievement, competition and money (masculine) versus a preference for care for others and quality of life (feminine). To represent the level of national initiatives, we included joint efforts of social partners to prevent psychosocial risks in the workplace, and the instruments used in the implementation of the European framework agreement on work-related stress.

The data were analysed using a multilevel model, with adjustments for the influence of country, sector, company size and respondent type. The results of the quantitative analyses were further discussed by a focus group of experts in the field of psychosocial risks from different EU Member States.

### Psychosocial risk management and its drivers and barriers at the organisational level

Psychosocial risk management was defined as the number of procedures and measures in place to deal with psychosocial risks. Figure 1 shows the level of psychosocial risk management by country. In general, the northern European countries report a high level of psychosocial risk management, while in the eastern and central European countries this is low.

Figure 1: Psychosocial risk management among EU-28 and EFTA countries (see Annex 1 for country abbreviations).

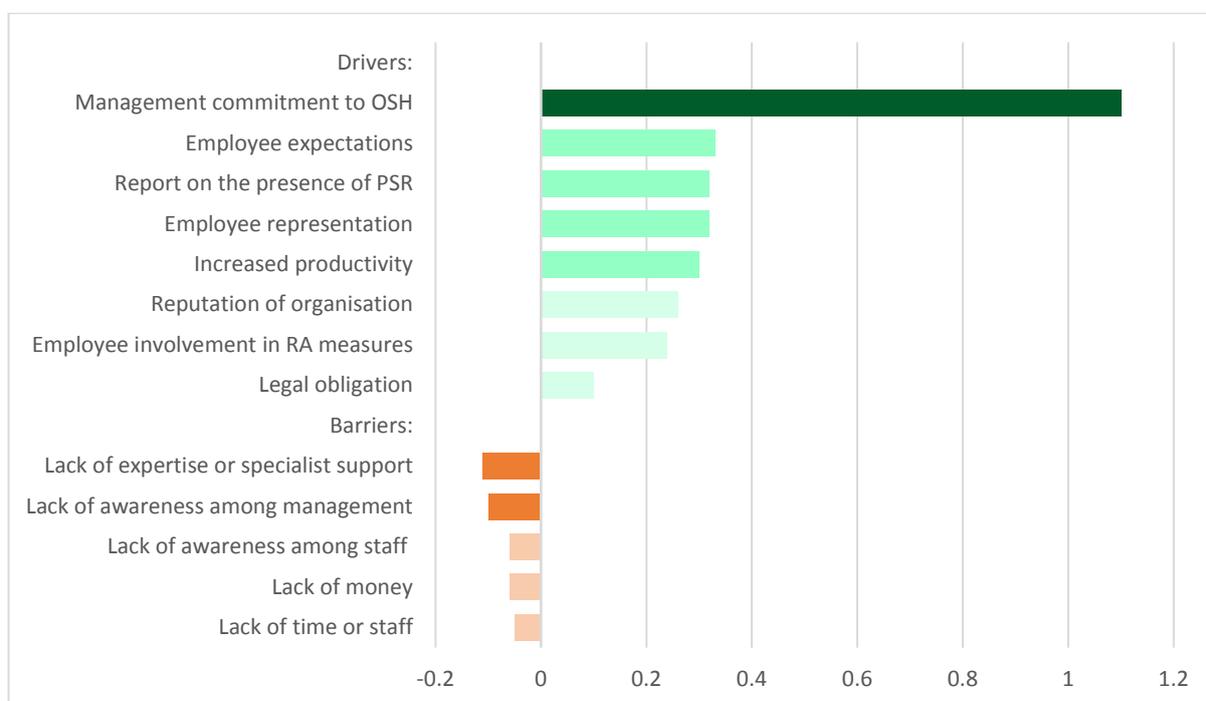


In the analysis, we included drivers and barriers that, in the ESENER questionnaire, were related to general occupational safety and health (OSH) management and not specifically to psychosocial risk management. As previous research has shown, 'good' OSH management is one of the most important drivers of psychosocial risk management, and drivers of psychosocial risk management are to a large extent similar to drivers of general safety and health management (EU-OSHA, 2012b). Figure 2 shows the associations between these drivers and barriers and psychosocial risk management. Darker colours indicate a higher association. Management commitment to OSH in general was identified as the strongest driver of psychosocial risk management. Other drivers that were related to psychosocial risk

management were the level at which the organisation reports on the presence of psychosocial risks, the level at which employees are involved in the design and implementation of measures after a risk assessment, and the presence of employee representation. In addition, the following reasons for addressing safety and health in general were also identified as drivers of psychosocial risk management: ‘fulfilling legal obligation’, ‘meeting expectations from employees’, ‘maintaining or increasing productivity’ and ‘maintaining the organisation’s reputation’.

The strongest barriers to psychosocial risk management were the lack of awareness among management and the lack of expertise or specialist support to deal with OSH in general. However, these associations were less strong than associations between drivers and psychosocial risk management. No relationship was found between psychosocial risk management and the mentioning of paperwork or the complexity of legal obligations as a difficulty in addressing (general) safety and health in the organisation. Respondents were also asked if some factors made addressing psychosocial risks more difficult than addressing other health risks. However, these potential barriers were not related to psychosocial risk management.

**Figure 2: Statistically significant drivers of and barriers to psychosocial risk management at the organisational level (standardised scores)**



PSR, psychosocial risk; RA, risk assessment

### Influence of the national context

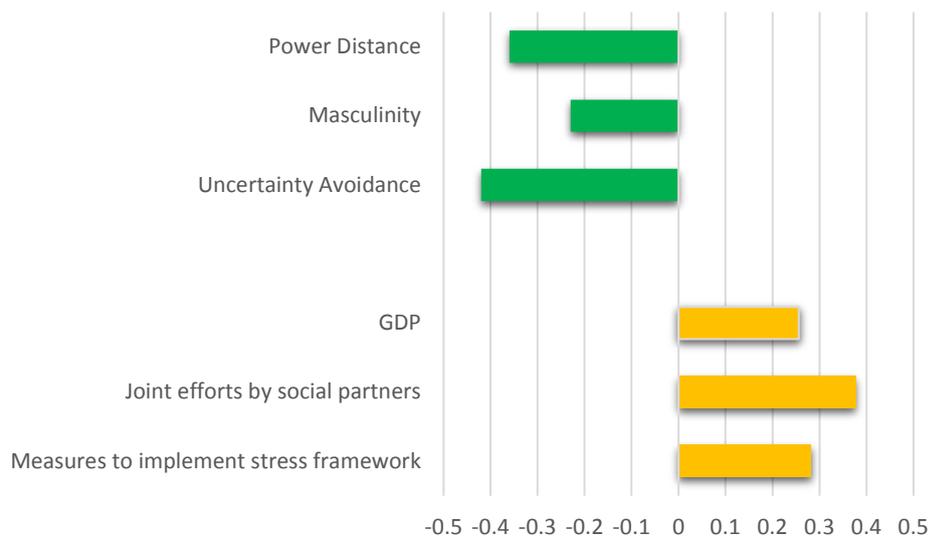
Figure 3 shows the influence of the national context on psychosocial risk management. The association of almost all national context variables with psychosocial risk management was statistically significant with the exception of masculinity. Psychosocial risk management is associated with low power distance, low uncertainty avoidance, a favourable economic situation (high GDP per capita) and national initiatives in the field of psychosocial risks (joint efforts of social partners and measures to implement the EU framework agreement on work-related stress). Note that the relationships between all the national context variables and psychosocial risk management are more or less at the same level, and comparable to the relationships between most drivers at the organisational level and psychosocial risk management. However, the association with the variable ‘management commitment to OSH’ is much stronger (see Figure 2).

All national context variables were strongly related to each other, with the exception of the cultural dimension masculinity. Joint efforts of social partners and measures to implement the EU framework agreement on work-related stress are more common in national cultures low on power distance and on uncertainty avoidance and in countries with a high GDP per capita.

In conclusion, all national context variables, including the cultural dimensions power distance and uncertainty avoidance, are related to psychosocial risk management, and all national context variables are related to each other. However, the causality of the relation is not altogether clear in this complicated context. Based on the current research, it is not possible to establish which factor of the national context is the most important for psychosocial risk management.

It is possible that the initiatives in the field of OSH in general, and psychosocial risks in particular, are influenced by both a favourable economic situation and a favourable cultural climate. Several earlier studies have indeed found indications of a relationship between the national culture and the psychosocial work environment (Lok and Crawford, 2003; Chen, 2004; Moncada et al., 2010). Research on the possible impact of the economic situation on national initiatives in the field of OSH and psychosocial risks is lacking, but it is plausible that a poor economic situation may lead to less budget for these initiatives.

**Figure 3: Associations between national context variables and psychosocial risk management (standardised scores).**



Although the level of psychosocial risk management appears to be related to national cultural dimensions, national culture was not, or only weakly, related to drivers and barriers at company level. This result seems to indicate that the possible impact of culture on psychosocial risk management cannot be explained by the impact of culture on the drivers and barriers we defined in the present study. It is possible that culture has a direct relationship with the way psychosocial risks are dealt with in companies. Also, culture may have an influence on other drivers and barriers, which were not included in the analyses. In addition, the relationship between drivers and barriers and psychosocial risk management does not appear to be dependent on the other national context variables (the economic situation on national initiatives in the field of OSH and psychosocial risks) either. There is, then, no indication that the interventions targeting organisational drivers and barriers (as defined in the present study) should be shaped according to the national context.

Based on the relationships found between the cultural dimensions, the GDP per capita and the national initiatives in the field of psychosocial risks, a distinction has been made between favourable and unfavourable contexts for psychosocial risk management. The favourable context appears to include

low PD, low UA, a good economic situation and national initiatives by the social partners that target psychosocial risk management.

### **Typologies of organisations**

**Apart from the national context, company characteristics such as size and sector also have their influence on psychosocial risk management. Previous research (EU-OSHA, 2016b) has shown the poorer quality of OSH management in smaller companies and the high level of non-compliance in relation to OSH regulation.**

**The results of the present study also show that the national context matters in organisations of all sizes, with the exception of small organisations with five to nine employees. These small companies have fewer measures in place to deal with psychosocial risks and have fewer drivers of dealing with safety and health risks, irrespective of the national context.**

**Concerning the sectors, national context appears to be related to differences in psychosocial risk management in all types of organisations, although in some sectors this relationship is weak. In the agriculture, forestry and fishing sector and the sectors of mining, construction, electricity, trade, transport, and accommodation and food, the low level of psychosocial risk management is observed also in a favourable national context. An explanation for this finding might relate to the large proportion of small organisations in these sectors, which, as concluded earlier, have poorer psychosocial risk management independently of the national context.**

**In an unfavourable national context, psychosocial risk management is below average in all sectors, with the exception of the education sector and the health and social work sector. In these sectors, we also see that important organisational drivers such as management commitment, employee representation and ‘meeting expectations from employees’ are more prevalent, including in an unfavourable national context. A possible explanation of the high level of psychosocial risk management and its drivers is the higher level at which the presence of psychosocial risks is reported. On the other hand, this higher-level reporting could also point to a higher awareness of psychosocial risks in this sector.**

### **Practical implications**

Several conclusions can be drawn from this study for practice. An important result is that the national context matters: the level of psychosocial risk management was found to be higher in countries with a favourable national context than in countries with an unfavourable national context. This suggests that certain cultural dimensions and the national initiatives are important in shaping the management of psychosocial risks in the workplace. Although the cultural dimensions are hard to change, the national initiatives such as joint actions of social partners, changes in the legal framework, campaigns and sector-specific activities should be strengthened.

It was hypothesised that the importance of (some) organisational drivers of and barriers to psychosocial risk management will also be dependent on the cultural context, which would demand a differentiated approach to stimulate psychosocial risk management. However, the results did not support this hypothesis, suggesting that the importance of certain organisational characteristics is the same independently of the national context. In general, the drivers appear more important than the barriers (which were rather weakly related to the level of psychosocial risk management); in particular, the results showed that:

- Management commitment is the strongest driver of psychosocial risk management.
- Formal employee involvement (in a works council, in a safety and health committee, as trade union representatives or as safety and health representatives) and informal employee involvement (e.g. in design and implementation of measures after a risk assessment) also appear to be drivers of psychosocial risk management.

Actions towards better psychosocial risk management may be taken by employers, employees (representatives), social partners and sector organisations. However, national initiatives are also

conceivable. For example, management commitment may be encouraged by awareness campaigns, and employee involvement may be stimulated by legislation.

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