

Psychosocial risks to workers' well-being: Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

Psychosocial risks are defined as social and organisational aspects of the design and management of work that could cause physical or psychological harm. Besides having an impact on workers, such risks also have important societal and economic implications, for example related to rising health and social expenditure and productivity losses. As absences from work because of mental ill-health are on the rise, EU policymakers and decision-makers are striving to better understand psychosocial risks in the workplace, what drives them and their impact.

This report examines the prevalence of some of the most important psychosocial workplace risks, or job stressors, experienced by employees: high work intensity, unsocial working hours, job insecurity, financial worries, and violence and harassment at work. It also looks at the availability of job resources that mitigate the negative effects of stressors, such as flexible working hours and training opportunities. The study is based on data from the European Working Conditions Telephone Survey (EWCTS) in 2021, reflecting the situation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the report focuses on the risks associated with telework, which has expanded dramatically since the start of the pandemic.

Policy context

The Framework Directive for occupational safety and health imposes a legal obligation on employers to prevent, assess and combat safety and health risks – including psychosocial risks – in the workplace. Its implementation is uneven across Member States because psychosocial risks and the approach and scope of legal frameworks dealing with them differ by country. The EU social partners' framework agreements on tackling violence and harassment and stress at work played a role in developing related regulations in most Member States, but they may not be sufficient to fully address these risks. The EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2021–2027 states that changes in working conditions are required to tackle psychosocial risks.

After the pandemic, mental health became part of the political discussion at EU level. Consequently, a resolution of the European Parliament called on the EU institutions and Member States to recognise the high prevalence of work-related mental health problems and to find ways to help prevent them. It also emphasised the need to eradicate violence, discrimination and harassment at work. The European Commission's communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health, from June 2023, proposes the possibility of an EU-level initiative on psychosocial risks in the medium term.

Key findings

- Changing European workplaces, characterised by rising digitalisation, are seeing increased prevalence of high work intensity (reported by 4 in 10 employees) and unsocial working hours, including working in one's free time (reported by a similar proportion). Working at high intensity was most common among managers, professionals, technicians, and clerical and support workers, particularly in the construction, financial services and health sectors. Unsocial working hours were most common among managers across sectors and low-skilled workers in the transport and storage sector. These job stressors have a negative impact on health and well-being and work-life balance.
- Some 14% of employees reported job insecurity, and 26% reported having financial worries. Job insecurity was most prevalent among employees who were young, had only a primary education, worked in elementary occupations or worked as plant and machine operators, craft workers or sales workers. Among employees with only a primary education, half said that they struggled to make ends meet, as did high shares of employees in elementary occupations and service and sales. Those experiencing these problems often lacked job resources, which made them feel unheard, unseen, unsupported and unable to improve their situation.

- Some 13% of employees reported having been exposed to adverse social behaviour (verbal abuse or threats, unwanted sexual attention, or bullying, harassment or violence), while 12% felt discriminated against at work. Employees in the health and public administration sectors and in low-skilled occupations were most likely to be subjected to these behaviours. Within those sectors and occupations, employees who frequently worked with third parties (such as clients and patients) were most affected. Adverse social behaviour and discrimination have a very negative and long-lasting impact on health and well-being.
- In general, employees who teleworked, whether some or all of the time, had more resources than those working only at their employer's premises. This is to some extent related to their job characteristics in terms of occupation and sector. However, many reported high work intensity and working in their free time.
- The prevalence of psychosocial risks differs across Member States, reflecting differences in both labour market structures and the effectiveness of policies aimed at combating such risks. The variation in prevalence is also very likely to be related to the different regulatory frameworks addressing psychosocial risks.
- From a sectoral perspective, highly skilled and medium-skilled workers in the health sector are most likely to experience adverse social behaviour, to work at high intensity and to work unsocial hours; therefore, a relatively high percentage of doctors, nurses and other health professionals are at risk of having their health damaged by work.
- Policy should aim to reduce both the levels of psychosocial risks in workplaces across the EU and the variation in their prevalence across the Member States.
- In some cases, workers who experience one psychosocial risk are more likely to experience other work-related risks. This implies that a holistic approach to psychosocial risk prevention is required in policy and practice, considering the entire social environment and the workplace culture and putting in place the resources conducive to its improvement (such as social support and organisational participation). In other cases, for example when workers have job insecurity and financial worries, a macroeconomic and social perspective must also be considered.
- The uneven distribution of risks by sector and occupation requires specific actions and social dialogue at company and sectoral levels. For example, work intensity is more prevalent among managers and professionals across sectors, whereas job insecurity and financial difficulties are more prevalent among lower-skilled occupations, while adverse social behaviour and discrimination are prevalent among those frequently working with third parties.
- With the expansion of telework, a high percentage of EU employees are experiencing work-life interference, high work intensity and unsocial working hours. Addressing the high prevalence of these risks in light of the potential further expansion of remote and flexible work requires specific attention, perhaps in different regulatory areas (such as occupational safety and health, working time, and the right to disconnect). In addition, the advantages of remote work may not be accessible to the whole workforce and, therefore, the right to a good work-life balance and access to flexible work and other psychosocial resources should be provided through other measures.

Policy pointers

- The increased prevalence of some psychosocial risks in EU workplaces during the pandemic and their harm to workers' health require action from governments and the social partners to ensure that the occupational health and safety principles enshrined in the Framework Directive are implemented effectively regarding psychosocial risks.

Further information

The report *Psychosocial risks to workers' well-being: Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic* is available at <https://eurofound.link/ef23001>

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