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This report synthesises some of the most relevant results of a research project on working conditions and work-related risks, comparing survey results obtained in 2006 and 2010 from employers, employees and workplace safety specialists. The results identify various risk factors in the working environment, levels of compliance with safety legislation, the effect of the shadow economy on workplace safety and to what extent employees are informed about workplace safety issues. The research suggests that social dialogue on workplace safety and matters pertaining to legal employment relationships significantly improve the working environment.

Introduction

A research project, Working Conditions and Risks in Latvia, 2009–2010, was conducted as part of the Latvian Employers’ Confederation (LDDK) programme, Practical application of labour relations and workplace safety legislation and regulation in branches and enterprises, with the financial support of the European Social Fund (ESF) and the Latvian government. The study was conducted by a research group that included Inspecta Prevention, a provider of inspection, testing, certification and technical consultancy services; media, market and public opinion research specialists TNS Latvia; and a number of experts under the leadership of Linda Matišāne, M.D., an expert in behavioural aspects of workplace accidents and occupational diseases.

The goal of the study was to establish the state of workplace safety culture in Latvia and to make recommendations for improving health and safety legislation, as well as other measures, thereby improving working conditions in Latvia’s enterprises. The study looks at the development of workplace safety systems by comparing the results of the 2009–2012 survey of working conditions and risks with the results obtained from an earlier 2005–2007 survey. It also assesses the implementation of proposals based on the results of the previous survey.

The target groups in this study were employers and employees, as well as workplace safety specialists who have the highest professional education in the field.

Research methods

The study involved a number of activities and used various research methods.

An analysis was made of current databases on occupational diseases and accidents at work and their cost, including, for instance:

- data on people in Latvia with occupational diseases and on people subjected to the radiation that followed Chernobyl catastrophe;
- data from the State Labour Inspectorate (VDI);
- data from the State Social Insurance Agency (VSAA).

Surveys were conducted and the results were analysed and compiled; the current results were compared with those obtained in 2006.

A specialised survey of employers and their representatives was conducted from 19 January to 10 February 2010:

- survey method: computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI);
- sampling method: combined quota and stratified random sampling;
- representative sample of approximately 82,737 enterprises or institutions throughout Latvia;
- sample size: 1,044 employers or their representatives.

A specialised survey of employees and self-employed people was conducted from 15 January to 22 March 2010:

- survey method: computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI);
• sampling method: combined quota and stratified random sampling;
• representative sample of approximately 1,070,900 employees and self-employed people throughout Latvia (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2008);
• sample size: 2,505 economically active people, including 2,378 employees and 127 self-employed people.

A survey of workplace safety specialists was conducted from 9 February to 5 March 2010:
• survey method: electronically distributed self-addressed interviews;
• sampling method, sample size: all workplace safety specialists who have acquired or are acquiring the highest professional education in work safety, 210 respondents.

An analysis was carried out of the database of laboratory measurements of the Institute of Occupational Safety and Environmental Health at Riga Stradiņš University, the Laboratory of Hygiene and Occupational Diseases, to assess working conditions and risk factors in the working environment. At the time of study, the database contained measurements on 11 types of physical factors (30,082 workplace measurements) and 93 types of chemical factors (4,525 workplace measurements).

The research includes a review of current and published studies that have been conducted in the sphere of occupational health and workplace safety in the period from 1997 to 2009. It reports on two groups of surveys – surveys conducted primarily in Latvia, and surveys conducted in several countries including Latvia (for example, the fourth and fifth European Working Conditions Surveys, 2005 and 2010, and the 2009 European Company Survey, all carried out by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions). In analysing working conditions and risks, the following characteristics have been taken into account:
• size of enterprise (number of employees);
• age of enterprise;
• type of ownership;
• sphere and location of enterprise;
• participation of enterprise in employers’ organisations;
• employees’ nationality, education level, age, gender, income level, and sector of employment.

Employee satisfaction
When asked how satisfied they are, in general, with their current job, employees are more satisfied (‘very satisfied’ and ‘rather satisfied’ responses) with their present job (74%) than self-employed people (62%). However, the proportion of those who are satisfied has increased among the self-employed (from 56% in 2006 to 62% in 2010), while the proportion of satisfied employees has decreased, but not significantly (from 75% in 2006 to 74% in 2010).
Figure 1: Main reasons for employee satisfaction with present job (% responding ‘very satisfied’ or ‘rather satisfied’)

In 2010, the chief reason for dissatisfaction among the employed is low salary (76% in 2006; 74% in 2010). The number of employees whose main reasons for dissatisfaction are lack of stability, lack of a feeling of security, and delayed payment of salary has significantly increased (from 17% in 2006 to 42% in 2010). In contrast, a heavy workload has become less important (30% in 2006; 20% in 2010).

Among the self-employed, the following reasons for dissatisfaction are cited more than twice as often in 2010 than in 2006: low salary (14% in 2006; 50% in 2010), excessive taxes (15% in 2006 to 30% in 2010), and lack of social guarantees, which corresponds to absence of insurance to cover accidents or occupational diseases (7% in 2006; 24% in 2010). The most significant cause of dissatisfaction is lack of a feeling of stability and security (38% in 2006; 67% in 2010).

Satisfaction with working conditions
An analysis of employees’ satisfaction with the safety of their working conditions and environment (asked how satisfied they are with working conditions and environment in their workplace in general) reveals an increase in the proportion of employed people who are satisfied (77% in 2006 and 84% in 2010 responded ‘very satisfied’ or ‘rather satisfied’).
Results reveal that as the basic salary increases, the number of respondents who are satisfied with their working conditions and environment also increases.

It is noteworthy that satisfaction is also related to whether or not the salary is undeclared (paid in an envelope, which means that income taxes are not paid for part or all of the salary). Among respondents who receive envelope salaries every month, the number of those who are satisfied with their working conditions and environment has decreased since 2006 (from 63% in 2006 to 60% in 2010). In contrast, respondents who have never received envelope salaries are more satisfied (79% in 2006; 87% in 2010). This confirms that social guarantees have a positive impact on employees' satisfaction with working conditions and environment.

Progress in the sphere of workplace safety has declined as a result of the poor economic situation in Latvia. The fact that in 2010 only 6% of respondents replied that work safety has improved greatly or improved somewhat confirms this trend (19% in 2006).

**Compliance with legislation**

As part of this study, employers had to assess on a 10-point scale the extent to which the working environment at their institution or enterprise complies with the requirements of the labour protection legislation (where 10 is full compliance and 1 no compliance at all). Ratings ranging from 7 to 10 points were reported by 79% of respondents (86% in 2006), which can be considered a positive result. Nevertheless, in-depth data analysis reveals that only 42% of employers (32% in 2006) who reported that the working environment at their enterprise complies with the Labour Protection Law (defined as a self-assessed rating of 9 or 10 points) have conducted a risk analysis as required by Section 8 of the law. According to the labour safety specialists who contributed to
the survey, only 35% of them rated the working environment in general as compliant with the Labour Protection Law (scores ranging from 7 to 10 points); this assessment has increased almost twofold since 2006 (19% in 2006).

*Figure 3: Compliance with Labour Protection Law, employers’ survey (%)*

It is interesting to note that as the proportion of enterprises in which a risk assessment of the working environment has been conducted increases (from 22% in 2006 to 31% in 2010), the employer’s average self-assessment decreases (average self-assessment in 2006 was 8.4 on the 10-point scale; in 2010 it was 7.9). That means the greater an employer’s knowledge and understanding of the working environment, the more objective will be the results, and this includes the employer’s assessment of actual compliance with the law.
The self-employed gave a lower score on observance of workplace safety requirements (7.8 in 2006; 8 in 2010) than did employees (8.2 in 2006; 8.3 in 2010). Nevertheless, in both cases the current assessment has increased in comparison with 2006.

There seems to be a relationship between undeclared wages and compliance with workplace safety requirements. Employees who say they receive undeclared wages every month also give a lower assessment of workplace safety compliance – the average assessment is only 6.6 on the 10-point scale (in 2006 it was 6.8).

According to the survey results, the percentage of companies that have full-time workplace safety specialists has significantly decreased from 26% in 2006 to 16% in 2010. Analysis of these results concluded that this was probably caused by a reduction in the volume of work (41% of the employees surveyed reported a decrease in the volume of work in the year prior the survey) and optimisation of internal resources, both consequences of the economic downturn.

The proportion of employers in whose enterprises a complete risk assessment of the working environment was conducted has generally increased (22% in 2006; 31% in 2010). Nevertheless, the situation can be considered negative given that since 2002, legislation requires every enterprise to conduct such an assessment. In addition, there has been a decrease in the number of companies or institutions where a specific employee or trusted representative of employees has been involved in the assessment. Survey results reveal that the smaller the enterprise, the less frequently a full-scale risk assessment of the working environment is carried out.

It is significant that in 53% enterprises that are not members of an employers’ organisation, no risk assessment of the working environment was carried out. Risk assessments were done in 75% of enterprises with LDDK membership.

Employees report similar results for companies that have entered into collective agreements, where 27% of respondents from companies covered by such agreements reported that they have
participated in working environment risk assessment compared to 17% of respondents from enterprises that have no agreement. Similarly, 28% of respondents from companies that have employee representatives report that they have participated in a working environment risk assessment, compared to 17% of respondents in enterprises that have no representative. Results from employees indicate that the level of assessment of risk factors in the working environment remains unchanged, with 14% reporting in 2010 that an assessment had been done by their employer, compared to 13% in 2006. The survey also shows some deterioration of working conditions in the field of legal employment relationships. The proportion of employers who said they had employees working on full-time contracts has decreased (89% in 2006; 79% in 2010). The employees’ survey shows that the proportion of employees who have not received compensation for overtime has increased (31% in 2006; 38% in 2010), although the proportion of employees who work overtime has decreased.

**Identification and prevention of workplace risk**

The most significant risk factors in the working environment are psycho-emotional factors (such as lack of time, overtime work, aggregated working time and direct contact with people who are not employed at the respondent’s workplace) and ergonomic factors (including computer work, carrying or moving heavy loads, working in a strained posture and performing repetitive movements).

Analysis of the survey results reveals that there have been no significant changes during the past five years, despite the fact that both employers and employees mention the most common risk factors more frequently in 2010 than they did in 2006. Researchers attribute that to improvement in employers’ understanding rather than an actual increase in risk factors. However, structural changes in the working environment have taken place during the last decade, and workplaces where there is physical overload or strained postures are common.

According to the employers’ survey, 75% of companies recognise that employees are subject to the environmental risk factor created by work with a computer (61% in 2006). The employees’ survey shows a higher proportion of workers who report working with a computer in a poor posture (75% in 2010 among those who do computer work at least two hours a day, compared to 68% in 2006).

One may conclude that the situation has improved because of a significant increase in the number of employers who have worked out a preventive plan for improving the working environment at their enterprise or organisation or have developed a plan for reducing risks after a risk assessment (in 2006 50% of employers at whose enterprise a risk assessment was conducted answered in the affirmative; in 2010 65% did so).

**Consequences of poor workplace safety**

The study compares the total number of accidents in Latvia with the numbers from other EU Member States.

It could be concluded that Latvia still has an extremely low level of registered accidents. **Eurostat** figures show that in 2007 the average number of accidents in the EU15 was 2,860 per 100,000 employees, and in Latvia 167 per 100,000 in 2007, and 121 in 2009.

However, this study indicates that these low figures are mainly a consequence of misreporting of workplace accidents. For example, it found that only 54.8% of accidents were reported in 2012, and 21% of respondents were unable to answer this question. One reason why employers fail to report and register all workplace accidents is that it can be complicated to deal with the VDI and its lengthy investigations.
The most serious problem is among the self-employed. In 2010, 11% of self-employed people reported that they had been involved in an accident, and 8% said that the accident had occurred at enterprises with which they had business relationships. It is important to note that, in general, self-employed individuals are not insured against accidents at work or occupational diseases.

Social dialogue in enterprises
The most popular social dialogue topic at enterprises is safety at work. Among employers who had invited suggestions for social dialogue, 71% reported that employees most frequently requested discussions about safety at work. Only 8% of the same employers reported that employees suggested discussing legal employment relationships (14% in 2006).

It should be noted that the number of respondents who are unwilling to join a trade union (‘definitely no’ and ‘probably no’ responses) has increased significantly from 44% in 2006 to 65% in 2010. The figures in the private sector are slightly higher, at 50% in 2006 and 70% in 2010. There has also been a dramatic increase in the number of employed people who fully agree with the statement that ‘My employer is opposed to employees joining a trade union’, up from 5% in 2006 to 24% in 2010.

Awareness of safety at work
In 2010, almost twice as many employers considered that all employees in their enterprise were subject to some kind of risk factor in the working environment than in 2006 (16% in 2006; 31% in 2010). This might be an indication of employers’ increased understanding of risk factors in the working environment, and it confirms the truth of the saying that ‘there is no workplace or type of work where employees are not subject to any risk factors’.

The proportion of employers who say they inform their employees about workplace risk factors decreased from 61% in 2006 to 52% in 2010, although the proportion of employees declaring that they had been informed about workplace safety increased slightly from 85% in 2006 to 89% in 2010. Nevertheless, 65% of employers consider that the main reason for accidents in their enterprises was employees’ non-observance of workplace safety requirements. Similarly, 65% of employees agreed with this statement.

Commentary
The study indicates that, in general, employers have an inadequate understanding of risk factors in the working environment and the need to assess them. Similarly, they do not seem to be sufficiently informed about the requirements of current legislation. Nevertheless, a positive sign is that knowledge and understanding of the law’s requirements are increasing. This appears to be helping employers to assess working conditions in their companies more objectively and to implement necessary improvements. Employers can also receive advice about legal employment relationships and safety at work as part of the ‘Practical application of labour relations and work safety legislation and regulations in branches and enterprises’ project, which will be in operation until December 2013.

The survey indirectly proves that one major defect in the work safety system is the lack of accessibility of information and understanding of aspects of workplace safety in various sectors. Furthermore, research results indicate merely formal compliance with the law. The evidence of this is seen, for example, in the increase in the proportion of employees who have signed the workplace safety instructions that are presented for inspection, while there has been a decrease in the proportion of employees who report that they are informed about workplace risk factors, and in the involvement of a specific employee or trusted employee representative in risk assessment.
The proportion of employers who have informed their employees about risk factors in the working environment has significantly decreased. Undeniably, the current economic situation has worsened the working conditions of the most vulnerable groups, especially those who receive monthly undeclared salary. It should be noted that 41% of employees agree with the assertion that in the year prior to the survey, their volume of work had decreased slightly or significantly, and thus the influence of risk factors had likewise decreased. The study also shows that in the existing economic conditions employers try to save money on labour protection measures, including mandatory health checks.

The situation is considerably better in enterprises that have membership of the employers’ organisation LDDK or an industry association, or that have either a functioning trade union or employee representatives. However, employees do not seem to be sufficiently engaged in social dialogue, and the majority do not seem to believe in the ability of trade unions to provide help – this is confirmed by the large number of respondents who are unwilling to join trade unions.

Reference
Linda Romele, EPC Ltd.