

## OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY MANAGEMENT IN POLISH ENTERPRISES. PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

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**Abstract:** Research priorities in the field of occupational health and safety in the European Union include research on shaping an organization culture of prevention by introducing OSH management, strengthening the role of corporate social responsibility, disseminating science discoveries and examples of good practice. Ensuring an appropriate level of occupational health and safety not only affects the company's performance, but is also a legal and social obligation. Compliance with health and safety rules prevents work-related injuries and occupational diseases and is an element contributing to the company's success. Paper presents research findings in the area of problems concerning occupational health and safety management in SME sector in Poland in the context of its challenges that face different conditions.

**Keywords:** occupational health and safety, management, enterprise, worker

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Occupational health and safety is not one of the most important research areas in management. Only 1% of the conducted research is related to this subject. The statistics are very unfavourable, especially in terms of the high social and financial costs associated with OSH. Economic analyses of working conditions and their effects have been carried out for years. The total costs related to inadequate working conditions in the European Union countries are estimated at 2.8% of GDP (Barling et al. 2002; Mullen 2004; Guldenmund 2000).

Research priorities in the field of occupational health and safety in the European Union include research on shaping a culture of prevention by introducing OSH management, strengthening the role of corporate social responsibility, disseminating science discoveries and examples of good practice. A fundamental pillar of the global health and safety strategy is to build and maintain an occupational health and safety culture at the national level and to apply a systemic approach to health and safety at the organizational level (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2004).

A health and safety culture is part of an organization's overall safety culture. The term security culture was first used by the Atomic Energy Agency, which issued a report on the Chernobyl disaster (IAEA 1999).

The OSH culture is treated as a component of organizational and social culture (Mearns and Flin 2000). The problems of occupational health and safety concern all collective actions consisting in the application of organizational and inter-organizational practices aimed at the individual protection of the employee and the entire work environment (Gherardi and Niccolini 2000). The involvement of management and employees in health and safety activities is a key factor in shaping the culture. Culture in general and OSH culture can be assessed through the attitudes and behaviours of members of an organization, which depend on the adopted system of values and beliefs (Glendon and Stanton 2000).

Human behaviour largely determines the current and future state of security. The most important issue related to the prevention and minimization of damage is the ability to see existing threats, take actions to minimize them and, at the same time, be aware of their potential consequences (Toft et al. 2003).

Occupational health and safety management consists in ensuring the conditions and organization of work and the behaviour of employees that guarantee the required level of health and life protection against hazards in the work environment. An example of a systemic approach to health and safety issues is the Polish standard PN-N 18001, which specifies the requirements for the occupational health and safety management system (PN-N-18001, 2004).

One of the basic conditions for effective management is the ability to measure and evaluate the effects of the activities carried out. This also applies to the broadly understood activities related to ensuring safe and hygienic conditions of the working environment.

The paper presents results of research findings on the occupational health and safety identified and analysed in SME sector in Poland. The author presents not only the results of research in the field of health and safety hazards, but above all indicates the main management problems in the field of occupational health and safety that Polish enterprises have encountered over the last 3 years due to various conditions. The task of the article is also to indicate solutions to improve the health and safety condition.

## **2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Measurement and evaluation of results are one of the stages of management processes in an organization. More and more often, the problems of the occupational safety are subject to management processes, which include: business planning, organization, implementation of planned activities as well as their control and monitoring.

The improvement of working conditions is most often a visible, immediate, direct effect of investment, organizational, technical and technological activities undertaken in the organization. The change in working conditions noticed by employees has a direct impact on their health and is associated with a reduction in exposure to hazardous factors of the work environment.

An existing or starting business activity has a defined initial state of work safety, which presents the actual state of the level of safety. It may be based only on the requirements specified by law or contain elements that additionally contribute to increasing the conditions of work safety in the workplace. Through occupational health and safety measures, a safety level higher than the initial state is achieved. Influencing the sphere of working conditions and the level of culture contributes to a positive change in the level of safety in the organization. This relationship is directly proportional, the level of safety increases with the intensity of activities in the field of occupational health and safety. It is worth noting that there is often a synergy effect between the actions and their effects, which means that even small changes in the improvement of working conditions translate into a significant improvement in work safety. The company monitoring the results of the introduced changes to improve safety should

be able to identify their effects. It should be emphasized that the safety sequence is a continuous process. Achieving a certain level of occupational health and safety, the organization should constantly seek new ways and solutions that will result in the improvement of working conditions. Moreover, an inseparable element of work safety measures should be the monitoring process, thanks to which the company obtains information on the actual state of safety conditions. On this basis, corrective actions can be taken (to ensure working conditions that meet legal requirements) and preventive actions taken (to increase the level of safety culture). According to the PN-N 18001 standard, the measurement of the effects of activities in the area of occupational health and safety should ensure:

- feedback on the health and safety at work in the organization;
- information allowing to determine whether and to what extent the organizational routine solutions in the scope of the hazard identification and prevention and limitation of occupational risk function effectively;
- the basis for making decisions regarding the improvement of hazard identification and occupational risk reduction as well as the functioning of the occupational health and safety management system.

The main objective of the research findings presented in the paper is identification and analysis of problems occupational health and safety management in Polish enterprises in the context of its challenges. The research was carried out using the CAWI (on-line) method with the use of the SW Panel web panel in 1517 workers from small, medium and large enterprises. The research has been carried out periodically on the initiative of the Safe at Work Coalition since 2016. The first edition of the research carried out by the Coalition made it possible to gain insight into the current security situation of employees and to identify areas for improvement. Data from the research report "Work Safety in Poland 2019" show that the scale of negative psychosocial phenomena on the labour market is huge. Nearly half of the surveyed (46%) office and physical-intellectual workers admitted that they had fallen victim to mobbing. More than half have experienced verbal violence and 14% have experienced physical violence in the workplace (Koalicja Bezpieczni w Pracy 2020).

### 3. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Changes in the work environment and the growing share of services in the employment sector significantly influenced the forms of organization of performing duties. These phenomena modify the challenges faced by health and safety services. Psychosocial risks are defined as emerging risk factors. They do not directly pose a physical threat to the employee, but their occurrence leads to damage to the somatic, mental and social health of employees, and, as a consequence, absenteeism, reduced efficiency or decision to leave work, which translates into the condition of the entire organization.

Over the last decade, the labour market has experienced dynamic transformations of work culture, as well as organizational and generational changes. Unfortunately, from a regulatory point of view, Polish labour law did not keep up with them. As a result of changes in the scope of the working environment and non-compliance with them, the regulations have a negative impact on the Polish employee and pose a threat to domestic companies.

Among the new phenomena there are those that were previously not spoken of loudly for various reasons. The legislator has taken insufficient steps to create legal regulations extending the spectrum of possibilities to combat this type of discrimination, such as harassment. We hope that this year's edition of the Safe at Work Coalition's report will be a pretext to open a broad discussion on psychosocial risks with representatives of employers' unions, employees, inspection and research institutions, associations dealing with this subject, as well as representatives of the legislator.

A study on mobbing, depression and stress in the workplace, carried out in 2019, indicated that 92% of respondents admitted that they had participated in occupational health and safety training in their current job, only in 58% of cases it covered psychosocial risks. Among the industries, the most worrying one in this respect was the health care sector, where the percentage of positive answers was only 52%, and 34% gave a negative answer. Additionally, only 40% of respondents participating in the survey indicated that the topic of psychosocial risks was discussed directly with the supervisor. This relatively low percentage can be explained by the fact that the perception of this topic as a significant challenge in the labour market is relatively recent, and factors such as stress still seem commonplace to many people in the workplace. The topic of psychosocial risks should be obligatorily raised not only during the initial OSH training, but also during onboarding trainings with the immediate supervisor. This will increase mutual trust, make it easier to face daily challenges in the team and help build a friendly working atmosphere.

Over 60% of respondents when asked about the experience of negative situations in the workplace encountered inappropriate treatment by their supervisor. Verbal abuse was also common (53%). Almost half of the respondents (46%) replied that they were a victim of mobbing. Most of the employees (78%) have come across the term "mobbing". It is most often defined as harassment (22%), stress, pressure, extortion (15%) or harassment (15%). A high percentage of people who have encountered mobbing in the workplace may also result from the lack of awareness of the full definition of the phenomenon, the essence of which is durability and persistence, i.e. a long-term process of harassment, humiliation or exclusion of an employee. Only

every fourth respondent (26%) admitted that activities aimed at counteracting mobbing were conducted in their organization. Programs for making employees aware of mobbing and its possible consequences are very important. It is not that the employer or the immediate supervisor always mobbing, because it happens that another employee does it. Also, the mobbing person is not always aware of what he is doing. That is why education in this area is so important, as it allows you to catch negative phenomena from the very beginning and counteract them. Psychosocial risks have a negative impact not only on the employee, but above all on the organization, its reputation, work efficiency, or - as the study shows - the atmosphere in the company, which is very important for employees. In the era of labour shortages, companies cannot afford to ignore the occurrence of such threats.

Underestimating the presence and escalation of psychosocial factors may result in high costs in the future. Occupational diseases, mental problems, the destructive impact of stress on physical health or the recently entered into the WHO list of diseases, occupational burnout are a real and increasing threat to the employee. Accidents at work have specific economic, social, health and ethical consequences, not only for employees, but also for their families. Economically, this problem will affect both employers and the state budget, through a burden on the social security system. In the long run, companies will have to face a serious reduction in the number of employees on the labour market, which is already a problem for Polish enterprises. The current Labour Code was adopted in 1974. And although we had a number of amendments along the way, it still lacks a modern and holistic view of labour law regulations, including psychosocial risks. It is high time to initiate activities that will have a positive impact on the work environment, thus, in the long run, will help build a healthy and strong business in Poland.

The coronavirus pandemic, which reached Poland in March 2020, violated the existing model of work organization and had a huge impact on changing the approach to the issue of occupational safety and health in particular. Occupational health and safety services in companies were thrown to the front in the fight against the epidemic to minimize the risk of infection in the organization. This means not only - to put it bluntly - intensification of the work of health and safety departments, but also taking on much greater responsibility for the safety and health of employees. At the beginning, neither the health service nor the legislator knew what the SARS-CoV-2 virus was, what its transmission looks like and what restrictions should be introduced. It was the shortcomings of the OHS service that, in the first phase, the obligation to look for solutions and introduce sanitary restrictions before the regulatory guidelines actually appeared.

According to the results of research carried out in 2021, during the pandemic, the scope of responsibilities of OSH services has expanded. In individual interviews, respondents admitted that their daily working time could be extended to 12 hours. On the other hand, the quantitative research shows that OSH services were responsible - apart from the standard scope of their work - for monitoring the observance of the rules of distance or disinfecting hands (97%) as well as conducting surveys and measuring the temperature (90%). In connection with the declaration of the pandemic, the OSH service had another important obligation that had to be fulfilled quickly. It was a necessity to develop new security procedures in connection with the threat of

coronavirus. In March 2020, when the first case of infection appeared in Poland, which very quickly developed into the so-called The "first wave", it was the health and safety services that had to respond to the threat in the first place, because the regulations introduced by the government changed frequently.

The coronavirus pandemic had an impact on the economic slowdown and the financial condition of Polish companies. However, it goes much deeper than financial issues - it concerns changes in the perception of health and safety, work organization, optimization of operating costs, readiness for changes and reorganization in the company. It is a challenge not only from the point of view of the physical health, but also the mental health of employees. An important element is also the impact of the pandemic on the long-term business strategy of Polish companies. They have implemented organizational changes such as remote work or shift work on an unprecedented scale. Sanitary restrictions appeared that have never been so widely applied before. From the point of view of the study, it is important to compare two perspectives - employees and employers. How do they rate remote work? How does it affect efficiency? What will be the long-term effects of the pandemic for Polish companies?"

Employers almost agree that when preparing an employee to work remotely, the company should introduce additional training on such topics as: rules of operating company equipment at home (93%) data security during remote work (87%) or occupational health and safety at work remotely (83%) . This is undoubtedly good news, but it is worrying that only 14% of employers believe that they should provide ergonomic tools to prepare the workplace. Unfortunately, for the time being, the law does not clearly define who is responsible for ensuring safe (i.e. ergonomic) working conditions in the home office mode. If the employer is unable to influence them, they should require employees to submit a declaration that their workplace allows them to safely work from home.

The assessment of the vast majority of employees that they expect a positive impact of the coronavirus on the quality of OHS standards is good news. This opinion shows that employers recognize the importance of the implemented solutions and, at the same time, are convinced of their effectiveness, which allows to assume that they will be more involved in the long-term process of maintaining appropriate standards. The conviction of a positive impact on the quality of standards may also be related to the fact that in many workplaces activities in the field of safety and counteracting coronavirus were conducted in a group form with the involvement of representatives of many departments of the plant. In this respect, there has been an improvement in cooperation regarding the creation of safety standards and recognition of their importance for the functioning of the entire enterprise. Taking joint actions and positive effects will make it easier to carry out other tasks related to ensuring the safety of employees in the future.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

A large scale of psychosocial phenomena, such as inappropriate treatment by the supervisor, verbal abuse, mobbing, discrimination or exclusion by other employees was identified in the research findings analysis. Insufficient regulatory actions aimed at equipping OSH services with tools to counteract psychosocial risks on the labour

market. Ignoring these phenomena could result in high future costs for employers and burden the Social Security system with long term layoffs and absenteeism.

Employees' responses clearly show the importance of psychosocial factors and their impact on the ability to perform work properly. A positive aspect is the fact that the respondents identify various sources of threats and nuisance related to performing work remotely, which proves that they have made a conscious assessment of the existing situation. It also shows that despite the fact that workplaces undertake activities aimed at enabling remote work, there is still a lack of fully functional tools ensuring, for example, ongoing contact between employees on business matters. There is also a lack of training support on how to individually react to changes in the situation in the immediate environment, manage working time, prioritize tasks.

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