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Marta Derlicka^a & Houshang Shahnava^b

^a Department of Ergonomics, Central Institute for Labour Protection, Warsaw, Poland

^b Luleå University of Technology, Sweden

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Working Conditions in Small Private Enterprises in Poland

Marta Derlicka

Department of Ergonomics, Central Institute for Labour
Protection, Warsaw, Poland

Houshang Shahnava

Luleå University of Technology, Sweden

The study deals with working conditions in small private enterprises in Poland. Data come from 50 small enterprises from the Warsaw area. Information about the evaluation of working conditions and the existence of programmes for their improvement was gathered with the help of questionnaires addressed to employees and employers. The results constitute a "photograph" of the Polish reality at the beginning of its transition from planned to market economy. The study revealed a lack of programmes for the improvement of working conditions in a significant number of the enterprises studied as well as little interest in occupational safety on the part of employers (owners).

The study also revealed that all decisions—including those about the improvement of working conditions—were made by employers. Hence, the need for the widest possible dissemination of knowledge on occupational safety and the protection of human in the working environment with particular stress put on employers. Employers who are knowledgeable in this field and who are aware of its importance can significantly influence the improvement of working conditions in small enterprises.

working conditions small enterprises occupational health

1. INTRODUCTION

The economic changes taking place in Poland, in particular transition from planned to market economy, have brought about an increase in the number of small private enterprises. The passage of the Economic Activity Act in 1988 (Ustawa, 1988) caused a great development of enterprises of this particular kind. According to Article 1 of the Act, everybody could now take up economic activity. Apart from very few exceptions in which a licence is required, all kinds of economic activity can be undertaken with practically no restrictions. Small, rarely affluent entrepreneurs, set up enterprises at all costs and in all—often dangerous—conditions. This state of affairs carried—and still carries—considerable danger to employees in small enterprises.

In Poland, small enterprises are those that employ under 50 employees. (It was only at the beginning of the period of transformation, i.e., in 1991–92, that the borderline between small and medium-sized enterprises was 100 employees.) The majority of small enterprises (95%; Państwowa Inspekcja Pracy, 1995) are private. More than 63% of the workforce is employed in the private sector now (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 1997a).

In 1988, 7% of the labour force was employed in the private sector. In 1989, this number rose dramatically to 33.3%, whereas in 1997 more than 63% of all employees worked in the private sector (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 1989, 1990, 1998a).

In addition to the ever increasing number of new enterprises, state enterprises are privatized, too. This contributes to the changing structure of all the enterprises as far as, among others, size is concerned, in favour of the small and the medium-sized.

The growing number of small private enterprises, together with the limited number of National Labour Inspectorate's inspectors (one inspector per 1,534 enterprises; Państwowa Inspekcja Pracy, 1994), means there is very limited control over compliance with occupational safety and health regulations in those companies. At the same time, inspections carried out by the National Labour Inspectorate in 1991–1994 (Państwowa Inspekcja Pracy, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995) indicated that working conditions in private, especially the smallest (i.e., employing fewer than 10 employees) enterprises, raised many objections and required constant supervision.

In 1992, inspections of the operation of machinery and equipment in small companies carried out by the National Labour Inspectorate (Państwowa Inspekcja Pracy, 1993) revealed that in 52.3% of the enterprises

studied, machinery and equipment were out of order or they did not have appropriate safety devices. In 1994, there were already 64.5% of enterprises like that. Similar upward trends were revealed by inspections (carried out in successive years) of fire protection, measurement of the concentration of dangerous factors, ventilation, lighting, the condition of the work space, conducting obligatory medical examinations, the training of employees, and so forth.

The number of occupational accidents in the private sector keeps growing. Whereas in 1991 they accounted for 14% of the total number of accidents, in 1992 the percentage rose to 20% and in 1993 to 24% (Państwowa Inspekcja Pracy, 1994). In 1994, the number was 29.6%, in 1996—39.6%, and in 1997 it was almost 45% (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 1995, 1997b, 1998b).

Until 1992 there had not been any studies of working conditions in small private enterprises. Some information was available from inspections carried out by bodies responsible for supervising the working environment (especially the National Labour Inspectorate), but those inspections did not target small enterprises. Moreover, the vast majority of the small enterprises created at that time failed to register with the National Labour Inspectorate and thus in most cases were not inspected. That is why, the Central Institute for Labour Protection (Warsaw, Poland) decided to investigate to what extent employees of small private enterprises were interested in the problems of occupational safety and health, who was involved in this area, if there were programmes for the improvement of working conditions in enterprises, and if so, if the employees were involved in them. The results of the study discussed here constitute a “photograph” of the Polish reality at the beginning of its transition from planned to market economy.

2. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this pilot study were

- to evaluate the employers' and employees' perception of working conditions in their companies,
- to investigate if there were programmes for the improvement of working conditions in those companies,
- to evaluate the employees' involvement in the programmes for the improvement of working conditions.

Thus, the objective was to investigate if those involved, that is, the employers and employees of small enterprises, were aware of the problems related to working conditions and, if so, what their attitude to them was. The part of the study that related to programmes for the improvement of working conditions was based on a questionnaire prepared by H. Shahnavaz at the Luleå University of Technology in Sweden. It had already been used (as part of a project headed by H. Shahnavaz) in Thailand, Japan, and the United Kingdom.

3. METHODS

The pilot study was conducted using questionnaires administered to (a) employers (36 items) and (b) employees (32 items).

The questionnaire for employers concerned

- general information about the plant (e.g., its size, location, line of business, the number of years it had existed),
- the employer's view on working conditions in the plant (e.g., "What do you think about working conditions in your plant? Please list the most important hazards in your plant."),
- programmes for the improvement of working conditions (e.g., "Is there a programme for the improvement of working conditions in your enterprise? If no, why not? If yes, what are its goals, who makes decisions regarding the principles of the programme, how is the programme executed?").

The items in the questionnaire administered to the employees concerned—just like the ones for the employers—general information about the plant, the employees' view on working conditions in the plant and programmes for their improvement. The items differed in the part relating to the programmes for the improvement of working conditions. Following are sample questions for the employees:

- Are you aware of a programme for the improvement of working conditions in your plant?
- Do you think there should be a programme for the improvement of working conditions in a plant?
- Have you ever been involved in improving working conditions?
- What can you do to improve working conditions?
- If you think there is a programme for the improvement of working conditions in your plant, what are its main goals?

4. PARTICIPANTS

The study was conducted—in accordance with the assumptions—in 50 private companies of 5–100 employees. Because the results of this pilot study were expected to be more interesting when presented against the results of routine inspections carried out by the National Labour Inspectorate in selected enterprises, a list of the enterprises inspected by the National Labour Inspectorate in 1991–92 was used. The study was conducted in 50 enterprises selected from that list. At that time, the private sector was particularly unstable. Most of the list turned out to be out-of-date. Many of the enterprises no longer existed, in some cases the addresses and telephone numbers were out of date making getting in touch impossible. Sometimes the enterprises employed more than 100 persons, or for the past few months part of the company was being restructured with only 1 or 2 persons employed to work on the restructuring, reorganizing, or moving the company and they were not able to fill in the questionnaire. That is why the *Official Phone and Address Directory for Warsaw and the Warsaw Province* (Yellow Pages) was used. Among the 50 companies studied

- 64% (32 companies) had fewer than 10 employees;
- 8% (4 companies) had more than 50 employees;
- 40% (20 companies) were production plants (food, chemical, printing, machine-building, light industries).

Table 1 classifies the enterprises according to size, type of activity, and ownership.

In 30 enterprises (60%), the questionnaire was personally administered by the first author of the study, that is, in each of those enterprises she administered the questionnaire to the employer and—wherever possible—also to an employee. In the other 20 enterprises, three people helped, all of them instructed and acquainted with the object of the study.

5. RESULTS

5.1. The Employees' and Employers' Evaluation of Working Conditions

More than 90% of the employers asked to rate the working conditions in their enterprises considered them good or very good. The employees gave

TABLE 1. Enterprises According to Size, Type of Activity, and Ownership (%), $N = 50$

Type of Ownership	Under 10 Employees		11-50 Employees		Over 50 Employees		Total	
	Production	Non-Production	Production	Non-Production	Production	Non-Production	Production	Non-Production
Craft and other private	8	36	8	8	0	0	16	44
Partnerships	12	8	4	8	8	0	24	16
Total	20	44	12	16	8	0	40	60

their working conditions high rating, too, although among the 81.8% who considered them good or very good, only 9.1% considered their working conditions very good (for employers this percentage was 42.9%, Figure 1).

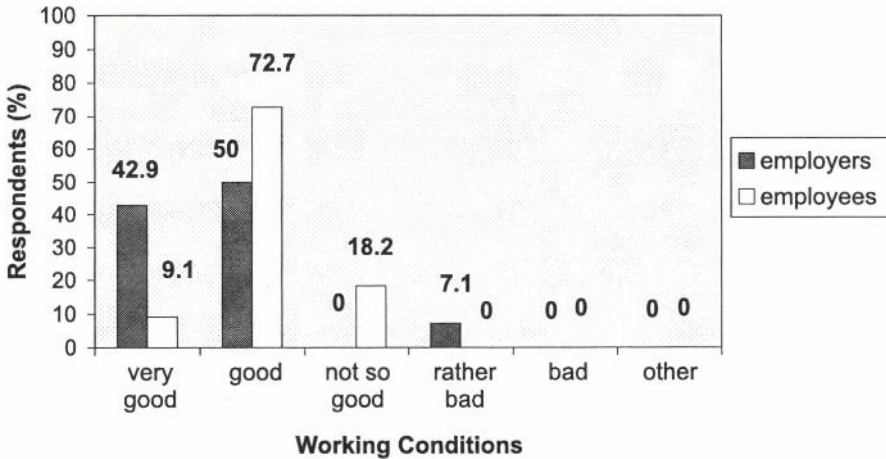


Figure 1. Evaluation of working conditions by employers and employees.

5.2. In-House Supervision of Working Conditions

There were no trade unions in the enterprises studied. Only in 4% of the companies (i.e., in 2 companies) with more than 50 employees trade unions were active. According to respondents, though, those trade unions were not interested in working conditions.

In over half (55.5%) of the companies with more than 10 employees—in which according to the Labour Code (*Kodeks pracy*, 1992) there should be an occupational safety and health officer (or safety issues should be assigned to an employee in the company or to an outside consultant)—there was no occupational safety and health service. In the other companies, the participants named an employee responsible for safety issues.

5.3. Basic Moves Towards Occupational Safety in a Plant

Over 50% of the employers questioned, when buying goods for their enterprise did not ask for a quality certificate confirming standard quality of the product. Safety certificates as well as certificates of admission to the domestic market for imported goods were not checked in almost half of the companies studied (46.4%).

More than half of the enterprises studied (52%) were not registered with the National Labour Inspectorate.

5.4. Programmes for the Improvement of Working Conditions

There were no programmes for the improvement of working conditions in 74% of the enterprises (i.e., in 37 enterprises) participating in the study.

In general, employers did not consider it necessary to plan improvements of working conditions in their enterprises (70.6%). Those who possibly wanted a programme for their improvement thought their principles should be determined first of all by the director of the enterprise. The second place was shared by occupational safety and health services and special occupational safety commissions that are responsible for general occupational safety policy of enterprises.

Figure 2 contains answers to the question who, according to the participants, should determine the principles of the programmes of the improvement of the working conditions in enterprises.

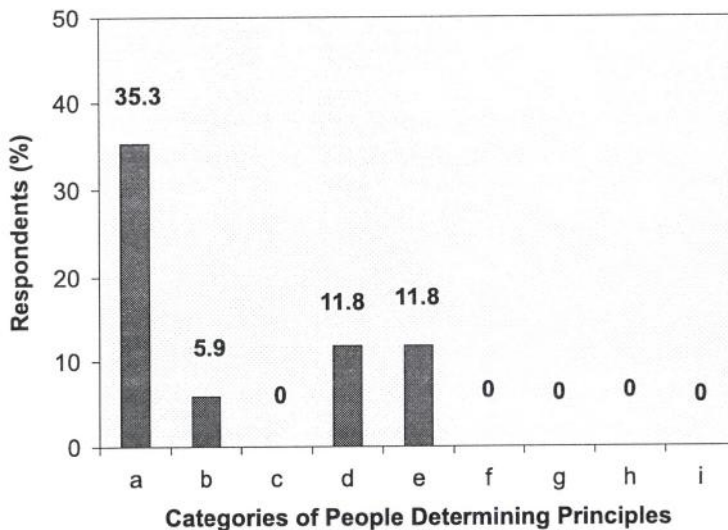


Figure 2. Who should determine the principles of a programme for the improvement of working conditions at the plant level? (%) Notes. a—management, b—division manager, c—foreman, d—occupational safety and health officers, e—occupational safety committee, f—representatives of employees or trade unions (e.g., community labour inspection), g—industrial engineer, h—government, i—other.

Employees of enterprises with no programmes for the improvement of working conditions were not involved in the improvement of working conditions in the plant, even though when asked if they considered that essential, 100% of them responded in the affirmative.

Programmes for the improvement of working conditions existed in 13 of the companies studied (26%). High productivity and efficiency as well as the improvement of work quality constituted the primary goals of programmes for the improvement of working conditions (76.9% each). It was employers who were asked about the goals of the programmes. Their responses are presented in Figure 3.

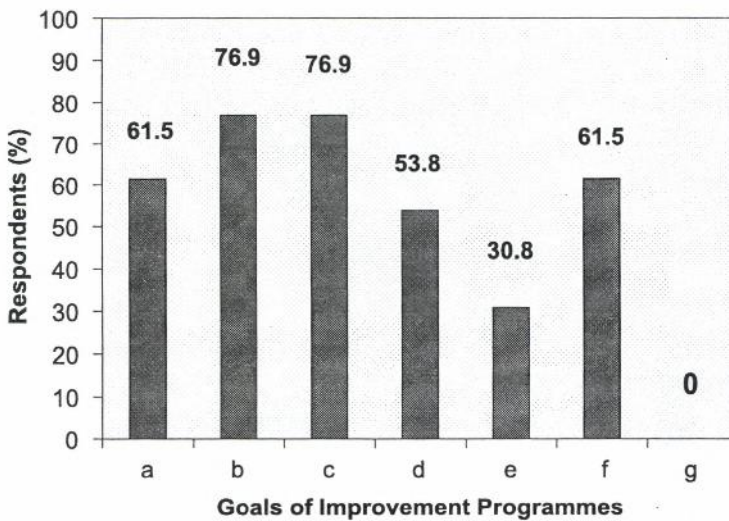


Figure 3. Goals of programmes for the improvement of working conditions.
Notes. a—to improve working conditions, b—to increase productivity and work efficiency, c—to improve work quality, d—to solve safety and health problems, e—to improve work relations, f—to increase job satisfaction, g—other.

Decisions about improving working conditions were usually made by the director. Both employers and employees agreed this was the case (Figure 4).

Directors of firms also determined the programmes for the improvement of working conditions. They studied problems of occupational safety and decided on the priority and ways in which individual problems were solved.

The employees' influence on the working conditions in a plant consisted in some of them identifying problems and suggesting ways to improve those conditions. Thirty point eight percent of employees had the opportunity to identify problems and to suggest ways to improve working conditions. The employers' views are expressed in Figures 5a and 5b.

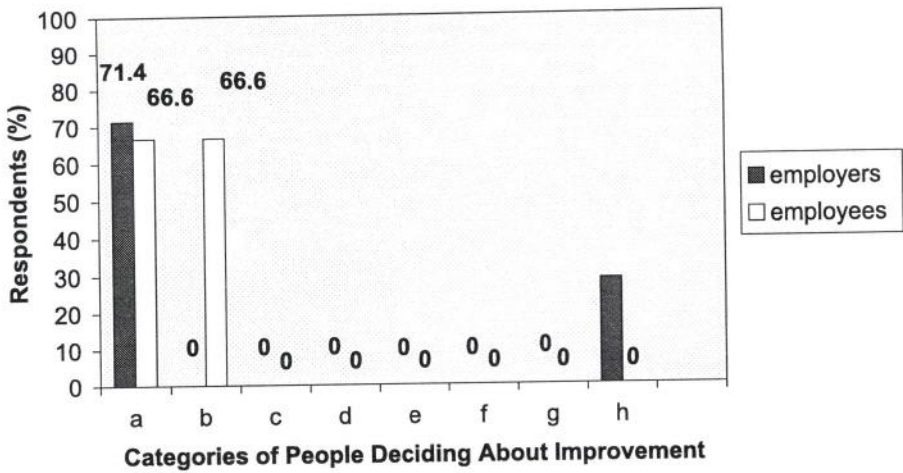


Figure 4. Who decides about improving working conditions? (%) Notes. a—director, b—division manager, c—foreman, d—employees or trade union representatives, e—occupational safety and health officers, f—industrial engineer, g—government, h—other (owner).

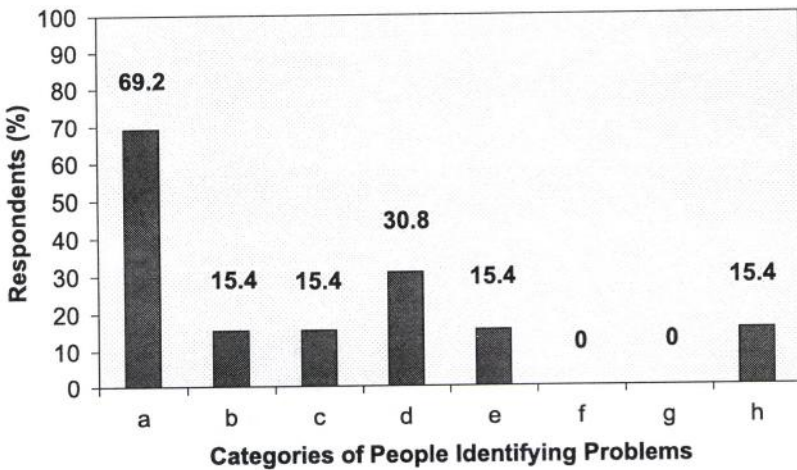


Figure 5a. Who identifies problems for the improvement of working conditions at the plant level? (%) Notes. a—director, b—division manager, c—foreman, d—employees or trade union representatives, e—occupational safety and health officers, f—industrial engineer, g—government, h—other (owner).

When carrying out programmes for the improvement of working conditions, employers claimed they needed the help of organizations as well as professionals from outside the company. Employers needed this kind of help particularly in the area of measuring dangerous agents as well as identifying problems negatively affecting the quality of products or the employees' absenteeism.

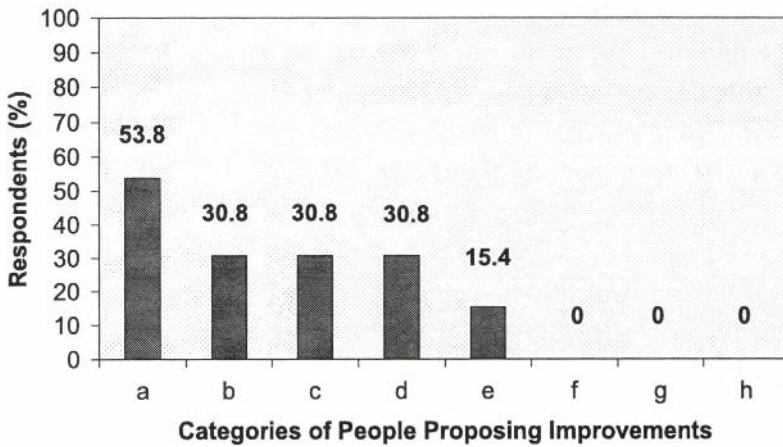


Figure 5b. Who proposes improvement measures? (%) Notes. a—director, —division manager, c—foreman, d—employees or trade union representatives, e—occupational safety and health officers, f—industrial engineer, g—government, h—other (owner).

All employers in whose plants there is a programme for the improvement of working conditions have recently been active in this area. In most cases, this consisted in investments such as purchasing modern equipment, automation, and computerization.

6. DISCUSSION

There were no programmes for the improvement of working conditions in three quarters of the companies studied. Considering working conditions very good, owners of those enterprises did not see any need to introduce changes. The ability to plan moves, which would secure a safe and healthy working environment for the employees is crucial. Examples from other countries prove that. For instance, in the United Kingdom, where occupational safety is at a much higher level, similar studies have shown that programmes for the improvement of working conditions exist in 82% of the randomly selected enterprises studied. Moreover, a high proportion of owners saw the need to have such plans for the future (Fowler & Shahnava, 1992). As conditions with regard to technology and labour force are changing rapidly in small enterprises in Poland, it is important for employers to be aware of the emerging hazards at the workplace that are connected with those changes and to develop programmes for improving the working environment and for motivating employees' involvement in the improvement process.

In the few enterprises where programmes for the improvement of working conditions existed, the employer made all the decisions. The employees did not participate in the shaping of working conditions in the company. This did not result from lack of interest on the part of the employees to be involved in improving working conditions. It should be borne in mind that 100% of the participants stated that there should be such participation. If we look at this result against the current Polish general knowledge on small enterprises, we can expect the following causes of this state of affairs. The employers were concerned with the firm's profits only and occupational safety was at the bottom of the company's list of priorities. Usually there was not enough money for the improvement of working conditions. On the other hand, workers are financially motivated to work, without complaining, in all working conditions. Moreover, the prospect of unemployment, apprehension regarding possible loss of work, resulted in remaining silent in spite of the obvious negligence of the employer and agreeing to work no matter what working conditions were like and no matter how many hazards there were in the enterprise. Even if the employer was not planning any improvements in the workstations, for example, decreasing hazards at machinery with no guards, the employee had no choice but to accept the status quo.

Answers to the questions on the employment of occupational safety and health services, registration of the company with the National Labour Inspectorate, and certificates of admission of a machine to the manufacturing process proved that employers often did not comply with occupational safety and health regulations.

Often there were no occupational safety and health officers in enterprises. Those responsibilities were not delegated to a professional from outside the enterprise, either. This responsibility is stated in the Labour Code (*Kodeks pracy*, 1992). The Labour Code is the basic legal act defining provisions for legal labour protection in Poland.

Enterprises were not registered at the National Labour Inspectorate, even though provisions of article 17 of the National Labour Inspectorate Act (*Ustawa*, 1981) put an obligation on employers to notify the Regional Labour Inspectorate about launching a company, changing the nature of its enterprise, or closing it down.

Employers did not ask for certificates of admission of a machine to the manufacturing process when purchasing machinery, technical equipment, or other mechanical tools. Article 213 of the Labour Code (*Kodeks pracy*, 1992) as well as Government Resolution No. 118 from 1986 (*Rada Ministrów*,

1986) require manufacturers to carry out appraisal like that in respect to all machines and other technical equipment before they are admitted to the manufacturing process. This kind of certificate increases certainty that a machine does not constitute a hazard to life or health.

Directors (owners) of firms decide about everything on their own. That is why, any moves aimed at an improvement of working conditions in small enterprises should be directed at them.

It is necessary to disseminate information in the field of occupational safety and the protection of the employees' health among this group. The reason managers and owners of firms in the private sector do not know regulations is often that on taking up economic activity, most of them unexpectedly became managers (owners) of enterprises and thus the problems of occupational safety are new to them. Many of them began economic activity with financial resources, but no preparation or qualifications, especially regarding obligations in occupational safety.

On the Polish market, there is a significant lack of diverse (from the point of view of form, scope, and content) information that would make complying with regulations in occupational safety easier for employers. That is why, it is suggested that dissemination in this field should be achieved by a wide range of materials that would contain both basic current legal regulations in occupational safety and materials that would help employers evaluate on their own working conditions, sets of legal regulations pertaining to selected problems, especially important for people setting up companies or new owners (e.g., an accident in a small enterprise, training employees in a small enterprise, employing the disabled in a small enterprise), and so on. Other forms of extensive popularization of the problems of occupational safety and the protection of human in the working environment are also essential.

7. CONCLUSIONS

When summing up the results of research on the working conditions in small companies and the attitude of the employers (owners of the companies) to the programmes of the improvement of working conditions, a general conclusion is that in small private enterprises there is an atmosphere of complacency regarding existing working conditions as well as disinclination to deal with matters not directly connected with the struggle to keep the enterprise afloat. The results constitute a "photograph" of the Polish reality

at the beginning of its transition from planned to market economy. The study revealed that all decisions, including those regarding the improvement of working conditions are made by the employers (owners). That is why, it is essential to disseminate information on occupational safety and the protection of human in the working environment as much as it is possible. Particular attention should be paid to employers, whose awareness of the problems and belief that it is important may to a considerable extent influence the improvement of working conditions in small enterprises.

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