Psychosocial risk management in company practice

Findings and conclusions from a field research project

The German Occupational Health and Safety Act obliges employers to design work in a way that risks to physical and mental health are avoided as far as possible. In doing so, psychosocial hazards must also be taken into account. A field research project of the German Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (BAuA) explored how this mandate is considered in company practice and the challenges and problems that companies must overcome.

Background and objectives

There is clear evidence that unfavourable psychosocial working conditions, e. g., excessive time pressure, conflicting demands, low job control, monotonous work, long/irregular working hours, or lack of support from supervisors or colleagues, contribute to the development of several widespread forms of physical and mental illness. Therefore, employers are expected by German OSH law to systematically reduce psychosocial risks as far as possible, as with any other kind of risks.

However, there is little empirical research offering insight into the challenges of psychosocial risk management in company practice and how to overcome them. Therefore, the German Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health conducted the field research project "Psychosocial Risk Management in Company Practice" (F 2358) from 2015 to 2019 to expand the empirical knowledge in this regard.

Data source and methods

The study is primarily based on semi-structured interviews with persons from 41 companies (including 15 small and medium-sized enterprises) who are actively managing psychosocial risks in their company. In small companies, typically the owners of the company were interviewed; in larger companies, interviewees were OSH specialists, experts from HR, persons responsible for workplace health management and/or employee representatives.

Additionally, labour inspectors from state authorities and accident insurance institutions were interviewed (n=17) to capture their assessment of companies' practice of psychosocial risk management. Furthermore, representative data from a survey of 6,500 companies that was conducted in 2015 as part of the German Joint Occupational Safety and Health Strategy (Gemeinsame Deutsche Arbeitsschutzstrategie – GDA) were used to analyse the prevalence and predictors of psychosocial risk management in Germany.

Key findings

As the analyses of the GDA survey data indicate, psychosocial risk assessments, which are legally required by German OSH law, are still not being implemented in a large proportion of German companies. Nearly one-third of small and microenterprises have no workplace risk assessments at all, but even large enterprises, which almost all carry out workplace risk assessments, often do not consider psychosocial risks. In addition to company size, the availability of OSH expert assistance and inspection by an OSH authority were the strongest predictors that psychosocial risk assessments have been carried out in a workplace (Beck & Lenhardt 2019).

However, field studies have shown that targeted measures to reduce psychosocial risks are also undertaken independent of the implementation of legally prescribed workplace risk assessments and, therefore, outside the structures and processes of (institutionalised) OSH management. Instead of referring to formal OSH requirements and standards, stakeholders in some cases refer to the company's culture and values or to the standards of the profession, standards of good leadership or standards of professional human resources management. For example, interviews in a social psychiatric facility made clear that for the therapists and social workers employed there, actively managing risks that result from working with patients (e.g., confrontation with suffering, possibility of harassment or violent assaults) was part of their professional self-image. Therefore, dealing with the psychosocial risks that result from interaction with clients is regularly a topic in the team

meetings, supervision, professional training and further education of these therapists and social workers. Accordingly, the field studies clearly indicated that the management of psychosocial risks might be embedded in multiple and diverse contexts of work environment evaluation and design (Beck et al. 2017).

Field studies have shown that psychosocial risks are often very difficult to manage in company practice. As many of these risks, such as work overload, high time pressure or interpersonal conflicts, are highly complex and have multiple interdependencies, there is often high uncertainty regarding these risks and appropriate mitigation measures. For example, considering the interdependencies of the quantity and complexity of work tasks, work time, and the qualifications and decision latitude of workers, it is difficult to specify the risk of work overload and the appropriate mitigation measures. Furthermore, substantial conflicts with other relevant business targets and requirements of work organisation may also arise that must be managed. Therefore, the practice of psychosocial risk management is often not a technical-rational decision-making process but rather a fluid problem-solving process in which diverse perspectives and multiple interests of stakeholders must be considered and negotiated. The field studies demonstrated that because of the political and social complexity of dealing with psychosocial risks, it is often challenging to provide effective OSH representation in these negotiation processes (Beck 2019).

Diversity was also found in the methodological approaches that companies pursued to identify and assess psychosocial risks. In some cases, the company's analyses of psychosocial risks were based on theoretical models or constructs (e.g., task variability, work intensity), usually using standardised survey and/or observation tools and claiming a technical or scientific rationale for the measurement, respectively. In contrast, approaches to analysing actual problems of work design or work organisation that were associated with psychosocial risks (e.g., overtime as a consequence of high induction costs in a department with high fluctuation) were often less formal and standardized and more discursive and reflexive (e.g., involving workshops, performance reviews or team meetings). Instead of claiming a scientific rationale for the measurement, these approaches were more targeted toward understanding the individual causes and contexts leading to critical situations or exposure to psychosocial risks at work. While standardized measurement tools provided a systematic overview of the characteristics of the psychosocial work environment, discursive and reflexive approaches contributed to an appropriate understanding of the characteristics and causes of specific problems, which is essential to develop and take appropriate measures (Schuller et al. 2018).

The spectrum of methodological approaches observed in small and medium-sized enterprises (SME, up to 249 employees) does not differ significantly from that in large companies. However, in SMEs, the approaches that predominated were pragmatic and solution-oriented practices for the everyday "assessing" and "managing" of psychosocial risks at work. For this purpose, e.g., individual talks, team meetings or annual staff meetings were used, but also spontaneous, informal hallway conversations. For assessing and managing psychosocial risks, the stakeholders in SMEs referred to their own observations and self-experiences of work-related psychosocial hazards rather than to models, constructs and scientific analyses of psychosocial risk (Schuller 2018).

In the cases studied, the processes for developing and implementing measures to reduce psychosocial risks were typically less reflected, organised and controlled than the analyses and assessment of psychosocial risks. Faced with the complexity and multiple interdependencies of psychosocial risks, the persons responsible were often unable to specify targets of intervention, recognise options and derive appropriate measures. The implementation of measures failed in cases of a lack of management commitment, i.e., if company management and/or superiors did not assume their responsibility for psychosocial risk management. Sometimes, however, insufficient employee commitment was also an obstacle. Furthermore, the development and implementation of adequate measures was severely restrained when the persons involved formally bore responsibility but had little scope for decisions regarding the management measures and their implementation (Schuller 2019).

Conclusions for practice

Contributions to the effective management of psychosocial risks are necessary and possible in all company contexts where the work tasks and the work environment are assessed and (re-)designed. Psychosocial risks are not only addressed in the context of OSH but also in the context of human resource management and/or leadership and professional practice. To effectively improve safety and health at work, the management of psychosocial risks must be systematically addressed and supported in all of these contexts.

For many relevant psychosocial risks, mandatory and universal standards are missing. Therefore, psychosocial risks cannot be assessed and managed by the traditional OSH approach of checking the generally accepted standards. Instead, a discursive and reflexive process of assessing and managing psychosocial risks must be organised involving all company stakeholders, in particular superiors, employees and OSH experts. The focus should be on

what has already been done to reduce psychosocial risks and what needs to be done to avoid critical exposure as far as possible. Tools and procedures for psychosocial risk management (that include risk assessment) should be designed to enable and develop a common understanding of what needs to be done to effectively reduce psychosocial risks at work.

Superiors and employees should not be addressed as the recipients of evaluations and recommendations from OSH experts but must instead be involved as primary players in the assessment of psychosocial risks and the implementation of management measures. To this end, they need appropriate competencies, know-how and incentives. These include appropriate qualifications but also sufficient scope for decision-making, sufficient time resources, suitable tools and effective support from OSH experts. OSH experts, such as safety specialist assistants or inspectors and consultants from state authorities or accident insurance institutions, contribute the specific view of OSH on psychosocial risks, referring to scientific evidence and generally accepted OSH standards. To strengthen experts' contributions, it is important to further develop knowledge and know-how in this field and to further concretise requirements on the psychosocial work environment from the perspective of OSH.

To place hazard-preventive work design more at the centre of the risk management process, the focus needs to shift from psychosocial risks as a measurement issue to psychosocial risks as a work design issue in order to prevent health risks at work. There is a considerable need for the development of procedures, tools and procedural guidelines that can support company stakeholders in better understanding the complex interrelationships of work design problems and in developing and implementing context-specific work design solutions at the organisational level.

Publications of the project results

Beck, David (2019): Psychosocial risks as a subject of occupational safety and health. Typical challenges in company practice. ARBEIT - Zeitschrift für Arbeitsforschung, Arbeitsgestaltung und Arbeitspolitik, 28 (2): 125-147 (in German)

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Beck, David; Schuller, Katja & Schulz-Dadaczynski, Anika (2017): Psychosocial risk management in company practice. Opportunities and limitations. Prävention und Gesundheitsförderung, 12 (4): 302-310 (in German)

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