



Is psychosocial risk prevention possible? Deconstructing common presumptions



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 November 2013

Received in revised form 2 March 2014

Accepted 31 March 2014

Available online 21 April 2014

Keywords:

Psychosocial risks

Management

Work organization

Prevention

ABSTRACT

This paper tackles a much debated and often misunderstood issue in the modern world of work, psychosocial risks. Although the prevalence and impact of psychosocial risks is now widely acknowledged as a priority in health and safety in Europe, there remains resistance by key stakeholders in prioritizing psychosocial risk management both in business and policy making. This paper explores why this is still the case by discussing three presumptions in relation to the current state of the art in this area. It examines the validity of these presumptions by summarizing key evidence, policies and practices. It is concluded that, although guidance on psychosocial risks and their management exists in abundance as does evidence to support the ‘case’ for psychosocial risk management, the concept of psychosocial risk is still not clearly understood in its entirety with discussions being focused on negative impacts and not opportunities that can be capitalized upon through effective psychosocial risk management at the organizational and societal levels. A key issue is the false distinction often made between psychosocial factors and issues pertaining to work organization, since psychosocial risks are embedded in certain forms of work organization. The suitability of available methods and tools is also considered as well as existing capabilities in the context of socioeconomic changes and constraints. On the basis of the current state of the art, an action plan for the prevention of psychosocial risks in the workplace is proposed, linked to sustainability and a value-based perspective.

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1. Introduction

The France Telecom suicides dramatically projected psychosocial risks and work-related stress to the front of the stage. Based on the report submitted to the court by the French Labour inspection authority, the Paris prosecutor’s office opened on 8 April 2010 judicial proceedings for “bullying and inadequate risk assessment”. The Labour inspectorate criticized very harshly the entire restructuring process of the company, a situation that, now more than ever, represents the norm both in enterprises in Europe and across the world. In 2004, France Telecom became a private company and since 2006 it reduced its staff and costs to improve productivity (NeXT recovery plan in 2006, aiming to cut 22,000 jobs and additionally change the job of some 10,000 workers within 3 years).

Public interest in the topic in France (and elsewhere) increased as a result of this highly publicized case. Consequently, one of three

targets of the Ministry of Labour strategic work plan 2010–2014 was psychosocial risks. Between 1 December 2009 and 30 October 2010, the French Ministry of Labour analyzed 234 company agreements on psychosocial risks and collected 250 company plans reported by companies with more than 1000 workers (out of 1300 companies concerned). Four out of five agreements were methodological agreements to define a process of assessment, evaluation and action. Few agreements included a clear commitment from management or specified the terms of their involvement (DGT, 2011). Since August 8, 2012, in France, companies with more than 20 employees must display at the workplaces articles of the Penal Code relating to sexual and moral harassment and make available to their staff a document specifying occupational risk assessment provided by the Article R 4121-1 of the Labour Code.

France is not the only country where there has been recent focus on this area. For example, the recent financial crisis accentuated challenges faced in the modern work environment mainly in relation to widespread organizational restructuring. According to the European Restructuring Monitor database, which contains

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information on large-scale restructuring events reported in the principal national media in each European Union (EU) member state, approximately 17,000 restructuring events have occurred in Europe from 2002 to present. This number includes only cases in which at least 100 jobs have been lost or created or employment effects affecting at least 10% of a workforce of more than 250 people; the number of smaller restructuring cases is undoubtedly even higher. Both business downsizing and expanding have been shown to influence employee well-being through the experience of stress, anxiety and burnout (e.g., Ferrie et al., 2008; Haruyama et al., 2008; Scheck and Kinicki, 2000; Vahtera et al., 2004).

In many countries in Europe, there has also been increased action concerning psychosocial risks (including harassment and bullying), and work-related stress as a result of accumulating evidence on their prevalence and impact, or policy actions at European or national level, such as social partner agreements. In some cases, for example in Italy, these have brought about changes in legislation with subsequent increased engagement at organizational level (Iavicoli et al., 2013). However, psychosocial risks are still considered by some stakeholders difficult to address in a preventative fashion. Taking into account the current state of the art in this area, three common presumptions are explored and addressed in this paper, in relation to this perception:

- There is neither a clear definition nor full understanding of psychosocial risks, not only by businesses, but also by other key stakeholders, including the social partners, policy makers and occupational health services. The often claimed complexity of the subject does not facilitate its practical management.
- The 'case' for the prioritization and management of psychosocial risks is still not clearly defined. While the emergence of psychosocial risks as a key health and safety challenge is commonly accepted and evidence is available on their prevalence and impact, the arguments presented on psychosocial risk management are focusing on potential negative impacts and do not also consider positive outcomes. In addition, their economic cost is often indirect, hidden and difficult to quantify. As a result psychosocial risk management is not strategic enough both in business and in policy making.
- Methods and tools for the assessment and management of psychosocial risks are not suitable for businesses while roles and responsibilities are not clearly established. Taking account of these risks in the risk assessment process and in operations management is difficult. This situation is worse when it comes to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) where expertise, resources and appropriate methods are lacking more.

This paper develops and examines the validity of these three presumptions. It also proposes an action plan for the prevention of psychosocial risks in the workplace considering the current state-of-the-art.

2. First presumption: there is no clear definition and understanding of psychosocial risks by key stakeholders and businesses

Psychosocial hazards are discussed in guidance by key organizations (such as ILO, WHO, and European Commission) as aspects of work organization, design and management that have the potential to cause harm on individual health and safety as well as other adverse organizational outcomes such as sickness absence, reduced productivity or human error (e.g., WHO, 2008a). They include several issues such as work demands, the availability of organizational support, rewards, and interpersonal relationships, including issues such as harassment and bullying in the workplace.

Psychosocial risk refers to the potential of psychosocial hazards to cause harm (BSI, 2011). Work-related stress is closely associated to exposure to psychosocial hazards and has been defined, for example, by the UK Health and Safety Executive as "The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work". While the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) states that "People experience stress when they perceive that there is an imbalance between the demands made of them and the resources they have available to cope with those demands". While in the past there was confusion between the concepts of 'eu-stress' and 'di-stress', in the current literature and key guidance on the topic, there is differentiation between work-related stress and different levels of pressure at work. When pressure at work is chronic and unmanageable, it results in work-related stress which is now recognized as a *negative* experience resulting from exposure to poor working conditions (psychosocial and/or physical) (Cox, 1993; WHO, 2008a; Cox and Griffiths, 2010).

Despite many publications and available guidance on the topics of psychosocial risks and work-related stress, the question remains, why are stakeholders and businesses still unclear on them? for example, the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI, 2013) recently staged the first European trade union seminar on psychosocial risks in Bilbao on 19–21 June 2013 with the support of EU-OSHA and 19 union representatives attending. At that meeting, participants discussed that an alternative term to "psychosocial risks" is needed "that will not perpetuate the confusion between cause and effect... [and will shift] the focus from work stress (effect)... towards acting on the causes of it, most often found in work organization (e.g., workload, management methods, etc.)". This discussion highlights that there is lack of clarity on the meaning of the term 'psychosocial risks', often being considered synonymous to work-related stress, even when key guidance has clarified their distinction a long time ago. Is the lack of understanding of psychosocial risks a matter of semantics despite the significant investment already made to raise awareness on the topic over the last almost three decades since the term 'psychosocial factors' appeared in guidance by the ILO (1986)?

To add to this, the lack of specificity and diversification of terminology used in the case of policies and guidance of relevance to psychosocial risks in Europe has also been highlighted as a concern (e.g., Widerszal-Bazyl et al., 2008; Leka et al., 2011). Indeed, there have been criticisms that this lack of specificity has negatively affected an understanding of legal requirements and practice (e.g., Ertel et al., 2010; Leka et al., 2011). Interestingly, in the documentation provided in the Senior Labour Inspectors (SLIC) (2012) campaign on psychosocial risks, one can find reports from European Union member state inspectorates stating that their country does not have specific legislation on psychosocial risks; assuming that they mean beyond the legal requirements of the Framework Directive 339/89/EEC which concerns all types of risk to workers' health and safety and also refers to work organization. This has also been clarified in the final report on the SLIC campaign (2012). Since psychosocial risks are defined as 'aspects of work organization, design and management', one would expect stakeholders and businesses to understand the relevance of EU health and safety legislation to them; however this is not always the case.

In addition, if one looked at the types of issues employers are asked to consider when it comes to psychosocial risks, they would find reference to workload, work schedules, role clarity, communication, rewards, teamwork, problem-solving, and relationships at work. Is there any business that is of the view that these issues are not important to its survival and success? Can any business flourish without effectively managing these issues? And if there is clear evidence that not managing these issues effectively can lead to poor employee health, presenteeism, absenteeism, human error

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