



Workforce diversity and risk assessment: ensuring everyone is covered

Summary of an Agency report

Introduction

Workers are not all exposed to the same risks and some specific groups of workers are exposed to increased risks (or are subject to particular requirements). When we speak about workers exposed to 'particular' or 'increased' risks, we refer to workers subject to specific risks due to their age, origins, gender, physical condition or status in the enterprise. Such people may be more vulnerable to certain risks and have specific requirements at work.

Health and safety legislation⁽¹⁾ requires employers to carry out risk assessments and emphasises the need to 'adapt the work to the individual', the obligation for the employer to 'be in possession of an assessment of the risks to safety and health at work, including those facing groups of workers exposed to particular risks' and that 'sensitive risk groups must be protected against the dangers which specifically affect them'.

Diversity and diversity management in the workplace are important issues in occupational safety and health today. However, diversity has seldom been studied from the perspective of risk assessment. Practical risk assessment tools that take into account the specific risks faced, for instance by people with disabilities, migrant workers, older workers, women and temporary workers, are still rare. It is hoped that further research and development will lead to additional guidance materials in the future.

Aim of the report

The report produced by the Agency highlights the need to carry out inclusive risk assessment, to take into account the diversity of the workforce when assessing and managing risks. The main aim of this report is to describe why and how risk assessment can and should cover the whole workforce, and to increase awareness among those responsible for and affected by health and safety at work — employers, employees, safety representatives and occupational safety and health practitioners — about the importance of assessing the risks for all workers.

The first part of the report presents the main issues regarding the occupational safety and health of six categories of workers considered at increased risk: migrant workers, disabled workers, young and older workers, women (gender issues) and temporary workers. At the end of each subsection, links are provided to further information and practical guidance or risk assessment tools.

⁽¹⁾ Council Directive 89/391/EEC of 12 June 1989 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work.



The report then focuses on the prevention of risks faced by the different groups of workers. It provides descriptions of practical actions at workplace or sector level and their background, including groups who are targeted, and ways of identifying and assessing results, side effects, success factors and problems.

Key issues for 'inclusion-sensitive' risk assessment

- Taking diversity issues seriously and having a positive commitment.
- Avoiding making prior assumptions about what the hazards are and who is at risk.
- Valuing the diverse workforce as an asset (and not as a problem).
- Considering the entire workforce, including cleaners, receptionists, maintenance workers, temporary agency workers, part-time workers, etc.
- Adapting work and preventive measures to workers. Matching work to workers is a key principle of EU legislation.
- Considering the needs of the diverse workforce at the design and planning stage, rather than waiting for a disabled/older/migrant worker to be employed and then having to make changes.
- Linking occupational safety and health into any workplace equality actions, including equality plans and non-discrimination policies.
- Providing relevant training and information on diversity issues regarding safety and health risks to risk assessors, managers and supervisors, safety representatives, etc.
- Providing adequate occupational safety and health training to each worker; tailoring training material to workers' needs and specificities.

- Inclusive risk assessment should take a participatory approach, involving the workers concerned and based on an examination of the real work situation.
- Good practice examples of inclusive risk assessment feature a mixture of preventive measures (adapting the work to the individual, adapting to technical progress, giving appropriate instructions to workers, providing specific training, etc.). The adoption of these interconnected measures is a key success factor.
- A risk assessment for categories of workers at increased risk that eliminates risks and tackles hazards at source will benefit all workers (regardless of age, gender, nationality and size). Examples of measures that could benefit the whole workforce include the following:
 - Installing adjustments to premises or workstations (to accommodate workers with disabilities, older workers, etc.), for example, ramps, lifts, light switches and steps edged with light paint, etc.
 - Adopting more ergonomic tools and instruments (that can be adapted to the specificities of each worker regardless of their size and characteristics). This will mean the job or task can be done by a wider range of workers (women, older workers, short men, etc.), for example due to a decrease in the amount of physical strength required.
 - Providing all health and safety information in accessible formats (with the aim of making this information more comprehensible to migrant workers).
 - Developing methods and strategies to retain older shift workers in particular; these strategies will benefit all workers (regardless of age) and make shift work more attractive for new employees.
- Whenever a company or an organisation makes changes to the physical environment of the workplace, or buys new equipment, it is important to ensure that those changes or purchases are also suitable for the diversity of the workforce.
- If the company or the organisation is not competent to deal with the risks of a specific group of workers, it is important to seek advice. This may be provided by occupational safety and health services and authorities, health professionals, safety professionals and ergonomists, disability or migrants' organisations, etc.
- Good practice examples of inclusive risk assessment show that, for any preventive action to be effective, it is essential to involve the whole range of actors directly concerned: workers and workers' representatives, works councils, management, occupational safety and health experts, contractors or subcontractors, etc.

Case study — Productive ageing — Shift-plan reform at Polyfelt (now TenCate), Austria

The management and works council of a chemical plant in Austria faced the problems of intensive shift work, an ageing workforce and a low retirement age. In a participatory process, a new shift schedule was developed with the help of occupational safety and health experts. The result was a win-win situation for all. Fewer weekly working hours, fewer night shifts and longer shift breaks are the main benefits for the employees. Higher productivity, later retirement and an improved image as a good employer are among the benefits enjoyed by the company.

Case study — Promoting the integration of workers with disabilities at Ford, Germany

The objective of this project was to integrate workers with disabilities and to reintegrate workers into the production process after extended sick leave. The company set up a disability management team with management representatives and employees, carried out a risk assessment using the integration of people with disabilities into the working environment (IMBA) tool, individual medical care and individual ability checks, and used the findings for the workplace design. Further problems had been evaluated via questionnaires. So far about 500 workers have been reintegrated into the production process. The project has won several awards.

How to obtain the report

The full report is available in English on the Agency's website at: <http://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/reports/TE7809894ENC/view> where it can be downloaded free of charge.

This factsheet is available in all EU languages at: <http://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/factsheets/87/view>

Further information

'Healthy Workplaces. Good for you. Good for business. A European campaign on risk assessment' is the theme for the European campaign 2008/09 being run by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) in more than 30 countries including all EU Member States. This factsheet has been produced to support the campaign.

Other factsheets in the series and further information on risk assessment are available at <http://osha.europa.eu/topics/riskassessment>

This resource is being continually developed and updated. <http://hw.osha.europa.eu> is the direct link to the European campaign.

European Agency for Safety and Health at Work

Gran Vía, 33, 48009 Bilbao, SPAIN
Tel. +34 944794360, Fax +34 944794383
E-mail: information@osha.europa.eu

