

Ceemet position paper on Mental Health at the Workplace

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Introduction

Ceemet understands how occupational safety and health (OSH) concerns can be multifactorial, impacted by both work and non-work contributory factors. Workplace mental health, which includes psychosocial risks, is one example of this. It is important to remember that both employers and employees have a shared responsibility under the EU OSH Framework Directive¹ to achieve improvements in OSH conditions. Consequently, efforts to improve OSH standards should not solely rest with the employer, but also with the individual.

Mental Health in the new world of work

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about root and branch changes in the way we work. There have been many positive elements to this, caused by the development of remote work and telework in occupations where it is applicable, such as the newly found possibility of better reconciling work and personal life. Digital opportunities offer more time flexibility but as the boundaries between work and leisure time become increasingly blurred, work organisation should be adapted to protect workers' health and safety while ensuring the smooth running of companies. However, it must be noted that this only applies to a certain portion of the workforce, as not all workers have the possibility to work remotely. It should also be noted that during lockdown due to the COVID-19 crisis, and where applicable, remote work and telework have proven to be a key tool to safeguard health and safety and to ensure business and work continuity. There have been many diverse experiences in relation to the enforced remote work and telework, as where applicable, employees were forced to work from home and dealt with issues such as decreased social contacts and isolation. However, it must be noted that this isn't the normal way remote work and telework are carried out. It is normally based on a voluntary agreement between the employee and employer which should benefit both parties.

A digitalised workplace needs to strike the right balance, ensuring psychosocial well-being. However, we must be cognisant of the added challenges for managers in managing employees at distance. In this context, either at company or sector level, social partners are best placed to reach tailored solutions on telework and remote work, ensuring that opportunities for organising work remotely are seized and the risks of being overly connected are duly addressed.

Ceemet recalls that the European framework for stress at the workplace was set out in the 2004 Framework Agreement² signed by all European social partners. This agreement has now been implemented at a national level by the social partners via national collective agreements or recommendations and guidance, as well as via the development of practical tools or surveys. In some countries legislative initiatives were also taken but these were in line with the actions taken by the social partners. Ceemet strongly advocates full implementation of the guidance from the 2004 Framework Agreement in all Member States. In many Member States, guidelines from this agreement have been embraced voluntarily by employers. It is clear that employers take care

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=celex%3A31989L0391>

² <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=1479&langId=en>

of the mental health of their employees of their own accord. MET employers are acutely aware of the fact that quality of life at work is key to ensuring a healthy, happy and motivated workforce. Companies are investing a lot in this area. We are currently seeing acute labour shortages in Europe, and they show no signs of abating. MET employers are therefore conscious of the fact that in order to ensure we have the right labour force in companies we must provide an attractive place to work. It is in our economic interest to do so. We must also recall that working, in general, already has a positive impact on a person's mental wellbeing.

As MET employers, we recognise that there are positive and negative effects associated with work activity. For example, an individual may cope with a short-term exposure to pressure i.e. positive effect, but have difficulty in coping with prolonged exposure to intensive pressure i.e. negative effect. Each individual has a unique coping capacity for managing their workload and individuals do display varied reactions to identical situations. Equally, any given person may react differently to identical situations at different stages of their lives. The MET employers' position on workplace mental health is outlined in the following four points:

1. EU Framework Directive caters for all workplace OSH risks

It is our view that there is no requirement for new legislative initiatives on managing workplace psychosocial risks as the 1989 EU Framework Directive already covers all OSH risks.

Early EU OSH directives put in place the right approach and established a clear set of roles and responsibilities for both employees and employers. For example, the structure laid out within the Framework Directive; requires that workplace risks are identified, assessed and acted upon together in a holistic fashion. Hazard or risk specific directives can cause confusion for employers. In this context, guidance on how to deal with psychosocial risks within the normal risk assessment process is favourable to MET employers. Furthermore, in many instances, countries already have significant pieces of legislation which are fitted to the specificities of their national context and companies know how to implement the rules in order to avoid psychosocial challenges at the workplace. The social partners are also engaged in these topics at a national level and they design materials and tools for companies. These materials clarify their legislation and give employers advice on how to work with the issues. We do agree that whilst existing legal requirements play an important role, they must be complemented with practical guidelines and support at national and organisational levels.

Ceemet supports EU policy makers in utilising the Framework Directive with regard to work-related stress in Member States alongside the various national implementations of the 2004 European Framework Agreement on work related stress.

2. Holistic approach to psychosocial risks

A holistic approach looks at all elements encompassing any OSH framework. It is essential in assessing the impact of psychosocial risks and mental health in the workplace. In looking at the issue holistically it is important to recognise that an individual's mental health cannot be exclusively attributed to work place factors. There are many other factors and psychosocial risks outside the workplace which will determine an individual's mental health status throughout their lives. In order for something to be seen as a workplace psychosocial risk, a causal link to the workplace needs to be established and this is a very complex issue.

Significantly, for effective management of psychosocial risks, there must also be appropriate onus made on employee personal responsibility. Mental health is not the exclusive responsibility of employers, in the same way as public health should not be the responsibility of employers to manage societal issues. Health literacy is another important factor that must be taken into account in the context of mental wellbeing and personal responsibility. Personal self-management capabilities determine the capacity of an individual to make sound health decisions

on a daily basis. Personal self-management and motivation are factors which contribute to an individual's mental health. This must be understood when conducting any analysis of mental health in the workplace.

Ceemet calls on EU policy makers to avoid imposing legal obligations on employers to manage societal public health issues such as mental health and physical well-being. A holistic approach must be adopted.

3. Impact of multifactorial factors outside the employers' control

Occupational health issues are often multifactorial, with both work and non-work related contributory factors. Both sets of factors can impact an individual's mental health and psychosocial risk factors attributed to a work environment cannot be exclusively attributable in determining a person's mental health. Every individual behaves and acts differently. Occupational health issues are often multifactorial. Ceemet reminds EU policy makers that factors outside the work environment have a potential impact on an individual's mental health whilst they are at work. Manifestations of stress at work cannot necessarily be considered to be work-related stress.

The place where work is carried out has been one of the most visible results of increasing flexibility in organisations, and under normal circumstances these places are increasingly varied. Remote and mobile work provides the possibility for workers to spread their work, among other places, between business premises, customer's places of work, their homes or public transport. This can be seen as one of the most important workplace innovations in Europe.

Having said that, it has been well documented that the application of traditional OSH practices to mobile working proves difficult. This can be down to a number of factors including excessive noise or poor posture which are variable and cannot be managed in a traditional way, these factors can create mental health challenges. Therefore, OSH management must evolve, for example by providing guidance to employees rather than trying to control all of the risks. The success rate depends on the level of planning and organisation by the company and if its workers understand and apply the new working methods. It must be done with due respect to the relevant legislation and there must be full buy-in from employees.

4. Causes of psychosocial risks

There is great difficulty in identifying the exact causes of psychosocial risks. While it is possible to define the risk to a person from a physical hazard i.e. a chemical substance, such direct causality can be absent and non-specific for psychosocial risk. Moreover, identifying any direct causality is further complicated because of individual differences in coping with these risks.

Stress surveys very often aim to identify hazards or outcomes without linking them. This is due to the difficulty in identifying the precise causes of psychosocial harm as a result of the variety of psychosocial risks and the potential interaction effects between the individual risk factors. It is our view that this complexity cannot be adequately addressed and resolved through normal legislative channels.

Ceemet calls on EU policy makers to acknowledge the major differences which exist between the identification of physical and psychosocial harm, while taking account of each individual's unique coping abilities to psychosocial risk factors.

Conclusion

OSH concerns, including those related to mental health, can be multifactorial, impacted by both work and non-work contributory factors. Consequently, the management of psychosocial risks is a shared responsibility between the employer and the employee.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about changes to the way a certain portion of the workforce carries out their work. Even though there have been many positive elements to this such as more flexibility for workers, work organisation should be adapted to protect workers' health and safety while ensuring the smooth running of companies. Telework and remote work increased dramatically due to the COVID-19 lockdowns, however, it must be noted that this is not the normal way remote work and telework are carried out. Since the increase in telework and remote work, employers have faced challenges, including the managing of employees at distance. In this context, either at company or sector level, social partners are best placed to reach tailored solutions on telework and remote work.

It is clear that employers take care of the mental health of their employees of their own accord. In order to ensure we have the right labour force in companies we must provide an attractive place to work, ensuring a healthy, happy and motivated workforce. However, it is important to stress that in our opinion there is no requirement for new legislation on managing workplace psychosocial risks, the 1989 EU Framework Directive already covers all OSH risks. Hazard or risk specific directives can cause confusion for employers therefore guidance on how to deal with psychosocial risks is favourable to MET employers.

Furthermore, a holistic approach to managing psychosocial risks is essential in assessing their impact at the workplace. There are many factors outside the workplace which will determine an individual's mental health status. Health literacy, personal self-management and motivation are some of the factors which can contribute to an individual's mental health. Every individual behaves and acts differently and we have great difficulty in identifying the exact causes of psychosocial risks. Therefore, OSH management must take these factors into account.

About Ceemet

- Ceemet represents the metal, engineering and technology-based industry employers in Europe.
- Member organisations represent 200,000 companies in Europe, providing over 17 million direct and 35 million indirect jobs.
- Ceemet is a recognised European social partner at the industrial sector level, promoting global competitiveness for European industry through consultation and social dialogue.