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Identify and prevent psychosocial risks within the railway sector

Joint Recommendations of the European Social Partners

1. BACKGROUND OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS AND INTENTIONS OF THE SOCIAL PARTNERS

The European social partners in the rail sector are of the opinion that psychosocial risks (PSR) affect the occupational safety and health (OSH) of rail employees. In their view, dealing with the issue of PSR will be beneficial to both the railway companies and railway workers. From a company perspective, reducing PSR means reducing the hidden costs linked to psychosocial risks. For the workers reducing psychosocial risks means improving the quality of working life and helping to prevent serious health problems. In 2002, the European Commission estimated that work-related stress costs EUR 20 billion a year in Europe due to production losses, absenteeism, "presenteeism[1]" etc. Currently some 50% and 60% of lost working days in the EU are thought to be related to psychosocial risks.[2]

Social partner interest focuses on the preventive aspect with its potential to improve working conditions and consequently workers' well-being at work. According to the EU-OSHA definition, "these risks are linked to the way work is designed, organised and managed, as well as to the economic and social context of work; they result in an increased level of stress and can lead to serious deterioration of mental and physical health"[3]. These troubles can, if not quickly tackled, get worse until they become pathological. Generally speaking, there are three kinds of factors conducive to psychosocial risks: (1) work-related stress, (2) internal violence (bullying, aggression, verbal or sexual harassment, conflicts, communication problems, etc.), and (3) external third-party violence (threats, insults, verbal or physical aggression).

[1] Presenteeism means being physically at work, though without producing the productivity expected, following sickness or burnout. Presenteeism losses can sometimes be worse for companies than losses due to absenteeism.

[2] Dealing with psychosocial risks: success factors and obstacles. EU-OSHA press release 2012. https://osha.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/dealing_psychosocial_risks_success_factors_obstacles

[3] FACTS. Expert forecast on emerging psychosocial risks related to occupational safety and health (OSH). European Agency for Safety and Health at Work. Belgium 2007.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE JOINT RECOMMENDATIONS

A healthy work environment taking both physical and mental aspects into account is important for ensuring good quality of work and thus high-quality services. Well-being at work is similarly important for productivity and service quality.

The overall aim of the joint recommendations is to contribute to improving working conditions in the rail sector by tackling the problem of psychosocial risks and identifying sector-specific measures contributing to diminishing the problem. The specific objectives of the joint recommendations are to increase the awareness and understanding of employers, workers and their representatives to work-related psychosocial risks and to draw their attention to signs indicative of risk. The social partners would like to see strategies and action initiated in their affiliated unions and companies with an aim to preventing and managing work-related psychosocial risks.

The obligation to protect the health and safety of employees while at work lies clearly with employers under both EU and national legislation.[4] The European social partners share the opinion, that tackling psychosocial risks should not only be part of the company health and safety policy but has to be addressed in all relevant fields of company policy and action. They are looking to a cooperative corporate culture in which measures are taken to prevent psychosocial risks and to deal with their consequences. Addressing psychosocial risks may be carried out within an overall process of risk assessment, through a separate psychosocial risk policy and/or through specific measures targeting identified risk factors. The European social partners emphasise that a joint approach promises to be the most successful.

3. FACTORS AND INDICATORS OF PSYCHOSOCIAL RISKS

In the course of the "PSR-RAIL" project in 2013, the joint CER/ETF study identified important factors (situations, conditions, etc.) liable to produce psychosocial risks in rail occupations.

3.1 Work demands

Technology

- Challenges from new vs. old technologies, skill requirements associated with computerization, insufficient information on new tools, performing work with faulty or obsolete equipment, restricted technical resources

Workload and time pressure

- Time pressure due to traffic (e.g. work has to be finished before the morning rush-hour starts), deadline pressure from different sources hindering the execution of traffic or maintenance work, traffic disruptions or accidents causing overtime
- Track maintenance work during traffic

Structure and communication

- An increasing number of people (from different companies) to deal with to ensure smooth traffic management
- Night and shift work subject to short-term changes, reduced transparency and predictability
- Workload during rush-hours, the sheer amount of working hours
- Pressure to achieve sales targets
- Money handling (security)
- Multitasking combined with frequent interruptions

[4] European Social Dialogue: Framework Agreement on Harassment and Violence at Work. 2007. P.1.

Human resources

- Shortfall of human resources
- Problems arising related to an ageing workforce
- Impact of overtime and shift work on work-life balance
- Teams growing in size: responsibility for an increasing number of team members

3.2 Emotional demands

External

- Aggression and violence from passengers, fear of attacks
- Exposure to suicides on tracks or serious accidents
- Commercial "keep on smiling" requirement not conducive to showing emotions

Internal

- Wide range of responsibilities: safety and security decisions, crisis management, larger geographical area, handling money, risk of penalties due to mistakes or incidents beyond one's influence
- Twin pressure from superiors and subordinates
- Implementing staff cuts
- Feeling of not delivering quality, uselessness of efforts

3.3 Autonomy/decision-making latitude

Structure and Communication

- Interdependency due to work organised along a chain of responsibilities
- Tensions due to disconnection between the deciding authority and the operational level
- Lack of resources: information, training, equipment, staff
- Process complexity and lack of clear organization
- Limited view and resources to solve problems
- Dependence on technologies and external information
- Difficulties / quarrel with hierarchically enforced decisions
- Increasing number of processes, increasing process complexity, less internal support
- Activities controlled by monitoring devices
- Lack of authority and means to take action

3.4 Social links, work relations

External

- Deteriorating public image of railway companies/ staff
- Increasing number of actors involved leads to communication problems

Internal

- Responsibility for security and rail protection
- Solitary work situations on the train
- Difficult situations with colleagues and supervisors
- Managers not present in the field (remote support), difficult for a manager to meet team members and foster management relations
- Unstaffed stations, not sufficient support for on-board staff
- Absenteeism (staying away from work)
- Presenteeism (Going to work while being sick, staying at work longer than necessary by being unproductive)

3.5 Conflicting values

- Commercial vs. personal values
- Service vs. revenue targets
- Sanction culture vs. recognition of mistakes (lack of "no blame culture" in the railways)
- Respect of safety and quality rules vs. productivity and commercial interests
- Infrastructure safety vs. number and punctuality of trains
- Short-term problem solving vs. long- term improvements
- Availability vs. rest hours

3.6 Socio-economic insecurity

Structural

- Uncertainty due to political decisions on regional, national or European level
- Reorganisation and structural changes of rail companies
- Fear of losing one's job or being transferred to another company
- Understaffing, under investment
- Disappearance of certain jobs
- Workplace geographically far from home due to continuous organisational change and restructuring (long commuting time or nights away from home)

Personal

- Lack of understanding for processes, lack of information
- Fear of being medically unfit
- Individual competition

Possible indicators of existing psychosocial risks are high absenteeism rates, staff turnover, frequent interpersonal conflicts, complaints by workers, etc.

4. MEASURES FOR IDENTIFYING, PREVENTING AND MANAGING PSYCHOSOCIAL RISKS

The purpose of a psychosocial risk prevention procedure is to prevent and/or reduce risks and their consequences and to regulate them by finding and analyzing the causes and defining joint action. Specific tools are needed to objectify risk factors. The social partners recommend that the approach should take place in four main phases:

- PSR identification and assessment
- PSR prevention plan (including bringing the issue into the company policy)
- PSR management (implementing actions designed to remove or reduce risks, active and careful sustainable management of the process)
- Evaluation (of actions, processes and intended effects)

4.1 Identifying psychosocial risk factors

The social partners have first to identify risk factors in the work organization and the employee categories most at risk. They need to put a specific focus on a defined work population, workplace or set of operations. A risk assessment to understand the nature of the problem and its underlying causes is essential for the prevention plan.

4.2 Setting up an action plan

The concrete implementation of preventive action in the company needs to be planned, with a guarantee of consistency between management decisions or policies and the terms of their deployment. Company objectives on PSR and the role of individual workers need to be defined. Adequate management support for individuals and teams must be ensured. The action plan must aim to improve work organisation and processes, working conditions and the work environment. The action plan must contain concrete actions allowing company targets to be measurably achieved. The action plan can be built as follows

- Why: Explanatory statement, purpose, targets
- What: What actions to implement
- When: Timetable and, if applicable, frequency
- Where: Which departments, sites or groups are affected
- Who: Which individuals are responsible for each of the actions proposed
- How: By what means, processes or mechanisms can the action be implemented

The action plan needs to prioritize actions and contain the terms for their monitoring and evaluation. The action plan must set forth the implementation monitoring mechanism, possibly resulting in adjustments or improvements to the measures. Evaluation criteria must be defined for the various actions. Setting up the action plan shall involve those workers' representatives that are responsible according to national practice and culture from the beginning. Workers shall not feel the action plan as something imposed to them from the company management: to make the plan successful workers' representatives should be key actors in all phases.

4.3 Designating a dedicated unit

A dedicated unit needs to be identified within the company with the official task of analysing and implementing the agreed measures. This task could possibly be assigned to the health and safety department. The designated unit should cooperate closely with HR departments and the business unit(s) concerned. Within the scope of applicable law and available resources, incidents should be examined using appropriate means. This unit can also be the contact point in the case of incidents or questions. The option should be available to handle incidents confidentially.

4.4 Raising awareness

Measures to identify, prevent and manage psychosocial risks can be of individual or collective nature. They can be introduced in the form of specific measures targeting identified risk factors or as part of an integrated risk policy implementing both preventive and responsive measures. Where the required expertise within the business unit is insufficient, competent external expertise should be called in, in accordance with European and national legislation, collective agreements and practices.

4.5 Communication and sensitisation measures

PSR indicators need to be identified (high absenteeism rates, staff turnover, frequent interpersonal conflicts, complaints by workers, etc.). Both employer and employee representatives need a critical understanding and the capability to identify at-risk situations. They shall suggest or develop possible actions for improving the situation in question and make sure they are operational. Information about the action plan to prevent PSR factors needs to be disseminated and discussed with employees. Employees and their representatives are to be included in the risk assessment process and in implementing preventive actions. Employees shall be informed of the finalized actions.

4.6 Training

Training courses for managers and workers and their representatives are essential to raise awareness and understanding for psychosocial risks, their possible causes and consequences, how to deal with them, and/or adapt to change. The training should take account of the company context and should address PSR factors before acting on their implications. The training must be part of the comprehensive approach to PSR prevention and management.

4.7 Aftercare

Aftercare needs to be provided to employees suffering from adverse psychosocial effects. Depending on the circumstances, this may involve medical, legal, practical, and/or financial support.

4.8 Using best practices

Best practices regarding the identification, prevention and management of psychosocial risks already exist in railway companies. The measures foreseen need to take into account the size and type of company, and their application needs to be validated. Best practices described in the "Guide to identifying and preventing psychosocial risks in the rail sector" can be used here.

4.9 Social dialogue

The social partners should aim for a joint approach to tackling the issue. Consultation with workers and their representatives in accordance with EU and national legislation, collective agreements and practices are important for the successful implementation of actions. Employees should participate in developing approaches and reviewing the operability of the preventive actions. Concluding social partner agreements is deemed worthwhile at different levels (company and / or sector level). Suggestions put forward by employees for improving weak points in PSR prevention should be examined, and, where feasible, taken up.

4.10 Evaluation

Preventive measures should be regularly reviewed to assess their effectiveness, whether they are making best use of resources, and whether they are still appropriate or necessary. It is recommended that the evaluation covers two primary aspects:

- Deployment compliance: Update on actions performed vs. actions announced (e.g. Was there any real communication from management during the recent changes?)
- Effectiveness of the action: Direct and indirect effects of the action (e.g. positive employee feedback, reduced absenteeism, etc.)

Those managing the actions must regular communicate the status of their deployment.

5. IMPLEMENTATION AND FOLLOW-UP

These joint recommendations commit CER and ETF affiliates to adopt the objectives and implement measures in accordance with the procedures and practices specific to management and labour in their countries. Member organisations will report on the implementation of the recommendations to the Social Dialogue Committee. The signatory parties shall evaluate the implementation of the recommendations any time after the three years following the date of signing, and review the recommendations if requested by one of them.

signed in Brussels on 11 March 2014

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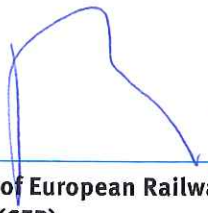

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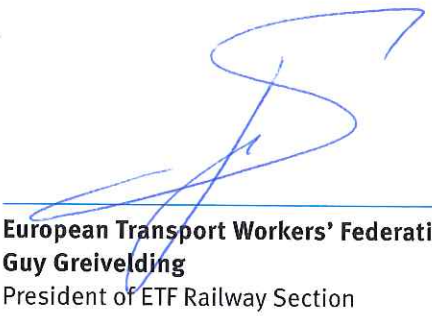

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