Making Social Dialogue successful for Psychosocial Risk Management

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Introduction

Social Dialogue as a peaceful way of solving conflicts and balancing interests between different parties is a central component of the European Social Model and also an important tool in an international context (e.g. through the activities of the International Labour Office). As a part of the industrial relations system, it is considered to be one of the main instruments for employment and social policy at European Union (EU) level. Social Dialogue comprises discussions, consultations, negotiations and joint actions undertaken by the social partner organisations in two main forms: a bipartite dialogue between the two sides of industry (management and labour) and a tripartite dialogue involving social partners and public authorities. Basic aims of European Social Dialogue are to influence European Social Policy, exchange good practice and contribute to social Europe.

Aim

This guidance sheet aims at providing policy makers and social partners with key facts and guidelines to promote social dialogue in the area of psychosocial risk management. Based on previous experiences and the scientific literature, central challenges and success factors are highlighted.

Social Dialogue and Psychosocial Risk Management

In a changing world of work due to globalisation, flexibilization and intensification of work, psychosocial risks, work-related stress and workplace violence have become major concerns for the protection of workers' health and safety. Work-related psychosocial risks concern aspects of the design and management of work and its social and organisational contexts that have the potential for causing psychological or physical harm. Work-related stress is among the most commonly reported causes of illness by workers, affecting more than 40 million individuals across the EU. In addition to health effects on the individual, the economic damage for businesses and the social costs to European countries are considerable. Estimated annual losses for member states amount to € 20 billion at least. Workplace bullying, harassment and violence are other major concerns that can contribute to ill health. The 2007 Working Conditions survey by the European Foundation showed that 6% of the workforce had been exposed to threats of physical violence, 4% to violence by other people and 5% to bullying and/or harassment at work over the past 12 months. Incidents were higher in minority groups and specific sectors (e.g. violence in health sector and social work: 15.2%).

Effective psychosocial risk management policies and practices are fundamental to prevent harm and reduce costs. In a wider perspective, psychosocial risk management can also help to increase productivity, foster innovation and improve public health. A healthy workforce and healthy organizations are key for optimum use of human and social capital.

In the general political framework of psychosocial risk management, a noticeable change has taken place in recent years. Whereas until the nineties, European social partner agreements were implemented as council decisions or directives (agreements on parental leave, 1995; part-time work, 1997; and fixed-time work, 1999), subsequent issues were covered by less binding agreements (on telework, 2002; work related stress, 2004; and harassment and violence at work, 2007). On this 'autonomous' implementation route, social partners commit to discuss and implement the agreement at national level through their member organisations and to

monitor the process. Due to this shift from 'hard' to 'soft' regulation, implementation results depend highly on the quality of industrial relations at national level, particularly the ability and the will of social partners to negotiate as equals, to reach consensus on relevant issues and to find innovative solutions. In that sense, successful Social Dialogue is crucial for combating psychosocial risks at the workplace.

Framework Agreements on Work-related Stress and on Harassment and Violence at Work

The framework agreements on work-related stress (2004) and on harassment and violence at work (2007) specifically deal with psychosocial risks. They aim at increasing awareness of employers, workers and their representatives and provide a framework to identify problems and address them within an overall process of risk management or through specific policies. The implementation phase of the work-related stress agreement ended in 2007. For the agreement on violence and harassment, the implementation phase will be completed in 2010.

Challenges to Social Dialogue across the EU

In spite of all progress on Social Dialogue that has been achieved up to now, the process faces several challenges. A major one accrues from EU enlargement. In the new EU member states from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), Social Dialogue does not yet have the same longstanding tradition as in the old EU countries and structures are still comparatively weak, in particular the organisation of social partners at sector level. Moreover, due to high unemployment rates, the power relations between employers and trade unions are often imbalanced. Over the last years, efforts have been made at EU level to improve the capabilities of new member states for Social Dialogue, e.g. by financing programmes that increase the relevant competencies of social partners. Other capacity building activities and initiatives have been carried out e.g. by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions and the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work. Still, inequalities between old and new EU countries can be observed and need to be addressed further on.

Another challenge concerns differences in perceptions and perspectives of social partners and their subsequent effect on prioritization of issues in the Social Dialogue process (see PRIMA-EF guidance sheet no. 5).

Additionally, as today's globalized markets place on enterprises strong demands for competitiveness, a short term economic orientation is often prevalent, whereas sustainable work systems that balance competitiveness with quality of working life require a long term perspective.

Finally, the involvement of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) remains a critical issue. Although SMEs are actually covered by the framework agreements on work-related stress and harassment and violence at work, only few engage in psychosocial risk management, due to a lack of resources, expertise and union representation.

Lessons Learned: Promotion of Social Dialogue for Successful Psychosocial Risk Management

Through an analysis of existing literature and from the experiences with the implementation of the framework agreement on work-related stress, success factors and recommendations can be identified in relation to Social Dialogue for psychosocial risk management.

Developing a policy context that is supportive to Social Dialogue

- Active government policy (e.g. legislation, campaigns) can raise awareness and help to put issues like work-related stress and workplace violence, harassment and bullying on the political and company agendas and stimulate organisations to take action.
- Research in this area can positively influence government (and also company) policies.
- The situation in SMEs needs to be addressed specifically through appro-

priate policy and Social Dialogue initiatives.
- Legislation and 'soft law' approaches should be used in a complementary way, according to the particular national background and the state of industrial relations at national and enterprise level.
- The situation in new EU countries should be taken into account explicitly by policy makers. Regulations and enforcement structures are necessary to bring about improvements in psychosocial risk management.
- Tools, guidance and training on psychosocial risk management for all parties involved can help to make Social Dialogue more successful.

Guidance on Social Dialogue: success factors for psychosocial risk management

Area	Indicator Framework
General Social Dialogue process	Adequate structures for Social Dialogue at national, sector and enterprise level, e.g. organisation of social partners, employee representation, union participation in public policy.
	Routines of cooperation among social partners at EU level and national levels.
	Capacity building activities, if structures are weak; Social Dialogue structures need some time to develop and improve in a continuing learning process.
	Clear ideas of social partners of their aims; to ensure a unified approach on each side, preparations prior to Social Dialogue should be made.
	Issues need to be relevant to both parties; therefore Social Dialogue at sector level is of particular importance.
	Building mutual trust and respect between social partners, e.g. starting the dialogue process on less controversial issues.
	Assistance for conflict settlement between social partners, e.g. mediation mechanisms.
	Agreement on ways of implementation; social partners need to make sure that as a result of Social Dialogue, actions are taken.
Social Dialogue on psychosocial risk management	Consideration of national, cultural and social differences in risk perception and problem awareness of relevant issues.
	Specific approaches for the domains 'work-related stress' and 'violence/harassment/bullying'.
	Building a common language among and between social partners on issues, e.g. agree on definitions of key issues.
	Consideration of seemingly paradoxical effects of actions; e.g. awareness raising on violence and bullying may result in a higher level of complaints.
	Inclusion of gender issues, in particular with regard to violence and harassment.

More Information

www.prima-ef.org

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