

Managing psychosocial risks in HORECA

1. Introduction

Workers in the hotel, restaurant and catering (HORECA) sector endure highly unfavourable working conditions such as long, irregular, non-standard hours. Worse, psychosocial working conditions have been deteriorating over the past decade¹, leading to a serious risk of work-related stress. As a result, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work has identified HORECA as a risk sector.

2. Statistics and legislation

In 2004, the hotels and catering sector in the EU generated €338 billion turnover and employed more than 7.8 million workers. France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK accounted for 72% of all enterprises and 75% of the sector's employment. The UK alone employed 24% of the EU hotel and catering workforce, while Italy and Spain each had more than 18% of all enterprises².

The sector has a high proportion of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and an above-average rate of part-time employment. Of the 1.4 million enterprises in the sector in 2001, more than 90% were micro-enterprises employing 10 people or less³. Some 56% of the workers were women and 22% were self-employed; 13% had fixed-term contracts while 4% were temporarily employed by agencies. More than 28% of workers were under 25 years old⁴.

Compared to some industries, the HORECA sector is subject to less regulation and government intervention.

3. Psychosocial risk factors

Figures in this chapter are based on the European Survey on Working Conditions. The results of the 2000 and 2002 surveys, the latter including more Member States, have been combined.

By psychosocial factors, we mean those work characteristics that refer to the organisation of work and the mental load involved. In general, risk factors include psychological and conflicting demands, lack of control and lack of support from colleagues or supervisors.

Long and non-standard working hours are characteristic of the HORECA sector. Most workers in Europe (63.5%) never work longer than 10 hours per day. However, in the HORECA sector 47.5% workers have a working day of



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10 hours or more at least once a month. The average working week for European workers is 39.6; a worker in the HORECA sector works an average of 43.4 hours. However, differences between countries are large. In most northern European countries, workers in the HORECA sector work fewer hours than other sectors.

More than 71% of HORECA staff work in the evening — between 6.00 pm and 10.00 pm for at least two hours — and more than 45% work at night — between 10.00 pm and 5.00 am for at least two hours. For all workers these percentages are 45% and 19%, respectively. Moreover, most HORECA workers work over the weekend — 83% on Saturdays and 69% on Sundays (51% and 29%, respectively for all workers).

Considering their demanding working hours, it is not surprising that staff in the HORECA sector experience problems with their work-life balance. According to the European Survey on Working Conditions, about 36% of HORECA workers reported that their working hours do not fit in well with their family or social commitments. For all workers, only 19% felt the same.

Workers in the HORECA sector are also confronted with a high workload, that is, working under time pressure with continuous customer contact. Working at high speed and to tight deadlines is more common in the HORECA sector than elsewhere. The workload rises at peak hours and is dependent on customer behaviour. Lack of control is inherent in the sector and many workers are not able to plan or organise their work.

Contact with customers can lead to problems: violence, harassment and discrimination are more common for workers in the HORECA sector than elsewhere. They are more often confronted with intimidation (12% versus 8.5%), physical violence (6.5% versus 3.5%) and unwanted sexual attention (8% versus 2%). Moreover, workers in the HORECA sector experience greater discrimination (10.5% versus 6.5%). In particular, workers in pubs, discotheques, nightclubs and bars are more at risk.

4. Outcomes

Across the whole European workforce, stress at work accounts for more than a quarter of absence from work of two weeks or more⁵. In general, it is scientifically well supported that chronic work stress is related to increased mental and physical health problems, in particular with cardiovascular morbidity and mortality⁶.

Workers in the HORECA sector report more-than-average headaches, stress and fear⁷. However, figures from the UK show that the HORECA sector has a lower than



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average prevalence rate of work-related illness. Data from the 2003/04 labour force and self-reported work-related illness surveys indicates that work-related illness accounted for an estimated 1 million working days lost in 2003/04, with a corresponding rate of 1.1 days per worker. The 2004/05 rate of self-reported work-related illness, 1,800 per 100,000 people, was statistically significantly lower than the rate for all industries (3,400 per 100,000 people). Moreover, the rate of stress, depression and anxiety in 2001/02 was statistically significantly lower than that for all industries⁸.

A possible explanation for the lower prevalence of work-related illness in the HORECA sector may be the relatively young age of workers. And, employees easily enter and leave the sector without staying long⁹. Possibly, they may leave the sector before any work-related illnesses become apparent.

The Third European Survey on Working Conditions revealed changes in working conditions in the HORECA sector from 1995 to 2000. A significant increase in job demands was accompanied by a loss of control over work and more unskilled work. This may result in increased job strain and more ill health. High absenteeism or staff turnover, frequent interpersonal conflicts or complaints by workers are some of the signs that may indicate problems of work-related stress¹⁰.

5. Prevention and intervention strategies

Initiatives for the prevention of psychosocial risks can take place at industry, company and the individual level of the worker. Activities at industry level may allow joint action such as the covenants on health and safety at work in the Netherlands signed by employers' organisations, trade unions and the government. The HORECA sector concluded such a covenant in June 2000, setting a goal of a 10% reduction in work pressure.

The two main types of actions at the company level are aimed at organisational processes and work characteristics. Preventive actions at the individual level usually involve staff training.

Preventive actions to tackle psychosocial risks need to be preceded by risk assessment. Although this might sound obvious, in practice it is often overlooked. In fact, employers have a legal obligation to protect the health and safety of their workforce¹¹. The employer must evaluate the risks to safety and health within the workplace and then, where necessary, improve standards. A good risk assessment should cover all standard operations and reflect how the work is actually done. Employees should cooperate with their employer and supervisors in carrying out the risk assessment. In most European countries, many sector-specific risk assessment tools are available.



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The table below shows actions that could be taken to tackle the psychosocial risks in the HORECA sector.

Psychosocial risk factor	Preventive action at company level	Preventive action at individual level
Long and non-standard working hours	Variation in contracts and work schedules	
Work-life balance	Flexible work arrangements Child care	
High workload	Organisational changes Job design Participation in decision-making	Stress management training Time management training
Contact with customers	Improvement of safety measures	Training on dealing with aggression

6. Policy overview

The characteristics of work in the HORECA sector — long and non-standard working hours, a high workload, lack of control and customer behaviour — make it unattractive as a career choice. As a result, the sector continues to suffer from high staff turnover and recruitment difficulties, which tends to perpetuate skills gaps. The challenge is to reverse this negative perception of the sector by improving working conditions¹².

One of the challenges in improving working conditions is to ensure that both employees and employers engage in the process. This puts great pressure on the social dialogue process and the role of trade unions. Moreover, cultural differences between countries and regions could lead to variations in enforcement and interpretation. Cultural differences between workers in different regions may also lead to differences in preferences about working conditions. This could present a challenge for worker representatives involved in social dialogue (Eurofound 2005).

Because the vast majority (90%) of all HORECA enterprises are small companies employing less than 10 people, employers often lack the time and resources to examine the relevant legislative and policy issues. They often lack in-house expertise to carry out an extensive risk assessment and sometimes are reluctant to call in (expensive) external consultants¹³.

7. Conclusions

Workers in the HORECA sector suffer from unfavourable psychosocial working conditions. In a letter to Members of the European Parliament in May 2005,



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HOTREC, the Confederation of National Associations of Hotels, Restaurants, Cafés and Similar Establishments in the European Union and European Economic Area, raised concerns about the impact of an amended Working Time Directive on the hospitality sector. In general, the challenge is to convince businesses that it is in the long-term interest of the sector to improve working conditions.

8. Further information

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (EU)

<http://Eurofound.europa.eu>

<http://Eurofound.europa.eu/pubdocs/2003/08/en/1/ef0308en.pdf>

http://www.emcc.Eurofound.eu.int/content/source/eu05027a.html?p1=sectorfutures&p2=eu05024a&p3=Hotels_and_catering

European Social Partner Agreement on Stress

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/news/2004/oct/stress_agreement_en.pdf

Health and Safety Executive (UK)

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/industry/hotel.htm>

International Labour Organisation

<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/dialogue/sector/papers/tourism/wp211.pdf>

European Agency for Safety and Health at Work

<http://osha.europa.eu/data/legislation/1>



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References

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- 3 Eurofound 2005: 'Hotels and catering — policies, issues and the future'.
- 4 Eurofound 2003: 'Sectoral profiles of working conditions'
- 5 Eurostat 2001: 'Work-related health problems in the EU in 1998-99'.
- 6 Hemingway H, Marmot M. 'Psychosocial factors in the aetiology and prognosis of coronary heart disease: systematic review of prospective cohort studies'. *BMJ*; 318:1460-7 (1999).
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- 8 Health & Safety Executive: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/industry/hotel.htm>
- 9 Klein Hesselink J, Houtman I, Van den Berg R, Van den Bossche S, Van den Heuvel F. 'EU hotel and restaurant sector: Work and employment conditions'. Dublin, Ireland: EFILWC (2004).
- 10 International Labor Organization:
<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/dialogue/sector/papers/tourism/wp211.pdf>
- 11 <http://osha.europa.eu/data/legislation/1>
- 12 Eurofound 2005: 'Hotels and catering — policies, issues and the future'.
- 13 Klein Hesselink J, Houtman I, Van den Berg R, Van den Bossche S, Van den Heuvel F. 'EU hotel and restaurant sector: Work and employment conditions'. Dublin, Ireland: EFILWC (2004).