



# **MENTAL HEALTH AT WORK**

## DISCUSSION DOCUMENT ON POLICY OPTIONS



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2025.

# Introduction

## Why work-related mental health matters

The mental health of employees is an emerging concern for both public and private enterprises in the Baltic Sea Region. People's mental health and ability to take individual and collective action are imperative for enterprises and societies to function during challenging periods and crises. In the face of hardship, enterprises need resilience and a resilient workforce.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, half of European workers considered stress to be common in their workplace, and it contributed to around half of all lost working days<sup>1</sup>. In addition, 1 in 6 workers experience mental health challenges in the European Union (EU)<sup>2</sup>. Combined with an already prevailing lack of qualified workforce in some key fields, such as health and social care, this puts the ability of enterprises and workplaces to withstand existing and future crises in jeopardy.

Every worker has the right to be protected from hazards and risks that can cause injury, illness, or death in the workplace, as established in the International Labour Organisation's *Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work*. Protecting workers and preserving their work ability is the objective of Occupational Safety and Health (OSH). Traditionally, OSH legislation, standards, and education have mainly focused on physical hazards and accident prevention. Recently, the mental health of the workforce has gained traction, bringing more and more attention to the psychosocial work environments. Despite growing awareness of the impact of workplace factors on employee mental health, significant work remains to be done to optimise legislation and support effective management of these psychosocial factors in the workplace. Continued efforts are necessary to create safer and healthier workplaces that protect mental well-being and enhance resilience at all levels.

The objective of the *MentalHealthMatters* project has been to propose solutions that support employers and managers in addressing psychosocial factors in their workplaces, while paving the way for long-term policy changes. To do this, the project partners from Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Poland, and Norway<sup>3</sup> have

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<sup>1</sup> European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2024) *Mental Health at work after the COVID-19 pandemic – What European figures reveal*. Publications Office of the European Union. Available from: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/mental-health-work-after-covid-pandemic>

<sup>2</sup> European Commission (2023). *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a comprehensive approach to mental health*. COM(2023). European Commission. Available from: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX%3A52023DC0298>

<sup>3</sup> Namely, Tallinn University of Technology, Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, Riga Stradinš University, Nofer Institute of Occupational Health, and Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority. The Lead Partner of the project is the Secretariat of the Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-being, which is based in Sweden.

set up National and Transnational Communities of Practice, which bring together experts from the health, labour, safety and education sectors to agree on the improvement needs and to propose concrete actions to address them, which are presented in this discussion document on policy options.

## Proposing solutions for complex challenges

The strategic recommendations featured in this document are designed to enhance and strengthen efforts in addressing psychosocial work environment factors. They serve as a foundation for action, addressing the most pressing needs in each country as identified by the National Communities of Practice. In the country-specific chapters, tailored recommendations for action in Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Poland, and Norway are presented, each addressing a key national challenge:

- **Estonia:** Assessing psychosocial risks in small and medium-sized enterprises in light of the changing world of work.
- **Finland:** Advancing interprofessional education for OSH personnel.
- **Latvia:** Raising awareness of psychosocial risks among employers.
- **Poland:** Building a workplace culture of health that proactively tackles psychosocial risks.
- **Norway:** Supporting the mental health of migrant workers, with a focus on the cleaning industry.

Additionally, this document includes proposals for collaborative actions in the Baltic Sea Region, emphasising how these countries can support each other through knowledge sharing and joint innovation. These proposals have been jointly discussed and agreed upon by the Transnational Community of Practice, comprising the project partners and members of the [Expert Group on Occupational Safety and Health of the Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-being](#).

## What are psychosocial factors?

In every workplace, there are organisational, social, and/or structural factors that can influence employees either positively or negatively. It is the compounded impact of these risks and protective factors that can shape an individual's work ability and mental well-being.

Psychosocial risks stem from inadequate work design, organisation, and management, as well as from a poor social work environment<sup>4</sup>. These risks go hand in hand with the experience of work-related stress, which is directly associated with health conditions such as heart disease, depression, and musculoskeletal

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<sup>4</sup> European Agency for Safety and Health at Work. *Psychosocial risks and mental health at work*. Available from: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/themes/psychosocial-risks-and-mental-health>

disorders<sup>5</sup>. In Europe, nearly 45% of workers report experiencing such workplace risks that can adversely affect their mental health<sup>6</sup>.

Some examples of psychosocial risks include<sup>7</sup>:

- **Job content and task design:** Lack of variety, fragmented or meaningless work, underuse of skills, or under-skilled for work.
- **Workload and pace:** Overload or underload, high levels of time pressure, lack of control over pacing.
- **Work schedule:** Shift work, inflexible work schedules, unpredictable hours, long or unsocial hours.
- **Job control:** Low participation in decision making, lack of control over work.
- **Environment and equipment:** Unsafe equipment and resources, poor physical working conditions.
- **Organisational culture:** Poor communication, low levels of support for problem-solving and personal development, and unclear organisational objectives.
- **Interpersonal relationships at work:** Social or physical isolation, poor relationships with colleagues and superiors, interpersonal conflicts, lack of social support.
- **Role in organisation:** Role ambiguity, role conflict, responsibility for people.
- **Career development:** Career stagnation and uncertainty, under- or overpromotion, job insecurity, poor pay, and low social value of work.
- **Home-work interface:** Conflicting demands of work and home, low support at home, dual-career problems.

The repercussions of unaddressed psychosocial risks can extend beyond employee health to financial losses for the organisation. These losses manifest in several ways. For example, employees under significant stress may experience presenteeism, manifesting as reduced concentration, impaired decision-making, and more frequent errors. Moreover, unaddressed psychosocial risks can contribute to increased staff turnover, necessitating investment in recruitment, including advertisement costs and the time spent by employees managing the recruitment process. The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work estimates that psychosocial risks can cost businesses billions of Euros annually<sup>8</sup>. One of the highest costs is linked with stress-related absenteeism. Evidence suggests that addressing psychosocial risks and their impact on sick leave could result in substantial savings for companies and societies.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Leka, S. and Jain, A. (2010). *Health impact of psychosocial hazards at work: An overview*. World Health Organisation.

<sup>6</sup> European Agency for Safety and Health at Work. (2025). *Psychosocial risks and mental health at work*. <https://osha.europa.eu/en/themes/psychosocial-risks-and-mental-health>

<sup>7</sup> International Labour Organisation. (2017). *Psychosocial risks, stress and violence in the world of work*. *International Journal of Labour Research*. <https://www.ilo.org/publications/psychosocial-risks-stress-and-violence-world-work>

<sup>8</sup> European Agency for Safety and Health at Work. (2014). *Calculating the cost of work-related stress and psychosocial risks*. EU-OSHA. <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/calculating-cost-work-related-stress-and-psychosocial-risks>

<sup>9</sup> OECD. (2014). *Making mental health count: The social and economic costs of neglecting mental health care*. OECD Publishing. [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2014/07/making-mental-health-count\\_g1g3c8a2.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2014/07/making-mental-health-count_g1g3c8a2.html)

While psychosocial risks are pervasive, there are also protective factors in the work environment that support work ability and good mental health. These are organisational factors related to the content of work, work arrangement, and work community. Such protective factors can, for example, include meaningful and rewarding work tasks, flexible working hours, clarity in roles and goals, as well as opportunities to influence decisions at work.

Employers bear the primary responsibility for minimising risks and fostering protective factors. A balanced approach that both prevents risks and promotes protective factors is vital to creating a resilient, engaged, and productive workforce.

## **National standards for workplace safety and health**

Protecting workers from occupational risks, including psychosocial ones, is not solely a matter of individual workplace initiatives – it is a shared responsibility embedded within national occupational safety and health (OSH) systems. These systems set the legal and regulatory foundations that ensure safe and healthy working conditions across all sectors, reinforcing that worker protection is a fundamental principle and right at work.

While all OSH systems in the Baltic Sea Region share a common goal of protecting workers from workplace health and safety risks, their structures, enforcement mechanisms, and strategic approaches vary. Some countries incorporate OSH regulations into broader labour laws, while others maintain dedicated OSH legislation with detailed employer obligations and responsibilities. The extent of obligatory oversight also differs – some countries centralise OSH governance under a single authority, whereas others distribute responsibilities among multiple agencies. Similarly, workplace inspections, compliance monitoring, and advisory services vary, shaping how regulations are applied in practice.<sup>10</sup>

The effectiveness of national OSH systems relies on collaboration among multiple actors, both formal and informal. Government authorities establish regulations and oversee compliance, but workplace safety and health also depend on the actions of various stakeholders, including employers, employees, occupational safety and health professionals, trade unions, and industry organisations. An effective OSH system fosters a culture of well-being and acknowledges that workplace safety extends beyond compliance.

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<sup>10</sup> For country-specific overviews of OSH systems, please see: European Agency for Safety and Health at Work. *Themes*. OSHwiki. Available from: [https://oshwiki.osha.europa.eu/en/themes?f%5B0%5D=themes\\_normal\\_search\\_themes%3A17](https://oshwiki.osha.europa.eu/en/themes?f%5B0%5D=themes_normal_search_themes%3A17)



## A multi-level approach to psychosocial risk management

While employers play a central role in minimising occupational risks in workplaces, effectively addressing the psychosocial factors calls for a systematic approach. A comprehensive ecosystem of stakeholders helps shape policies and regulations, provides expertise, and influences workplace practices.

At the heart of this ecosystem are **workplaces** themselves. Employers and managers bear the responsibility for minimising occupational risks and organising work in a way that protects their employees' health and well-being. However, they are not the only workplace actors that can influence the psychosocial work environment. Colleagues also contribute to the social dynamics of the workplace, human resources professionals shape organisational culture, and occupational safety representatives monitor and address workplace safety issues.

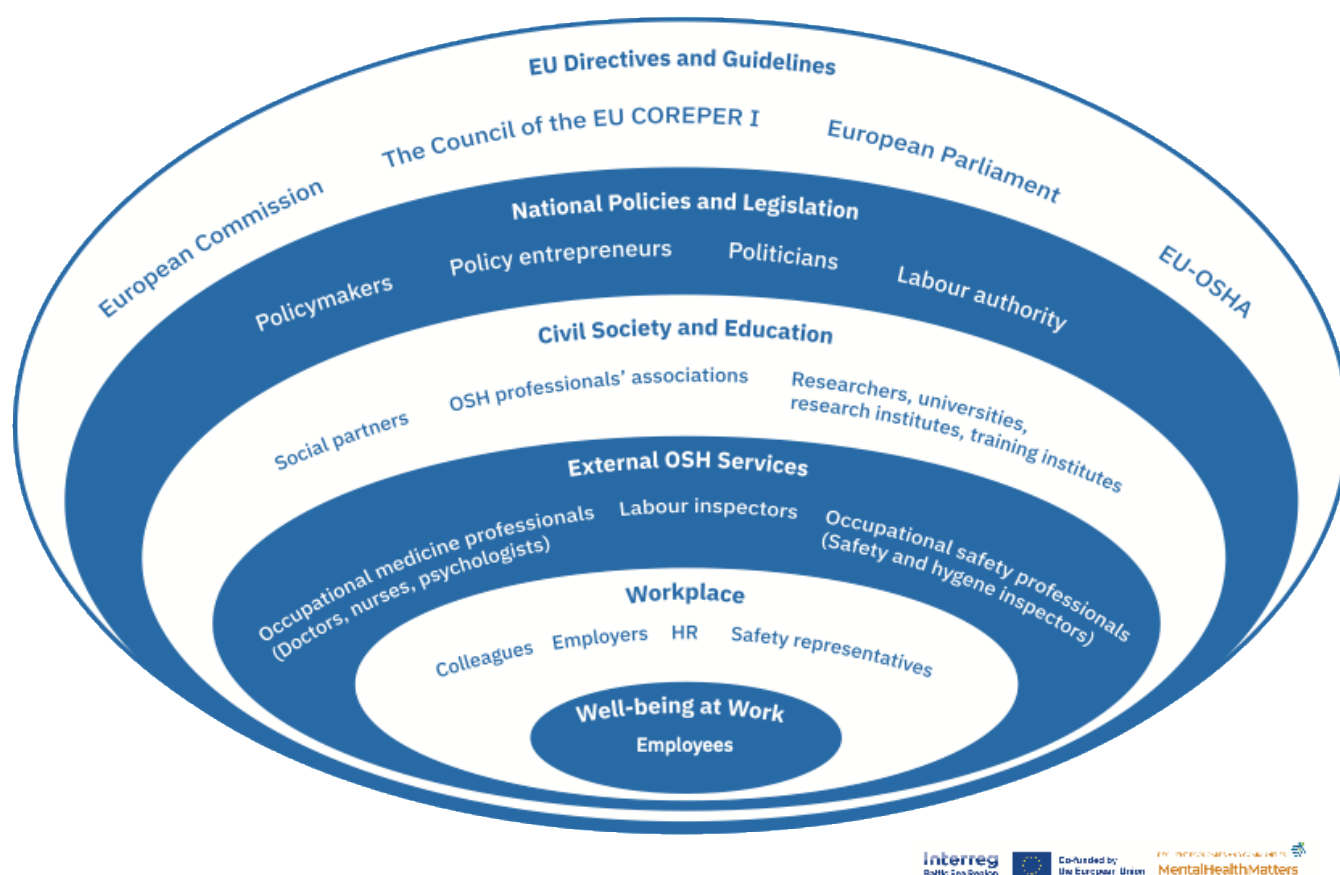
Beyond the workplace, **external occupational safety and health services**, which include professionals such as occupational doctors and nurses, labour inspectors, as well as health and safety specialists, partner with workplaces to assess risks, ensure regulatory compliance, help develop effective workplace practices, and provide health support and safety advice. These services vary by country, but their primary role is to support employers and employees through expert advice, intervention strategies, and compliance monitoring in matters related to workplace safety and health.

**Civil society, research, education, and commercial initiatives** can significantly influence other actors of the ecosystem across all levels. Social partners and professional associations regularly engage in political dialogue, collective bargaining, and setting industry standards. Research and education institutions can support policymakers by providing essential data and knowledge. In addition, they can partner with OSH services and workplaces to offer education and competence building, as well as support social innovation processes. Finally, in some countries, commercial initiatives also play an essential role in providing services and solutions that help address psychosocial factors in the workplace.

**National policies and regulations** establish the foundation for workplace safety and health standards that employers must adhere to. Tripartite dialogue between government bodies, employer organisations, and worker representatives is the gold standard in the development of policies and regulations related to social and labour market issues. Labour authorities then ensure that these regulations are enforced fairly and effectively, helping protect employees across all sectors.

At the European level, the EU reinforces this multi-layered approach to workplace well-being through **guidelines and directives** such as the *EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work and the European Pillar of Social Rights*. In addition, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) conducts research, gathers data, runs awareness-raising campaigns, and provides resources to help EU member states and workplaces uphold these standards and address psychosocial risks.

These various levels and stakeholders interact and influence one another, creating a dynamic system that shapes workplace behaviours and practices. Therefore, it is essential to consider all these levels and their interdependencies. For example, new research might spark policy discussions, prompting legislative changes that in turn regulate workplace standards. Civil society groups may seize on these windows of opportunity to advocate for specific regulatory changes and formulations, raise awareness of workplace wellbeing, and create momentum for a shift in behaviours and practices in the workplace. The recommendations presented in this discussion document take these interdependencies into account, recognising that even small actions at one level can create ripple effects throughout the system.



**Image 1.** The ecosystem of actors and levels that impact the psychosocial work environment in workplaces.



# Transnational collaboration: A catalyst for healthier workplaces

## Transnational collaboration can help foster healthy workplaces.

The Baltic Sea Region has unique potential for fostering healthy workplaces through transnational collaboration, owing to its longstanding tradition of partnership and many shared cultural values. Countries in this region share a rich history of working together on social, economic, and environmental issues. The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, Europe's first macro-regional strategy, has facilitated cross-sectoral and multi-level collaboration in the region for over 15 years, addressing shared challenges. Health has been one of the priority areas since the Strategy's inception in 2009.

Well-established regional networks already exist that address issues impacting workforce health in the Baltic Sea Region. One of the most notable is the Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-being (NDPHS), which for over 20 years has provided a professional platform to promote sustainable, inclusive societies with equal opportunities for good health and well-being for all. With workplace safety and health as one of its thematic priorities, the NDPHS hosts the Occupational Safety and Health Expert Group, which brings together experts from research institutions, relevant national ministries, and labour authorities. This group comprises well-established figures in the field of workplace health and safety, serving as a central hub for transnational collaboration on this topic in the Baltic Sea Region.

Within the *MentalHealthMatters* project, the Transnational Community of Practice – comprising the project partners and members of the OSH Expert Group – has identified shared challenges in addressing psychosocial factors across the region. Through collaboration, they have examined how transnational efforts can help overcome these challenges and offer peer support during policy processes. The outcomes of these discussions are presented below, outlining potential actions for concrete solutions.

## From the EU to the workplaces

The European Union is one of the major bodies in Europe that sets standards for workplace health and safety. However, effective implementation of these EU-level standards requires adaptation to each member state's unique circumstances and challenges. In the Baltic Sea Region, transnational collaboration provides a powerful approach to effectively transfer these standards to the national level, enabling countries to share best practices, support regulatory interpretation, and enhance workplace mental health initiatives.

The Framework Directive on Occupational Safety and Health has played a foundational role in establishing a common baseline for worker protection by shifting focus from mere compliance to proactive risk management. Under this Directive, employers are responsible for identifying risks, including both physical and psychosocial ones. Its broad language allows for flexibility in how member states interpret and apply its provisions, particularly in relation to psychosocial risks. As a result, countries have adapted the Directive to suit their national contexts, resulting in a diverse range of approaches to regulating psychosocial risks. Transnational collaboration offers remarkable potential for sharing experiences from the Directive's application in practice and learning from each other's policy processes.

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) also plays a crucial role in empowering national actors to effectively manage psychosocial risks in the workplace. Through its comprehensive array of tools, guidelines, research, and training resources, the agency supports EU member states in implementing robust workplace health and safety measures. The upcoming EU-OSHA Healthy Workplaces Campaign for 2026-2028, centred on mental health at work, offers a unique and timely opportunity to raise awareness and engage a broader audience across the Baltic Sea Region. By capitalising on this momentum, transnational collaboration can drive meaningful change and promote promising practices.

With this context in mind, the Transnational Community of Practice proposes that the Baltic Sea Region countries:

- **Application of EU regulations at the national level:** Jointly review how the EU directives, guidelines, and standards have been applied in national legislation and followed up in practice in the workplaces.
- **Interpretation of EU regulations:** Support neighbouring countries in applying EU directives in practice, for example, in connection with the forthcoming Directive 2024/2831 on improving working conditions in platform work.
- **Outreach to national stakeholders:** Further disseminate tools, guidelines, and research developed by the EU-OSHA to raise awareness and support the engagement of local stakeholders.
- **Awareness raising:** Consider becoming an official partner of the EU-OSHA Healthy Workplaces Campaign 2026-2028 on mental health.

## Supporting national policy processes

Transnational collaboration presents an invaluable opportunity for countries in the Baltic Sea Region to learn from one another, leveraging cultural similarities while benefiting from diverse political approaches. Recognising this, the Transnational Community of Practice emphasises the importance of ongoing dialogue that can support countries in navigating through regulatory and policy processes.

Countries across the Baltic Sea Region are at different stages in developing and implementing regulations relevant to psychosocial factors. Some countries have made significant breakthroughs in areas such as defining terminology or establishing advanced regulatory frameworks. Others are refining their approaches and expanding their efforts in key areas, such as social dialogue. However, each country's experiences offer essential learning opportunities for others. Whether through navigating challenges, advancing policy dialogues, or addressing emerging needs, all countries benefit from the diverse experiences and insights of their neighbours.

The Baltic Sea Region countries face several shared challenges, particularly in translating national regulations into practical action. While regulations are in place, there is an ongoing effort to ensure that these are effectively implemented and embraced in workplaces. Reaching and motivating employers, especially in smaller workplaces, to apply and effectively implement these regulations beyond minimum compliance remains an area of focus. Across the region, there is a strong interest in exploring solutions and developing effective strategies to address joint challenges, with a shared commitment to creating healthier and more supportive work environments.

The Transnational Community of Practice has pinpointed several areas for collaborative learning and sharing of promising practices among countries in the Baltic Sea Region. These include:

- **Strategies to engage small and medium-sized workplaces:** Exploring effective methods to reach employers with relevant information and support tools to ensure compliance and foster healthy work environments.
- **Impact measures:** Investigating ways to assess the impact of specific regulations, policies, and initiatives at the workplace level, ensuring that actions taken are both measurable and effective.
- **Evidence-based policy development:** Sharing methods for conducting research that forms the basis for evidence-based policies and regulations, in consultation with social partners.
- **Learning from legislative changes:** Understanding the effects of specific regulatory refinements, such as defining key terms in legislation, on practical application and impact.
- **Tripartite agreements on political changes:** Examining processes for securing consensus among governments, employers, and employees during political review processes.

## The potential of transnational projects

The Transnational Community of Practice acknowledges that international projects serve as valuable platforms for piloting initiatives, conducting research, and developing promising practices to address psychosocial factors in the Baltic Sea Region. They serve as testing grounds for innovative ideas, facilitating the dissemination and scaling of successful practices while fostering collaborative solutions to shared challenges.

The *MentalHealthMatters* project exemplifies the potential of transnational collaboration, delivering tangible outcomes such as the [\*First-Aid Kit for Mental Health: Supporting Workplace Well-being\*](#), which curates research-backed resources and tools to help employers and managers in small businesses and organisations navigate common psychosocial challenges in their workplaces. In addition, it has laid the groundwork for lasting change through meaningful dialogue with key stakeholders, facilitated by the work of the National and Transnational Communities of Practice.

Throughout the project, numerous ideas for continued collaboration have emerged. Partners from Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Poland, and Norway have expressed a strong interest in pursuing another transnational initiative. Proposed ideas include:

- **Cross-university collaboration** to create a unified teaching module on psychosocial factors for OSH, management, and business administration programmes, focusing on recognising, assessing, and addressing psychosocial risks while fostering protective factors in the workplace.
- **Joint research** to deepen the understanding of how working life impacts mental health and how work can also positively influence employee well-being.
- **Joint research** on the promising mental health initiatives at work, identified through the *MentalHealthMatters* project – what works, why, and how?
- **A joint awareness raising project** aimed at reframing the dialogue around work's impact on mental health, shifting the narrative from negative to positive, for example, “work gives you well-being”.
- **A capacity-building project** aimed at strengthening the role of OSH actors in workplace health promotion, considering topics such as mental health promotion, work-life balance, and sedentary work.
- **An exploratory project** to map, develop, and/or evaluate promising measures to prevent psychosocial risks in workplaces.

## The value of lasting networks

Transnational collaboration is a powerful driver for improving psychosocial work environments, with enduring networks, such as the NDPHS Expert Group on Occupational Safety and Health, playing a pivotal role. Professional networks like these facilitate sustained dialogue, shared learning, joint research, and coordinated actions among countries in the Baltic Sea Region. They offer resilience during shifting political landscapes, ensuring continuity in the pursuit of healthier workplaces.

The shared challenges, such as effectively assessing psychosocial risks, disseminating relevant information to employers, and effectively applying existing regulations in practice, underscore the need for cross-border knowledge sharing and innovation. By pooling resources and expertise, the countries in the Baltic Sea Region can craft tailored solutions that reflect regional realities while upholding EU standards.

As we look to the future, the importance of fostering resilient transnational networks cannot be overstated. Such networks ensure that initiatives like *MentalHealthMatters* are not one-time efforts but part of a sustained movement toward healthier workplaces. Whether through piloting new tools, advancing research, or reframing public narratives, the potential for continued collaboration remains immense.

# Policy options in Estonia

## Key messages

The mental well-being of Estonia's workforce is not just a matter of individual concern but an essential national interest that impacts productivity, employee well-being, and overall economic success. While Estonia has made commendable progress in recognizing the importance of mental health in the workplace, gaps persist in policy, knowledge, and the practical implementation of these initiatives. The current policies require updating to ensure they provide robust protection and support for employees' mental health needs.

The vulnerability of small businesses, the backbone of Estonia's economy, is particularly concerning. Often lacking the resources and awareness necessary for adequate mental health support, they are disproportionately affected. Addressing this challenge requires a collaborative effort, a united front involving public authorities, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), engaged interest groups, and educational institutions. Only through such a holistic approach can workplaces truly support mental well-being.

The way forward lies in concrete action: enhancing workplace awareness of psychosocial factors, expanding mental health education, and ensuring accessible support services are available. Achieving these goals successfully requires a coordinated national strategy, dedicated funding, and a fundamental change in organisational culture that places mental well-being at the core of the workplace.

### Recommendations:

- Reduce stigma around workplace mental health.
- Invest in research and data collection on workplace mental health.
- Introduce mandatory training for employers and workplace leaders on how to identify and address psychosocial risks.
- Increase access to mental health services through occupational safety and health services.

## Introduction

Mental health issues are increasingly recognised as a significant factor affecting workforce productivity and overall workplace well-being in Estonia. While awareness of mental health has grown, current workplace policies remain insufficient in addressing the full scope of the issue. The lack of clear frameworks, limited access to mental health resources, and cultural stigma surrounding mental health prevent effective action at the national level.



To cultivate sustainable system-level change, a collaborative effort among key stakeholders across sectors and levels is necessary, bringing together all stakeholders who can directly or indirectly impact practices and behaviors in the workplace. Within the context of the MentalHealthMatters project, a multidisciplinary Estonian Community of Practice was established, comprising representatives from the Ministries of Social Affairs, Economic Affairs, and Communications, the Labour Inspectorate, occupational safety and health (OSH) professionals and their associations, social partners, mental health interest groups, universities, and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Together, based on consensus, these stakeholders have developed recommendations for enhancing the preparedness of SMEs to address psychosocial factors in their workplaces, particularly in light of the evolving world of work.

The Community of Practice believes that several key strategies, as presented in this chapter, should be implemented. They address six main national challenges that the Community of Practice has highlighted, namely:

1. Limited awareness and engagement among small business employers regarding psychosocial risks and workplace well-being.
2. Pervasive stigma around mental health is hindering proactive interventions in workplaces.
3. Insufficient enforcement of existing OSH legislation concerning psychosocial risks.
4. There is a shortage of occupational psychologists and mental health professionals to support workplace initiatives.
5. Limited integration of mental health services into occupational health programmes.
6. Deficiencies in manager training and capacity-building on effective mental health practices.

## Proposed actions

### *Reducing stigma around workplace mental health*

Persistent stigma around mental health hinders open discussions and proactive interventions in the workplace. This stigma is particularly prevalent in male-dominated sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and heavy industry, where mental health discussions are often perceived as a sign of weakness.

Consequently, many employers, especially in small businesses, are hesitant to address these issues due to the fear of legal or reputational consequences, coupled with uncertainty on providing appropriate support. This results in a reactive rather than proactive approach, with mental health interventions typically implemented only after issues escalate.

Overcoming the stigma around mental health in the workplace requires a dual approach — changing cultural perceptions and providing concrete, accessible tools for action. Mental health should be

normalised as a fundamental piece of overall workplace well-being, just as important as physical safety. This involves shifting attitudes, particularly in sectors where mental health is still perceived as a sign of weakness, and empowering both employers and employees with the language and confidence to engage in open communication. To facilitate this cultural shift, employers need clear guidance and practical resources. Instead of leaving businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), to navigate this issue alone, a structured support framework should be established. Demonstrating the business value of mental health initiatives – linking well-being to productivity, resilience, and employee retention – is also key.

Building a mentally healthy workplace is not a one-size-fits-all effort. Solutions must be tailored to sector-specific realities, guided by trusted institutions, and supported by strong partnerships between the public and private sectors. With the proper support, Estonian workplaces can move from reactive to proactive mental health management, setting a strong example.

Several enablers for this process are already in place. Estonia has laid the necessary groundwork with public awareness efforts and pilot programmes, and promising initiatives like the ‘Head Matters’ (Peaasi) golden label have shown that businesses are open to change when supported appropriately. There is a growing recognition among both employers and employees that mental well-being has a significant impact on performance, retention, and morale. Key stakeholders—ranging from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to employers’ associations, trade unions, universities, mental health non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and media outlets—are all positioned to play meaningful roles.

However, the path forward is not without obstacles. Persistent societal attitudes continue to address mental health as a taboo topic, and many employers, especially in cost-sensitive sectors, remain cautious of the perceived expense or complexity of mental health programmes. Without adequate funding for awareness-raising efforts and accessible resources, even well-intentioned businesses may hesitate to act. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts, policy incentives, and strong public-private partnerships to ensure that all workplaces, regardless of size or sector, feel empowered to support their employees’ mental well-being.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Establish a national workplace mental health campaign, leveraging promising initiatives like the “Golden Label” recognition by the NGO “Head Matters”.
- Develop educational materials and interactive workshops to normalise mental health discussions.
- Integrate mental health awareness into leadership training programmes, preparing managers to support employee well-being.
- Encourage media and influential figures to champion mental health awareness, especially in male-dominant sectors, where mental health is often not discussed.

- Implement workplace “mental health ambassadors” programmes, where trained employees can provide initial mental health guidance and referrals.
- Promote mental health as a key factor in productivity and resilience, not just a health issue, demonstrating its direct impact on business performance.
- Encourage public-private partnerships to develop tailored support programmes for SMEs, ensuring accessibility and practical application.

### *Investing in research and data collection*

Estonia faces a growing concern over psychosocial hazards in the workplace, manifesting as stress, burnout, and other mental health-related issues. Despite increasing public awareness, the country lacks systematic and sector-specific data that could inform targeted policy responses, limiting the capacity of decision-makers to understand how different work environment factors affect mental well-being. This gap also hinders the evaluation of existing mental health initiatives. Without reliable data and ongoing research, Estonia risks investing in interventions that may not address root causes or deliver measurable improvements.

To establish a robust understanding of workplace mental well-being and drive effective intervention, a stronger foundation of longitudinal and comparative data on workplace mental health is needed. The solution lies in a commitment to research, encompassing long-term studies that track employee mental health trends over time and pilot programs that test different workplace interventions, from flexible working arrangements to stress management training.

Crucially, these research efforts should be integrated into broader national health and labour strategies, ensuring a direct pathway for findings to inform policy and practice. A national database of workplace mental health indicators would support this goal, providing policymakers, researchers, and employers with accessible data. Importantly, fostering strong collaborative partnerships between research institutions, government bodies, and businesses would ensure that the insights gained are relevant and actionable.

Some research activities have already been actively ongoing for several years, demonstrating that there is time and space for research on the mental health of the workforce. Some existing enablers offer a strong foundation for progress. These include EU4Health programme funding, a national policy focus on mental health, and the active interest of research institutions to carry out such studies. There is also growing demand from both employers and employees for data-driven solutions to workplace mental health issues.

However, realising the potential of further research requires acknowledging and overcoming several challenges. Securing sustainable funding remains an obstacle, as does the absence of standardised research methodologies. Additionally, employers may also be reluctant to share sensitive internal data,

fearing reputational risks or retributions. Overcoming these obstacles will require clear ethical guidelines, trust-building efforts, and the active engagement of key stakeholders, including universities, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), employer organisations, labour unions, mental health professionals, and relevant government ministries.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Conduct longitudinal studies to track changes in workplace mental health over time and evaluate the effectiveness of emerging interventions.
- Conduct pilot programmes in selected companies, measuring the impact of various mental health strategies and interventions, as an indicator for effective initiatives to be scaled nationally.
- Support workplace mental health research through national health and labour policies, ensuring that findings translate into actionable policies.
- Create a national database of workplace mental health statistics, accessible to policymakers, researchers, and employers.
- Facilitate cross-sector collaboration among universities, government agencies, and employers to promote evidence-based decision-making and informed policy development.
- Incentivise workplace participation in research projects, possibly through tax benefits or recognition programmes.

#### ***Mandatory training for managers and leaders***

Managers and leaders often lack knowledge on how to identify psychosocial risks. Many organisations see mental health as a personal rather than a workplace issue. As a result, there is little consistency in how mental health risks are addressed across different sectors or companies. The absence of standardised, evidence-based training means that even well-intentioned managers may lack the knowledge or tools needed to support employee well-being effectively and in accordance with national regulations. This inconsistency undermines both the effectiveness of workplace mental health initiatives and compliance with occupational health and safety requirements.

Establishing a standardised, mandatory mental health training programme for managers is a critical step toward building healthier workplaces. Such a programme should be developed in collaboration with mental health professionals and OSH experts to ensure scientific accuracy and legal compliance. Flexibility is key: training should be offered through various accessible formats—e-learning, webinars, and in-person workshops—to suit the needs of both large enterprises and small businesses. The training must be practical and scenario-based, incorporating real-world case studies to help managers respond to complex

situations. Government incentives could encourage companies, particularly SMEs, to participate in these initiatives. Over time, this approach not only builds leadership skills but also signals that mental health is a shared workplace responsibility.

Estonia already has a favourable foundation for implementing such training initiatives. Previous managers' development programmes provide a model for structured training delivery, and a well-established digital learning infrastructure is in place.

Nonetheless, several barriers may hinder implementation. Employers may resist mandatory training due to concerns over costs and administrative complexity. In particular, SMEs may lack the financial and human resources to participate in such training programmes. There is also a risk that training becomes a mere formality, undertaken for compliance rather than a genuine will to drive cultural change. To mitigate these risks, training should be designed to be cost-effective, engaging, and clearly linked to improved business outcomes, such as increased productivity and enhanced staff retention.

Effective implementation would require cooperation between multiple stakeholders. Government agencies should provide policy direction and political support. Employers' organisations and trade unions are needed to promote uptake and accountability. Collaboration with training providers and leadership consultants would be essential for guaranteeing the quality and accessibility of relevant programmes. Finally, as the target audience for such training programmes, collaboration with SMEs is needed for valuable feedback and for piloting innovative delivery models.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Develop a standardised mental health training programme for managers, including:
- Evidence-based materials developed in collaboration with mental health and occupational safety and health experts.
- Flexible learning formats to ensure accessibility across different business sizes.
- A certification system requiring refresher courses every few years, ensuring continuous skill development.
- Case studies and scenario-based training to equip managers with practical problem-solving skills.
- Guidance on legally compliant workplace interventions, ensuring managers are aware of their responsibilities under OSH legislation.
- Specialised modules for SMEs, providing low-cost, accessible solutions tailored to small businesses.
- Encourage governmental incentives for businesses that train their managers in mental health awareness.
- Integrate mental health training into broader leadership development programs, ensuring it is seen as a core component of good management.

## *Increasing mental health service accessibility through the Occupational Safety and Health system*

In Estonia, occupational health inspections are mandatory in workplaces where hazards exist, yet minimal attention is given to mental health and psychosocial risks during these evaluations. Many occupational health doctors lack understanding of the importance of mental well-being at work and have limited training on psychosocial hazards. This issue is compounded by a severe shortage of professionals trained in occupational mental health. Currently, Estonia has only 106 practicing occupational health physicians—far below the estimated need of 150. The gap is even wider for occupational psychologists: only 20 are active, while the estimated need stands at 400. The absence of a university-level education programme in occupational psychology further restricts the country's capacity to train new specialists, threatening the long-term sustainability of this field.

To meaningfully address psychosocial risks, the role of mental health within the OSH system should be emphasised. Integrating mental health assessments into routine occupational health inspections should serve as the starting point for this approach. To do this, occupational health physicians would need to be equipped—and required—to consider psychosocial risk factors as part of their standard evaluation. To equip occupational health practitioners with the knowledge and skills necessary to recognize and respond to psychosocial hazards effectively, the introduction of new continuing education programs is essential.

Collaboration between occupational health doctors and mental health professionals should also be strengthened, ensuring a more holistic view of employee well-being. As a part of this, expanding access to occupational psychologists is needed. Considering the current shortage of such professionals, systemic investment, starting with the establishment of a university-level curriculum in occupational psychology, is paramount.

At the workplace level, access to mental health services can be improved by encouraging companies to provide regular mental health consultations, especially in sectors or regions where risks are high. Small businesses, which often lack in-house expertise, should receive financial support to implement mental health programmes. Additionally, a referral system should be established to enable occupational health doctors to efficiently connect employees with mental health specialists.

There are already strong foundations to start implementing the aforementioned changes. Estonia's Occupational Health and Safety Act provides a legal mandate to broaden the scope of workplace health assessments, and the 2022 "Guidelines for Occupational Health Physicians" include references to psychosocial hazards. Overall, there is a growing recognition of the importance of workplace mental health among governments.

Still, significant barriers remain. The most immediate challenge is the shortage of trained professionals, both physicians and psychologists, which could limit the feasibility of short-term implementation. In



addition, smaller enterprises may resist due to cost concerns, especially if they lack immediate access to OSH infrastructure.

Embedding mental health into the OSH systems requires coordination across multiple institutions—ministries, educational institutions, healthcare providers, and employers—necessitating long-term planning and political will. Key stakeholders in driving change include the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, the Labour Inspectorate, professional associations, universities, mental health NGOs, employer organizations, and trade unions. Cooperation between these actors is essential for creating a system where psychosocial risks are treated with the same urgency and consistency as physical hazards.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Enhance the role of mental health in occupational health inspections by mandating a more profound examination of psychological risks during routine check-ups.
- Strengthening collaboration between occupational health doctors and mental health professionals, ensuring that mental health assessments are part of workplace health evaluations.
- Introduce continuing education programmes for occupational health physicians and nurses, ensuring that training on psychosocial hazards becomes an integral part of professional development.
- Expand access to occupational psychologists by:
  - Creating a university-level curriculum for occupational psychology
  - Offering incentives for medical professionals to specialise in workplace mental health.
- Increase workplace accessibility to mental health services by:
  - Encouraging workplaces to offer regular mental health consultations.
- Funding mental health support programmes for small businesses that lack in-house mental health professionals.
- Establishing an appointment system that allows occupational health doctors to connect employees with mental health specialists when needed.

## **Looking forward**

The need for a proactive approach to workplace mental health in Estonia is clear. While awareness has increased in recent years, the next step is to translate this recognition into actionable policies and

programs. A mentally healthy workforce leads to higher productivity<sup>11</sup>, greater job satisfaction<sup>1213</sup>, and a more resilient national economy<sup>14</sup>. However, achieving this goal requires a multi-faceted approach, involving government action, employer responsibility, and societal support.

The successful implementation of the proposed actions will require strong political commitment. This includes government funding and strategic support with national health and labour initiatives. Investment in workplace mental health research is also essential. Longitudinal studies and pilot programmes will provide valuable data to track long-term trends and measure the impact of interventions. Evidence-based decision-making will help to improve policies and ensure their effectiveness in addressing workplace mental health challenges.

Employers, particularly in SMEs, need to be more engaged in implementing meaningful workplace mental health strategies. This requires awareness campaigns, encouragement for companies that wish to prioritise mental health, and better access to training resources. Strengthening employer engagement will help create a culture where mental health is recognised as an essential aspect of workplace well-being. To achieve this, increased training and capacity-building for managers and leaders, as well as OSH professionals, is necessary.

The recommendations presented in this chapter are a step towards a more supportive work environment in Estonia. Stakeholders at every level must commit to turning these recommendations into reality.

## Further reading

For further reading from Estonia, we recommend consulting the following documents produced through the *MentalHealthMatters* project:

- **Mental health at work: Needed improvements in Estonia** – A technical report analysing the progress made and needed improvements regarding policies, regulations, data availability, and education that impact the management of psychosocial factors in the workplace.
- **Mental health at work: Overview on definitions, regulations & further guidance** – A document compiling definitions, legislation, policies, and guidance on psychosocial factors in workplaces in the Baltic Sea Region Countries.

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<sup>11</sup> Cooper, C., Bevan, S. (2014). Business benefits of a healthy workforce. *Workplace Well-being: How to Build Psychologically Healthy Workplaces*, pp. 27-49.

<sup>12</sup> Yang, Y., Obrenovic, B., Kamotho, D.W., Godinic, D., Ostic, D. (2024). Enhancing Job Performance: The Critical Roles of Well-Being, Satisfaction, and Trust in Supervisor. *Behavioral Sciences*, 14 (8), art. no. 688.

<sup>13</sup> Piao, X., Managi, S. (2022). Long-term improvement of psychological well-being in the workplace: What and how. *Social Science and Medicine*, 298, art. no. 114851.

<sup>14</sup> Pinheiro, M., Ivandic, I., Razzouk, D. 2017. The economic impact of mental disorders and mental health problems in the workplace. *Mental Health Economics: The Costs and Benefits of Psychiatric Care*, pp. 415-430.

# Policy options in Finland

## Key messages

The psychosocial work environment is a pressing and significant issue in Finland. Recent research highlights concern especially regarding the mental health of young individuals who have recently joined the workforce, alongside a noted decline in overall work ability. Additionally, there is growing apprehension about increased cynicism among leaders and a diminished interest in pursuing leadership roles. Insights from workplace signals and document (occupational health workplace survey and action plan) audits conducted by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health suggest that the Government Decree on the principles of good occupational health practice (708/2013) is not being fully leveraged in occupational health collaboration. Furthermore, the organisation of education in Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) studies in Finland is suboptimal, with the competencies required of appointed OSH representatives (Occupational Safety Manager and Occupational Safety representative) yet to be clearly defined.

Within the *MentalHealthMatters* project, the Finnish Community of Practice worked in stages to identify gaps in data, policy, and education on psychosocial health. A thematic focus was placed on exploring the current state of education for Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) representatives and Occupational Health (OH) professionals, aiming to advance their skills in managing psychosocial factors of the workplace and enhance educational collaboration with the OSH authority. The Community of Practice presented and discussed good practices, including their transferability, and prioritised potential measures for OSH policy and education at the national level. This work culminated in four proposed measures, as presented in this chapter.

### Recommendations

- Establishing a mutual understanding between workplaces, occupational health, and OSH authority on psychosocial factors and their effects on the well-being of employees, with a tripartite political acceptance.
- Providing all OSH representatives and OH professionals as well as OSH authority with an equal basic knowledge about observing, identifying, and assessing psychosocial factors of the workplace through education and training.
- Creating a systematic, comparable approach to observing and assessing psychosocial factors for OSH representatives and OH professionals as well as OSH authority.
- Measuring effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of workplace practices that promote mental health on system, operational and individual levels.

## Introduction

Finland is facing a growing challenge: declining occupational well-being and a rise in work-related burnout, particularly among young people<sup>15</sup>. Despite a robust regulatory framework and widespread awareness of the importance of a healthy psychosocial work environment, a critical gap persists. Occupational safety (OSH) representatives and occupational health (OH) professionals as well as OSH authority may lack the shared understanding and necessary skills to effectively observe, identify and evaluate psychosocial factors of the workplace. This deficiency undermines the ability to comprehensively tackle these crucial issues.

A recent small survey conducted in January 2024 as a part of the *MentalHealthMatters* project further underscores this point. The findings highlight gaps in the education of OSH and OH professionals. Sixty-two percent of the student respondents reported not using systematic methods to recognise or evaluate psychosocial risks, and both students and teachers found the current education on these factors to be insufficient. Students highlighted a need for more practical teaching and concrete examples, whereas teachers emphasised the significance of taking into consideration psychosocial resources. There is a need to address these educational shortcomings to prepare professionals better to collaborate effectively and tackle workplace challenges.

To effectively and systematically improve the quality and content of OSH and OH education and training, a collaborative effort between key stakeholders is needed. In the context of the *MentalHealthMatters* project, the Finnish Community of Practice focused on exploring the development of interprofessional education policy for OSH and OH professionals, as well as for OSH authorities. This multidisciplinary Community of Practice consisted of 16 experts from the universities of Oulu, Tampere and Helsinki, Finnish Entrepreneurs, Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and labour market organisations.

Through workshops with multifaceted approach and cross-sector collaboration, this group of professionals demonstrated a mutual and strong will to find means to further develop psychosocial work environments in the Finnish workplaces. By actively engaging in the development work in all levels, from practice to policymaking, the group formulated a solid plan to improve the prerequisites of mental health among the working aged people in Finland. This plan systematically takes into consideration practical actions as well as legislation, policies and good practices. To succeed in the efforts, decision-makers were involved in the project already at early stages. The project was presented to, and a successful joint workshop was held with the tripartite Advisory Boards on Occupational Safety and Health, and Occupational Health. These two bodies, which operate under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, guide the development of OSH policies and regulations.

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<sup>15</sup> Suutala, S., Hakanen, J. and Kaltiainen, J. (2024) *Miten Suomi voi? -tutkimus. Työhyvinvoinnin kehittyminen kesästä 2021 loppuvuoteen 2023*. Helsinki: Finnish Institute of Occupational Health

The Finnish Community of Practice has found that, while qualification pathways for OH doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, and psychologists are structured, the OSH education framework lacks standardisation, leading to disparities. However, both OSH and OH professional training require improvement, particularly in standardising competencies related to psychosocial factors. While continuous training on psychosocial factors is available, deeper basic knowledge and increased practical training are needed.

The Community of Practice believes that several short-, medium-, and long-term strategies should be implemented to address psychosocial factors in the workplace better:

1. Establishing a mutual understanding among workplaces, occupational health, and OSH authorities on psychosocial factors and their impact on employee well-being, with a tripartite political consensus.
2. Providing all OSH representatives and OH professionals, as well as OSH authorities, with equal basic knowledge about observing, identifying, and assessing psychosocial factors of the workplace through education and training.
3. Creating a systematic, comparable approach to observing and evaluating psychosocial factors for OSH representatives and OH professionals as well as OSH authority.
4. Measuring effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of workplace practices that promote mental health on the system, operational, and individual levels.

## Proposed actions

### *Establishing a tripartite accepted understanding of psychosocial factors*

There is an ongoing discussion about the definitions, roles and responsibilities related to psychosocial factors in the workplace. These factors can have profound impacts on productivity, job satisfaction, and overall organisational health. When all stakeholders—workplaces, occupational health actors, and regulatory bodies—share a common understanding on these factors as well as their roles in their management, they can collaboratively develop effective interventions and policies to mitigate psychosocial risks.

Moreover, achieving tripartite consensus within the Advisory Boards on Occupational Safety and Occupational Health not only enhances the legitimacy of the established understanding but also facilitates widespread implementation across sectors. Cultivating a mutual and robust understanding between all stakeholders is therefore critical. It fosters a cohesive approach to enhancing employee well-being, ultimately leading to healthier, more resilient workplaces and workforce.

**Recommendation:**

- Establishing a mutual understanding among workplaces, occupational health, and OSH authority on psychosocial factors and their impact on employee well-being, with a tripartite political consensus.

***Building an equal basic knowledge of psychosocial factors***

OSH representatives and OH professionals as well as OSH authority partly lack a shared knowledge base on psychosocial factors. This disparity in understanding can lead to inconsistencies in the management of these factors.

A unified education-based knowledge foundation and understanding are essential for establishing an equal basic level of knowledge, serving a diverse working life, and reducing quality variations in the management of psychosocial risks. Additionally, a unified knowledge base plays a crucial role in improving stakeholder collaboration and communication. It creates a common language and understanding of key concepts and supports a coordinated approach to addressing psychosocial factors.

**Recommendation:**

- Providing all OSH representatives and OH professionals as well as OSH authorities with an equal basic knowledge about observing, identifying, and assessing psychosocial factors of the workplace through education and training.

***Creating a systematic, comparable approach to assessing psychosocial factors***

Currently, various methods are available to stakeholders for assessing psychosocial factors. This inconsistency can pose challenges in ensuring uniform management of the psychosocial work environment across different workplaces, as well as in sector-specific and workplace-specific comparisons. A systematic approach would promote transparency in the management of psychosocial factors, and the collected data could be used to understand the prevalence of psychosocial risks at both organisational and national levels. Additionally, evidence-based measures and practices could be developed to efficiently allocate resources to the areas that need them the most.



#### Recommendation:

- Creating a systematic, comparable approach to observing and evaluating psychosocial factors by OSH and OH professionals, as well as OSH authorities.

### *Assessing effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of mental health promoting workplace practices*

The knowledge of what causes mental health promotion practices to be effective is limited. The assessment of impact and cost-effectiveness can provide information on which practices yield the most significant benefits at three different levels:

- **At the system level**, the assessment of system-level impact examines population-level outcomes, how the entire service system and society can benefit from practices that promote mental health in the workplace, and how the mental health of the working-age population is promoted as effectively, timely, and equitably as possible. Do legislation, funding models, and governance structurally support solutions that promote mental health?
- **At the operational level**, the assessment helps determine how practices that promote mental health in the workplace improve the functionality and management of preventive structures, the workplace atmosphere, leadership, or reduce the number of sick leaves.
- **At the individual level**, the assessment helps understand whether the well-being at work, work ability, and/or workload management of individual employees change as a result of workplace-level interventions.

Assessing cost-effectiveness at different levels is equally important. A multi-level perspective helps understand how investments in practices that promote mental health yield economic and human benefits for different stakeholders. By identifying the most economically viable measures, organizations can allocate resources efficiently while maintaining and/or improving employee well-being.

Ultimately, such assessments help develop best practices and benchmarks that can be used across different sectors. They enhance the collective understanding of how mental health can be effectively promoted in the workplace. However, developing impact and cost-effectiveness assessments requires a shared understanding and the creation of a comparable approach.

#### Recommendation:

- Measuring effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of workplace practices that promote mental health at the system, operational and individual levels.

## Looking forward

As we advance in addressing the complex landscape of psychosocial factors in the workplace, it is crucial to adopt a collaborative approach at every level of stakeholder engagement. The Occupational Safety and Health Advisory Boards in Finland are at the forefront of promoting safe and healthy working environments. Their leadership and collaborative spirit are essential to achieving a comprehensive understanding of psychosocial factors across different sectors and stakeholders. The psychosocial work environment is an integral part of a safe and healthy workplace.

## Further reading

For further reading from Finland, we recommend consulting the following documents produced through the *MentalHealthMatters* project:

- **Mental health at work: Needed improvements in Finland** – A technical report analysing needed improvements regarding policies, regulations, data, and education that impact the management of psychosocial factors in the workplace.
- **Mental health at work: Overview on definitions, regulations & further guidance** – A document compiling definitions, legislation, policies and guidance on psychosocial factors in the workplace in the Baltic Sea Region Countries.

# Policy options in Latvia

## Key messages

Employees have the right to a safe working environment, encompassing both physical and psychosocial aspects of work that impact health and well-being. Employers and governmental authorities share the responsibility to ensure that mental health at work is addressed to the same extent as other workplace factors.

Addressing workplace psychosocial risks is essential for ensuring employee well-being, improving productivity, and fostering a healthier work environment. By implementing targeted actions, Latvia can build a more resilient workforce and set a precedent for proactive psychosocial risk management.

### Recommendations:

- Strengthen policy and legal frameworks by incorporating psychosocial risks into workplace safety regulations and risk assessment requirements.
- Enhance OSH expert training programmes to improve the identification, assessment, and prevention of psychosocial risks.
- Improve diagnostic systems for occupational disorders resulting from psychosocial risks at work by developing a structured roadmap and increasing training for medical professionals.
- Expand awareness and education initiatives among different stakeholders to promote a preventive workplace culture that prioritises mental well-being.
- Encourage data collection and research on psychosocial risks to support evidence-based policy decisions and targeted interventions.
- Facilitate collaboration among stakeholders, including government agencies, employers, trade unions, and professional associations, to ensure effective implementation of proposed measures.

## Introduction

In Latvia, occupational health and safety have traditionally centred on mitigating accidents at work and physical risks, including workplace hazards and ergonomic considerations. While these factors remain important, there is a growing need to recognise and address psychosocial risks in the workplace more comprehensively. Stress, excessive workloads, poor work-life balance, and job insecurity are significant challenges that negatively impact employee well-being, productivity, and overall health. Addressing these issues should be a national priority, as Latvia endeavours to cultivate a more supportive and resilient work environment.

Enhancing awareness and implementing proactive measures to mitigate psychosocial risks are fundamental steps toward fostering a sustainable and productive workforce. Neglecting these risks can result in profound social and economic consequences. To maintain competitiveness and safeguard the well-being and mental health of its workforce, Latvia must comprehensively integrate psychosocial risk management into workplace policies and practices.

To effectively address psychosocial risks, a collaborative approach is essential. In Latvia, this need has been recognised by key stakeholders who have formed a Latvian Community of Practice. This group has undertaken a collaborative and inclusive process to develop targeted action proposals within the context of the *MentalHealthMatters* project.

These action proposals were formulated through broad consultation with key stakeholders involved in the Community of Practice, including representatives of employers, employees, and national public authorities, as well as experts from governmental institutions, trade unions, academic institutions, and the fields of occupational medicine and health—such as the State Labour Inspectorate, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Welfare, Employers’ Confederation of Latvia, and the Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia. In addition to these key stakeholders, insights have also been gathered from market research experts, OSH service providers, occupational physicians, and other thematic experts, contributing to a well-rounded understanding of the challenges and opportunities for addressing psychosocial risks in the workplace. This collaborative process has raised awareness on psychosocial risks, ensured consensus on the importance of addressing them, and strengthened commitment to meaningful policy changes.

Thereby, the Latvian Community of Practice believes that several key strategies should be implemented to address psychosocial risks in the workplace:

1. **Strong policies and regulations.** Clear legislative frameworks and enforcement mechanisms ensure that employers prioritise and proactively manage these risks within their organisations.
2. **Enhanced knowledge and systematic data collection.** This is crucial for understanding the prevalence and impact of psychosocial risks across various sectors. A data-driven approach allows for the development of targeted and effective interventions.
3. **Targeted education and training initiatives.** These can equip employers, managers, and occupational safety and health professionals with the skills to identify, assess, and mitigate psychosocial risks. Comprehensive training programmes should foster a workplace culture of open communication and mutual support, ultimately contributing to healthier and more resilient work environments.
4. **Improved diagnostic systems for occupational mental disorders caused by workplace psychosocial risks and expanding training for medical professionals.** These are vital for ensuring better recognition, diagnosis, and treatment.

By prioritising psychosocial risks and their management, Latvia can create workplaces that not only protect employees from harm but also support their overall well-being. This commitment underscores the increasing awareness that mental health is just as vital as physical health in fostering a productive and engaged workforce.

## Proposed actions

### *Improving Policies and Regulations to Address Psychosocial Risks*

A robust policy and legal framework that prioritises mental health alongside physical well-being is essential for addressing psychosocial risks in the workplace. Currently, these risks are not sufficiently emphasised in national regulations, limiting the ability of key stakeholders, such as employers and OSH professionals, to allocate resources and implement meaningful improvements in the workplace. This gap hinders progress in ensuring employee well-being, productivity, and a healthy work environment.

The existing policies, such as the Public Health Guidelines 2021–2027 and the Social Protection Labour Market Policy Guidelines for 2021–2027, do not adequately address workplace psychosocial risks. This reflects a broader issue—the absence of a formalised policy framework, strategy, or targeted regulations for psychosocial risk management, which constitutes a significant gap in the national approach to occupational health and safety. Without clear guidelines, policymakers, employers, and OSH professionals may struggle to prioritise mental health initiatives and coordinate resources effectively.

Additionally, the two key regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers—No. 660 on internal supervision of the work environment and No. 219 on mandatory health examinations—lack clear provisions for assessing and managing these risks. Without crucial legal improvements to rectify these shortcomings, progress in addressing psychosocial risks remains limited, especially among employers who may not act proactively. Strengthening and refining the existing regulatory frameworks is therefore essential to establish a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to prevention and management.

However, amending regulations can also present several challenges. Changes are infrequent, can be perceived as risky or controversial, and can potentially lead to unintended consequences. To navigate this complexity, it is essential to draft and coordinate proposed amendments with key government institutions, particularly the Ministry of Welfare and the Ministry of Health, which hold decision-making authority. Their direct involvement is critical for ensuring the effective implementation of the necessary legal changes. Furthermore, the involvement of OSH field experts and employer confederations in the amendment development process is essential to oversee the impact, identify potential obstacles, and consider the perspectives of all parties involved.

Implementing new OSH requirements related to psychosocial risk factors and mental well-being at work can also be challenging for employers. The primary barrier is a lack of awareness and understanding, as many employers may not fully recognise psychosocial risks as workplace hazards. Financial constraints and staff shortage are another significant hurdle, as implementing new OSH requirements often necessitates investment in training, resources, organisational improvements, or additional staff. Adding to these issues, the challenge of objectively measuring psychosocial risks, which is frequently compounded by the absence of standardised assessment tools, is further exacerbated by underlying issues like stigma. Stigma surrounding mental health in the workplace can hinder employees from disclosing concerns, thus making it difficult for employers to implement regulations effectively. To raise awareness and reduce stigma around mental health at work, some stakeholders can play a more influential role than others, e.g., trade unions, employers' organisations, professional organisations, and NGOs, including human resource leaders' associations and organisational psychologists. Their contribution is therefore valuable.

A relevant European Union policy and/or directive on psychosocial risks and mental health at work could facilitate the implementation of new requirements within national legal frameworks. Awareness and understanding of psychosocial risks and mental health hazards can be promoted through various means, not only through legislation or national strategy development but also by establishing national standards, fostering collective agreements, promoting social dialogue initiatives, developing guidelines, and building partnerships.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Establish precise definitions of key terms and requirements for psychosocial risks and their assessment within the regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers.
- Initiate a tripartite committee, including trade unions and employer organisations, to prepare amendments to the national strategies and regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers regarding psychosocial risks and mental health at work.
- Following the adoption of the legislative changes, provide explanatory support and develop comprehensive guidelines for employers and OSH professionals to facilitate understanding of the amendments and to support their effective implementation in practice.

#### ***Enhancing OSH Expert Training and Retraining Programmes***

Ensuring the effective recognition and management of psychosocial risks in the workplace requires strengthening the training curricula for occupational safety and health experts, at both higher and basic levels of education. Currently, these risks receive insufficient attention in university programmes and training modules, which hinders the ability of OSH experts to address these critical workplace factors adequately. Moreover, general health aspects are also insufficiently covered in OSH education and training.



To address these gaps, it is necessary to allocate more time to psychosocial risk management within official training curricula and to encourage more bachelor's and master's theses in this area. Additionally, annual training events for OSH specialists, human resource specialists, employers, and occupational health professionals should incorporate more activities focused on workplace psychosocial risks and mental health at work to enhance awareness and practical knowledge grounded in recent scientific discoveries and adaptable to rapid changes.

Strengthening OSH training programmes would yield both medium- and long-term benefits, including higher-quality risk assessments, improved identification and prevention strategies, and greater awareness among OSH experts, employers, and employees. A stronger emphasis on psychosocial risks would contribute to a more robust preventive culture that extends beyond physical safety to encompass mental well-being. However, implementing these improvements necessitates both top-down regulatory changes and bottom-up institutional support. The training curricula are regulated by the Ministry of Education, which follows a structured framework that may require time to adapt to new developments. While universities retain some flexibility, providing institutional support from the ministry, such as reducing bureaucratic complexity and improving procedural flexibility, is crucial for driving meaningful reforms.

To implement these changes, a political dialogue is urgently needed among the Ministry of Welfare, the Ministry of Health, universities providing OSH training, and relevant social partners. A concept for amending training programmes should be jointly developed and presented to the Ministry of Education, with strong support from the Ministry of Welfare and the Ministry of Health. Simultaneously, continuous efforts should be made to integrate mental well-being considerations and updates into the training and recertification system for OSH professionals. Key stakeholders involved in this process include universities offering OSH training, private training centres, and professional associations, all of which play a critical role in shaping the future of OSH education and ensuring that psychosocial risks are effectively addressed.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Strengthen the training curricula for occupational safety and health (OSH) experts by allocating more time to psychosocial risk management, including updates on psychosocial risk assessment, management actions, and prevention.
- Incorporate activities focused on workplace psychosocial risks and mental health into the recertification programs for OSH experts and annual professional events.
- Enhance dialogue between the Ministry of Welfare, the Ministry of Health, universities providing OSH training, and relevant social partners to promote both top-down regulatory changes and bottom-up institutional support.

## *Improving the System for Diagnosing Occupational Psychosocial Disorders*

Ensuring better mental health support for employees necessitates effective diagnosis of occupational psychosocial disorders. This requires a structured approach that facilitates the accurate and timely identification and management of work-related mental health conditions, ultimately contributing to a healthier and more resilient workforce.

Improving the diagnosis of occupational psychosocial disorders should start with the development of a comprehensive roadmap for diagnosing and managing work-related mental health conditions. A similar approach has been successfully implemented for musculoskeletal disorders and could serve as a valuable model for reference. This roadmap would require support from the National Preventive Action Plan, providing a strategic foundation for these improvements.

A key aspect of this initiative is the training of occupational medicine doctors, organisational psychologists, psychotherapists, and psychiatrists in the identification and management of work-related mental health issues. Increasing the awareness and expertise of medical professionals would lead to more accurate diagnoses and more effective interventions. Additionally, as a large portion of employees are engaged in medical surveillance programmes, improved diagnostic practices would also enhance overall awareness of psychosocial risks within the workforce. The involvement and support of medical professionals, particularly psychotherapists and psychiatrists, is essential for the success of this initiative.

To improve the diagnosis of occupational psychosocial disorders, such as burnout, collaboration with OSH professionals' associations is necessary to develop clear guidelines and a structured roadmap. Parallel efforts should focus on integrating these topics into existing training programs and on continuing the organisation of annual conferences for occupational medicine doctors. Engaging other relevant professional associations will further strengthen the initiative and ensure a multidisciplinary approach.

To drive these changes, active participation from key stakeholders is necessary, including professional associations, the Latvian Medical Association, the Latvian Association of Occupational Physicians, the Ministry of Welfare, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Education. Their collective support will be instrumental in establishing a more effective system for diagnosing and addressing occupational psychosocial disorders, ultimately contributing to a healthier and more resilient workforce.

### Recommendations:

- Develop a structured approach to facilitate the accurate and timely identification and management of work-related mental health conditions through the training of occupational medicine doctors, organisational psychologists, psychotherapists, and psychiatrists.
- Develop clear guidelines and a comprehensive roadmap for diagnosing occupational psychosocial disorders in collaboration with relevant professional associations.
- Ensure financial support through the National Preventive Action Plan to provide a strategic foundation for these improvements.

## Looking forward

Addressing psychosocial risks in the workplace is essential for fostering a healthier, more productive, and resilient workforce. The proposed actions outlined in this document highlight critical areas for improvement:

- Strengthening policy and legal frameworks
- Enhancing OSH expert training
- Improving the diagnosis of occupational psychosocial disorders.

By implementing these measures, Latvia can take significant steps toward integrating mental well-being into workplace safety initiatives, ensuring that employees receive the support they need.

A more comprehensive legal framework would provide clear definitions and risk assessment requirements, enabling organisations to prioritise psychosocial risks alongside physical hazards. Enhancing OSH training programmes would equip professionals with the necessary skills to identify, assess, and mitigate these risks effectively. Finally, improving diagnostic systems for occupational psychosocial disorders would lead to improved awareness and early intervention, benefiting both employees and medical professionals.

These initiatives require collaboration among key stakeholders, including government institutions, professional associations, employers, and trade unions. Their collective support is crucial in driving meaningful change. While challenges such as regulatory rigidity and competing priorities exist, the long-term benefits — ranging from improved employee well-being to increased workplace productivity — far outweigh the obstacles.

Now is the time to take action. By recognising the importance of psychosocial risks and implementing these strategic improvements, Latvia can build a more resilient workforce and set a strong precedent for workplace mental health. The steps outlined in this document provide a clear path forward, and with the right commitment, these solutions can lead to lasting, positive change.

## Further reading

For further reading from Latvia, we recommend consulting the following documents produced through the *MentalHealthMatters* project:

- **Mental health at work: Needed improvements in Latvia** – A technical report analysing progress made and needed improvements regarding policies, regulations, data availability, and education that impact the management of psychosocial factors in the workplace.
- **Mental health at work: Overview on definitions, regulations & further guidance** – A document compiling definitions, legislation, policies and guidance on psychosocial factors in the workplace in the Baltic Sea Region Countries.

# Policy options in Norway

## Key messages

Improving migrant workers' mental health is crucial to increase inclusion in the workforce, reduce sickness absence and ensure long-term work participation. Mental health problems cause millions of lost working days each year. This is particularly critical in sectors like cleaning, where immigrant workers constitute up to 65% of the workforce in Norway, and the impact of ill health is substantial, with 930,000 workdays lost annually due to sickness absence<sup>16</sup>. Within the framework of the *MentalHealthMatters* project, the Norwegian Community of Practice has closely examined the psychosocial work environment in this sector. Their key findings highlight the challenges faced by migrant workers:

- Cleaning workers experience high time and workload pressure, low work control, and physically demanding tasks.
- Migrant workers have limited opportunities to voice concerns and participate in improving their working environment.
- The Workplace Environment Tool (Arbeidsmiljøhjelpen) can enhance the participation and inclusion of foreign-born employees.

### Recommendations:

- Increase knowledge of key work environment factors among managers, union representatives, and safety delegates.
- Evaluate and expand testing of the Workplace Environment Tool.
- Strengthen local-level partnerships to foster inclusion and cooperation in multicultural workplaces.

## Introduction

The psychosocial work environment plays a significant role in employees' overall well-being, impacting both their mental and physical health. It is therefore concerning that the Norwegian National Institute of Occupational Health (STAMI) reports that 15% of all sick leave can be attributed to the psychosocial work environment<sup>17</sup>. Among cleaners, 1 in 2 sick leave is stated to be related to the job<sup>18</sup>. This statistic highlights a significant challenge that warrants careful consideration and the implementation of proactive measures.

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<sup>16</sup> STAMI, NOA. (n.d.). Renhold - STAMI NOA. <https://noa.stami.no/yrker-og-naeringer/noa/renhold/>

<sup>17</sup> STAMI, NOA. (n.d.). Legemeldt sykefravær - STAMI NOA. <https://noa.stami.no/helse-og-fravaer/legemeldt-sykefravaer/>

<sup>18</sup> STAMI, NOA. (n.d.). Renhold - STAMI NOA. <https://noa.stami.no/yrker-og-naeringer/noa/renhold/>

This is particularly relevant in sectors like cleaning, where several key challenges persist, including high time pressure and workload, limited control over work, and demanding physical tasks.

These challenges are further compounded by the industry's reliance on immigrant workers. Over 60% of employees in Norway are immigrants, with some companies employing up to 80%. These workers represent a valuable part of the workforce, and it is essential to understand their experiences better. While the cleaning industry often serves as an entry point into the labour market, there is a need for greater insight into the specific work environment experiences of immigrant workers.

To effectively improve participation and working conditions in the cleaning industry, the *MentalHealthMatters* project established a Norwegian Community of Practice. This group includes representatives from the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO), the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise (NHO), and the Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority. LO and NHO, representing the largest employees' and employers' interest groups in Norway, are also key partners in the Work Environment Initiative and the IA Agreement. The collaboration between the parties and the authorities in the Working Environment Initiative has previously led to the Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority developing the [Workplace Environment Tool \(Arbeidsmiljøhjelpen\)](#).

The Norwegian Community of Practice has identified three objectives that can pave the way for a better psychosocial work environment in the cleaning industry. These objectives focus on the workplace level, proposing practical measures to help businesses work more effectively and in a preventive manner to improve their work environment. They are building on the current regulatory framework, offering a crucial starting point for tangible progress.

While workplace-level interventions are a valuable starting point, they should be complemented by broader systemic changes to achieve lasting impact. While the following recommendations emphasise individual workplaces, this does not negate the need for ongoing research and further development of regulations. Already now, there is room for improvement in how existing knowledge and regulations are communicated and implemented in workplaces. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of how immigrant workers experience working life in Norway would be invaluable in refining recommendations related to training and regulations, ensuring that they are truly effective and equitable.

#### ***MentalHealthMatters* project phases in Norway:**

##### **1. Insight phase**

Gathering comprehensive knowledge of the cleaning industry through research, regulatory reviews, collaboration meetings, and semi-structured interviews.

##### **2. Testing phase**

Testing the *Workplace Environment Tool* with its multilingual function in two cleaning companies, with a total of 100 participants.

##### **3. Summary phase**

Summarising knowledge and experience gained through the project with the aim of extracting key learning points for recommendations and proposed measures.

## Proposed actions

### *Increasing knowledge about work environment factors in the cleaning industry*

A functional and systematic approach to improving the work environment is based on knowledge, which can positively influence health outcomes and reduce sick leave. However, a SINTEF report on organisational understanding and management of the psychosocial work environment reveals that many managers, employee representatives, and safety delegates have a limited knowledge of what the psychosocial work environment entails<sup>19</sup>. This lack of knowledge hinders their ability to identify effective improvement measures. Consequently, many organisations attempt to address the symptom of a work environment challenge, such as interpersonal conflicts, rather than its root cause, such as role ambiguity. In the cleaning industry, it is thus reasonable to assume that many managers, employee representatives, and safety delegates lack knowledge about the most critical psychosocial work environment factors in their own sector, thereby limiting their ability to implement relevant preventive measures. This observation is further supported by conversations with social partners in Norway and semi-structured interviews conducted with industry representatives.

Data and research from organisations such as Statistics Norway (SSB) and the National Institute of Occupational Health (STAMI) provide substantial knowledge about the state of the working environment in Norway, including in the cleaning industry. The working environment regulations also explicitly state that the working environment must be entirely satisfactory in both physical and psychological aspects. To help employers ensure this, several evidence-based tools have already been developed to support preventive efforts related to psychosocial and organisational work environment factors, such as *A Good Day at Work* (STAMI) and the *Workplace Environment Tool* (The Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority).

Therefore, evidence-based knowledge, tools, and regulations already exist. Yet, there is a need to reach the workplace stakeholders with them, instead of developing new ones. To address this, the Labour Inspection Authority, together with actors close to the workplace level, such as Regional Safety Representatives (RVO) and social partners, should provide targeted initiatives, including webinars, conferences, and informational articles, to help disseminate existing knowledge to workplace actors.

Efforts should focus on reaching small and medium-sized cleaning businesses, which often face resource constraints that hinder participation. The goal of these initiatives is to help enterprises to systematically improve their work environments. However, challenges remain, including limited access to digital training platforms and time constraints in small businesses. Therefore, efforts must be sustained over time and communicated through various channels and in multiple languages, so that smaller companies can also benefit from the knowledge and tools in the long term.

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<sup>19</sup> Thun, Sylvi; Buvik, Marte; Ose, Solveig (2022) *Kartlegging av psykososialt arbeidsmiljøarbeid*. Sintef. [sintef-rapport-kartlegging-psykososialt-arbeidsmiljoarbeid-fou-2021-15.pdf](https://sintef-rapport-kartlegging-psykososialt-arbeidsmiljoarbeid-fou-2021-15.pdf)



**Recommendations:**

- Develop awareness-raising campaigns targeting workplace-level actors on social media.
- Provide knowledge, resources, and tools in multiple languages, ensuring their accessibility in multicultural work environments.

**Key stakeholders:** employers, managers, union representatives, and safety delegates.

***Testing and evaluating the Workplace Environment Tool in multicultural workplaces***

The *Workplace Environment Tool* (*Arbeidsmiljøhjelpen*) is a web-based resource developed to address the work environment factors that have the most significant impact on sickness absence—namely organisational, psychosocial, and ergonomic factors. It is a self-help tool designed to facilitate employee participation in the workplace. The goal is for the employer and employees to discuss challenges and resources in the work environment together, and then to jointly identify measures that can help develop and improve the working environment.

The tool contributes to:

- Enhanced knowledge about psychosocial, organisational, and ergonomic work environment factors, providing a basis for informed action.
- Employee participation in improving the work environment, fostering a sense of engagement and ownership.

Tailored to multiple industries, including cleaning, and accessible in various languages, this tool can help transform workplace collaboration in this sector. The Norwegian Community of Practice has investigated the potential of the tool to contribute to increased participation and inclusion of migrant workers in the cleaning industry, recognising the importance of addressing their specific needs and promoting equitable working conditions.

Initial testing of the *Workplace Environment Tool* in two cleaning industry companies with a total of 100 participants, conducted as a part of the *MentalHealthMatters* project, demonstrates that systematically addressing factors such as working hours, time pressure, and language comprehension can have a significant impact on both the work environment and employee health. It also shows that employees are generally eager to express how they experience their workday, given that they have a language and a platform to do so. The tool enables employees to contribute constructive suggestions for solutions, ranging from language training to improved routines.

To comprehensively evaluate the systematic impact of the Workplace Environment Tool, further testing is needed across additional businesses and industries. To reach migrant workers beyond the cleaning industry, it would be advantageous to continue tailoring and testing the tool in other industries with a high proportion of immigrant workers, such as the public transport sector. This expansion would help refine the tool and ensure its relevance and accessibility across diverse workplaces.

**Recommendations:**

- Further expand the *Workplace Environment Tool* to cover different industries with a high proportion of immigrant workers.
- Ensure further testing in other industries, such as public transport.

**Key Stakeholders:** Labour Inspection Authority, employers, industry representatives, RVO

### *The importance of local-level partnership in businesses with linguistic and cultural challenges*

The Norwegian cooperation model, often referred to as the "social partnership model," is a distinctive approach to labour relations where employers, employees, and the government work together to ensure a stable, fair, and productive working environment. This model is based on mutual respect, collaboration, and the principle of shared responsibility for the workplace and society. In the workplace, the focus is on democracy, where employees have a voice in decision-making processes, including matters related to their work environment and conditions. This is often facilitated by employee representation on boards and safety committees.

Many migrant workers are unfamiliar with the Norwegian cooperation model, and a common challenge in industries such as cleaning is a low unionisation rate. This reduces their opportunity for participation and influence related to work environment issues and might limit their participation in workplace development. Strengthening local-level partnerships is essential for fostering inclusion and ensuring that all workers can contribute to creating a better work environment.

Effective preventive measures in the workplace require good cooperation between employers and safety/union representatives, as well as employee participation. To achieve this, training and knowledge-sharing initiatives in collaboration with social partners are necessary. In such efforts, it is important that communication is tailored to be accessible and culturally relevant, ensuring that language barriers and the complexity of work environment regulations do not prevent participation.

### Recommendations:

- Develop a targeted information campaign to increase unionisation rates among migrant workers.
- Provide guidance to the cleaning sector workplaces on setting up effective local-level partnerships.

**Key Stakeholders:** Employers, union representatives, safety delegates, and public authorities.

## Looking forward

Strengthening employees' participation and improving working conditions are foundational elements of a positive psychosocial work environment. The actions proposed in this paper offer a valuable roadmap for creating a more inclusive work environment in immigrant-heavy sectors, such as cleaning, through enhanced knowledge, innovative tools, and fostered cooperation at the workplace level. They build upon the existing regulatory framework, focusing on effective enforcement at the workplace level. Implementing these recommendations holds the potential to significantly reduce work-related sick leave and improve the overall psychosocial well-being of workers in the cleaning sector.

However, to fully capitalise on these advancements, we must look beyond the immediate workplace. While workplace-level interventions provide a crucial foundation, achieving sustainable and equitable change necessitates a broader, more systemic approach. Continued research, clear regulations, and proactive communication strategies are essential complements to the valuable work already undertaken.

## Further reading

For further reading from Norway, we recommend consulting the following documents produced through the *MentalHealthMatters* project:

- **Mental health at work: Needed improvements in Norway** – A technical report analysing progress made and needed improvements regarding policies, regulations, data availability, and education that impact the management of psychosocial factors in the workplace.
- **Mental health at work: Overview on definitions, regulations & further guidance** – A document compiling definitions, legislation, policies, and guidance on psychosocial factors in the workplace in the Baltic Sea Region Countries.

# Policy options in Poland

## Key messages

Mental health problems are increasingly diagnosed among the working population in Poland. However, the occupational safety and health (OSH) system is not fully successful in supporting workplaces in managing psychosocial risks and strengthening workers' mental health. Therefore, there is an urgent need to step up efforts to support the OSH system in this area.

There is a notable lack of objective, independent research that is not subordinated to the market needs of service providers but instead aims to provide a comprehensive, evidence-based understanding of the issue. This lack of objective data impedes the development of effective, targeted policies and interventions.

Although there is significant institutional potential for carrying out these research activities and planning further initiatives based on the results obtained, the funding mechanisms currently available in Poland do not facilitate their organisation, especially when it comes to longitudinal research. It is therefore necessary to involve decision-makers in introducing appropriate funding mechanisms for these activities, particularly in the context of recurrent research. The role of social partners in lobbying for proposed research projects is essential.

### Recommendations:

- **Develop a national social survey.** This survey should be conducted periodically and target employers, managers, OSH professionals, and employees to understand their attitudes, needs, and current practices in managing psychosocial risks and promoting mental health in the workplace. The results would inform strategies to strengthen workplaces and the OSH system.
- Fund research projects aimed at:
  - **Awareness raising** of employers, HR managers, and OSH professionals about existing:
    - External services and practices that employers can offer to their staff to prevent employees' mental health problems and improve their mental well-being.
    - Tools and courses aimed at the self-education of OSH actors in the management of psychosocial risks in the workplace.
  - Equipping employers, HR managers, and OSH professionals with the **quality criteria** to enable them to evaluate existing support initiatives.

## Introduction

A significant proportion of the working population in Poland is affected by a variety of mental health problems. Analysis conducted by Mindgram reveals a stark reality: as many as 77% of employees rate their general well-being as below high, 45% report burnout symptoms, and 44% and 35% experience depressive and anxiety symptoms, respectively<sup>20</sup>. This widespread prevalence of mental health issues underscores the urgent need to address psychosocial risks that impact workplaces across the country. Beyond the individual health and functional consequences for employees (micro level), this situation also generates substantial costs for businesses through increased absenteeism and presenteeism (meso level), as well as for the broader economy through improved medical care and social security expenditures (macro level).

In response to these challenges, the *MentalHealthMatters* project focused on identifying obstacles to workplace involvement in managing psychosocial risks and promoting the mental health of workers in Poland. The primary purpose was to explore ways to enable workplaces to tackle psychosocial risks by creating a culture of health, covering all elements of the working environment like management, work organisation, and interpersonal relations that support and promote the health and well-being of employees. To achieve this, the project established a National Community of Practice, bringing together key stakeholders in occupational safety and health in Poland to explore prevalent challenges, the progress already made, and potential ways to enable healthier and more sustainable workplaces.

The stakeholders engaged in the Community of Practice varied at each stage of the project, depending on the specific issues and tasks under discussion. The members consisted of representatives from:

- Association of Occupational Safety and Health Service Providers in Łódź,
- Central Institute for Labour Protection - National Research Institute,
- National Labour Inspectorate,
- Nofer Institute of Occupational Medicine,
- Polish Association of Occupational Safety and Health Service Providers - Łódź Branch,
- Polish Society of Occupational Medicine,
- Prof. Jerzy Dietl Foundation for the Development of Entrepreneurship
- makowkapracuje.pl as a representative of commercial service providers operating on the free market and supporting OSH actors in the management of psychosocial risks.

To understand the stakeholders with the potential of supporting workplaces in building a culture of health, including through legal, inter-organisational, or market means, the project adopted a broad understanding of the OSH system in Poland. This encompasses traditional OSH actors, including safety and hygiene professionals, occupational medicine professionals, social labour inspectors, and national labour and health inspectors, as well as relevant actors currently outside the formal OSH system, such as human resources managers, education and training providers, and free market initiatives.

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<sup>20</sup> Mindgram. (2023). *Badanie dobrostanu polskich pracowników: Analiza stanu kondycji psychicznej na rodzimym rynku pracy i rekomendowane działania naprawcze*. Warszawa.

Discussions with the Polish Community of Practice highlighted gaps in OSH practices, policies, education, and research, along with necessary improvements. Furthermore, the project team at the Nofer Institute of Occupational Medicine consulted representatives of the Polish Community of Practice on key strategies to strengthen workplace engagement in psychosocial risk management and mental health promotion. Based on these discussions and consultations, the following actions are recommended:

1. **Broadening the knowledge base** by conducting a thorough and systematic assessment of the needs, attitudes, and experiences of the OSH actors regarding the management of the psychosocial risks and mental health promotion in workplaces. Further knowledge is needed to develop evidence-based actions.
2. **Raising awareness** among actors of the broad OSH system on the services, tools, and courses available to support them in managing psychosocial risks and improving the mental health of employees, as well as the quality assessment criteria of those initiatives. This is necessary to activate mechanisms of quality control of the services offered, which in the long run can influence their general improvement in Poland, as the demand for high-quality services will force the supply of such services.

Achieving these goals entails conducting ongoing and repeated research activities. This, in turn, requires securing adequate funding opportunities.

#### Why should these actions be implemented?

- The number of sickness absence days due to mental health and behavioural disorders and their share in the total number of absence days across Poland are increasing. In 2018, these health problems accounted for almost 8% of all sickness absence, corresponding to nearly 19.5 million days of absence<sup>21</sup>. In 2023, the share was nearly 11% of all sick days, corresponding to more than 26 million days.<sup>22</sup> **This demonstrates the urgent need for action to support the mental health of the working population.**
- Although Polish legislation considers traditional OSH professionals (i.e., safety and hygiene specialists and occupational medicine staff) as competent to assist employers with managing various kinds of occupational risks, in practice, they focus mainly on the management of traditional risks, paying little attention, in a very narrow way, to psychosocial risks. Few of these OSH professionals are daily involved in building a culture of health in workplaces through the identification and reduction of psychosocial risks. **This raises the question of mechanisms to realistically involve these professionals in managing such risks.**
- Beyond traditional legal occupational health protection, companies are increasingly addressing psychosocial risks and employee well-being, driven by a growing emphasis on health and wellness. A 2024 study by the Nofer Institute of Occupational Medicine<sup>23</sup>, conducted among a representative sample of medium and large companies in Poland, found that 60% of workplaces cited this motivation. They reported that top management and human resources managers are the most knowledgeable about the health of their employees and are responsible for managing employee health. At the same time, the proportion of traditional OSH professionals, such as safety and hygiene specialists and occupational

<sup>21</sup> Zakład Ubezpieczeń Społecznych. (2019). *Absencja chorobowa w 2018 roku*. Warszawa.

<sup>22</sup> Zakład Ubezpieczeń Społecznych. (2024). *Absencja chorobowa w 2023 roku*. Warszawa.

<sup>23</sup> The results of the study have not been published yet.

medicine physicians, has been declining for years, currently having this responsibility of managing employee health in only 8% of companies, compared with 11% of organisations in 2017 and up to around 50% at the beginning of the century. **This highlights the need to extend activities beyond the traditional OSH system and broaden its definition.**

- An additional challenge is that employers, HR managers, and traditional OSH professionals feel ill-equipped to undertake well-being activities and are not developing their skills in this area. In only 1 in 12 medium and large organisations (8%), they report feeling well-prepared to undertake well-being initiatives. This results in mistakes in how these actors manage psychosocial risks and enhance the mental health of employees within their companies. For example, stress management activities in organisations often involve providing training or psychological counselling to individuals at risk. Such provisions are therefore aimed at ‘firefighting’ rather than identifying and changing the sources of stress. Only 14% of medium and large organisations report using proactive preventive approaches to address the sources of stress. This situation shifts the responsibility for management to the employees themselves, while the main stressors at work, namely those related to organisation and management, remain unaddressed. **This highlights the need to enhance the knowledge and skills of actors within the broad OSH system in this area, and to provide them with practical, high-quality tools to support employee health.**
- There is currently a rapidly growing market in Poland for commercial services that help manage psychosocial risks in the workplace and promote the mental health of employees. However, these are often paid services, which limit their accessibility. According to the study by the Nofer Institute of Occupational Medicine, 67% of medium and large companies in Poland cite the lack of financial resources as an obstacle to employee health promotion. The burgeoning commercial sector risks diminishing the state’s role in developing employer support solutions. Furthermore, a critical concern is the variable quality of these commercial services, which currently lack regulatory oversight. **These issues underscore the need for increased state involvement in strengthening the broader occupational safety and health (OSH) system and necessitate a review of commercial services to promote quality initiatives.**
- As a result of the aforementioned factors, psychosocial risk reduction and mental health initiatives are not widely implemented in Polish workplaces. The aforementioned study revealed that of the nine measured initiatives, the three most popular ones were implemented by only 26-32% of organisations, with the majority of others adopted by just a few percent. **This highlights the need for a thorough employer needs assessment and increased motivation for action in this area.**

## Proposed actions

### *A national social survey: Gathering data for developing evidence-based actions*

Currently, Poland lacks a comprehensive understanding of the current state and broad conditions, including diverse experiences, attitudes, and needs of key stakeholders, related to managing psychosocial risks in the workplace and promoting the mental health of employees.

To address this information gap, **a nationally representative social survey is needed**. To gather crucial data on the current state of psychosocial risk management and mental health promotion in workplaces, this survey should target key stakeholders, including employers, managers, formal OSH system actors, and employees. In addition, it should explore other underlying factors such as these stakeholders’ needs



(including cooperation with other actors), attitudes, and past experiences. Such data is crucial for informing the development of tailored solutions across various domains, including policy, science, social initiatives, education, marketing, and workplace actions. To enable the evaluation of intervention impact and monitoring continuous improvement, such a survey should be conducted cyclically.

Implementing such a survey would require a strategic and collaborative approach, including:

- **Securing funding:** Identifying and securing appropriate funding sources for cyclical research projects to ensure their feasibility, implementation, and sustainability.
- **Establishing a strong, cross-sectoral consortium:** Partnering with research institutions and organisations representing all responder groups to ensure a broad research perspective. Representation of all these stakeholders' interests is critical for data validation, dissemination, and knowledge transfer.

The lead role in this research project could be played by a public scientific institution specialising in the field of health and work. Furthermore, to ensure strategic coherence, establishing advisory groups comprising key stakeholders would be necessary. These would include, for example, representatives of survey respondents, facilitating discussions on study design, survey piloting, research conclusions, and practical recommendations. In addition, the voices of external service providers – both public and private – who support workplaces in managing psychosocial risks would be valuable, particularly during the survey planning stages.

The growing public and institutional interest in employee mental health in Poland is an important factor that would bolster the success of such a social survey. Furthermore, there is strong institutional capacity in Poland for implementing such a survey, with numerous public research institutions, such as the Nofer Institute of Occupational Medicine, the Central Institute for Labour Protection, and the Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology, having extensive experience in conducting studies in the field of labour, OSH, and mental health. Additionally, there are numerous polling agencies with the competence and expertise to conduct social surveys. These factors provide a solid foundation for a successful execution of the survey.

However, despite the great potential of such a survey, the inadequacy of current funding mechanisms poses a significant obstacle to its implementation. Currently, there are no funding mechanisms in Poland that match the thematic focus of the proposed survey and facilitate the cyclical nature of the research project. Therefore, **there is a need to prioritise such research related to workplace mental health in research policy.**

### *Improvement of OSH Actor Capacity*

OSH actors in Poland face several challenges that inhibit their ability to manage psychosocial risks and promote employee mental health effectively. A significant factor is the limited skills and competencies

among actors of the broad OSH system in this specialised area, often coupled with a lack of practical tools, experience, and motivation to address psychosocial risks. This deficiency is further compounded by the dynamic and frequently poorly regulated market for paid workplace mental health services, where the variability in service quality and the absence of robust quality control mechanisms create notable challenges. As a result, employers and other OSH actors struggle to discern, use, and promote high-quality external services, tools, and courses that can effectively assist them in preventing mental health problems and enhancing employee well-being. This lack of clarity and guidance ultimately hinders the development of comprehensive and effective workplace mental health strategies.

To address these challenges, **a series of research-based projects is needed, aimed at raising awareness among OSH actors about the services, tools, and courses available for them.** These projects should:

1. Identify and promote:
  - a. External services are available for employers to offer to their employees to prevent mental health issues.
  - b. Tools and courses aimed at the self-education of OSH actors in the management of psychosocial risks in workplaces.
2. Develop and promote quality assessment criteria for such services and initiatives.

To facilitate ongoing evaluation and improvement, such reviews should ideally be conducted cyclically.

Implementing these review projects would require a strategic approach and dedicated resources, including securing funding for them. To ensure an evidence-based approach, the reviews should entail:

- Conducting desk research to identify available services, tools, and resources
- Developing quality criteria for evaluating existing initiatives
- Partnering with the providers of the identified initiatives to gather details on their services
- Promoting identified initiatives and the quality criteria among the OSH actors through trade unions, employers' associations, occupational medicine professionals, the Network of Workplace Health Promotion Managers, and relevant online platforms.

These reviews would empower employers, managers, and OSH professionals to make informed decisions about free-market mental health services and tools. By enabling OSH actors to turn to the free market for high-quality services, the competitiveness of the existing service market could be increased, and, in the long term, the quality of available services would be improved.

The implementation of these projects is driven by the growing interest in these products among the direct target groups, namely employers, managers, and OSH professionals. Public research institutions, with their focus on labour and occupational health, are well-positioned to lead these initiatives. However, the successful implementation of these projects would be contingent on securing adequate funding, as the

current funding mechanisms for conducting the cyclical research projects in this area might be insufficient. Therefore, **establishing and ensuring a proper funding mechanism is crucial.**

## Looking forward

The implementation of the proposed actions outlined in this chapter would, in the short term, help employers understand how they can be motivated and supported to actively engage in managing psychosocial risks and promoting worker mental health in Poland. They can also foster further skill development among the actors of the wide OSH system in this area. The actions can also help understand the ways to sensitise the OSH professionals to the need to prioritise psychosocial risks alongside traditional occupational hazards and encourage training institutions to incorporate psychosocial risk management into their curricula better. In the medium and long term, these actions could strengthen the overall OSH system through improved policy, education, research, and OSH practices.

However, the inadequacy of the current permanent funding mechanisms poses a significant obstacle to the successful implementation of the proposed actions, particularly for cyclical research initiatives. Therefore, policymakers and social partners should facilitate the implementation of the proposed research projects. This call is directed especially to decision-makers in research policy and R&D related to public health and economic policy, including representatives from:

- The Ministries of Science, Health, and Labour
- The National Centre for Research and Development, and
- The National Science Centre.

To ensure the effective strengthening of the OSH system, lobbying efforts are essential. The Council for Labour Protection of the Polish Parliament, social partners, and associations for safety and hygiene professionals, occupational medicine practitioners, and HR managers could play an important role in advocating for these proposed solutions. By working together, we can create healthier, more productive workplaces and improve the well-being of Poland's workforce.

## Further reading

For further reading from Poland, we recommend consulting the following documents produced through the *MentalHealthMatters* project:

- **Mental health at work: Needed improvements in Poland** – A technical report analysing progress made and needed improvements regarding policies, regulations, data availability, and education that impact the management of psychosocial factors in the workplace.

- **Mental health at work: Overview on definitions, regulations & further guidance** – A document compiling definitions, legislation, policies and guidance on psychosocial factors in the workplace in the Baltic Sea Region Countries.

## Conclusion

The *MentalHealthMatters* project represents a collective commitment to drive change towards more sustainable working lives in the Baltic Sea Region, where mental well-being of the workforce is considered as important as their physical health. To achieve this, there is a need to take the psychosocial work environment seriously, paying attention to the organisation, content and social context of work.

The policy options and other recommendations presented in this document are actionable strategies designed to drive tangible change. Each country-specific chapter, along with the transnational reflections, underscores the importance of tailored approaches that recognise the unique contexts and needs of Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Poland, and Norway, while also fostering a spirit of joint learning and innovation across the Baltic Sea Region.

As we look to the future, the vision for workplace mental health is one of proactive engagement, resilience, and a shared responsibility. It is a future where workplaces simultaneously proactively prevent psychosocial risks and foster protective factors for good mental health and well-being.

The journey towards this future requires concerted efforts. It calls for policymakers to enact supportive policies and regulations, for employers and social partners to implement promising practices, for educators to refine training programmes for OSH professionals, and for researchers to provide data to support evidence-based actions.

By proactively addressing psychosocial risks and fostering protective work environments, we can enhance people's resilience and sustainability of businesses. The *MentalHealthMatters* project has established a foundation for this; now it's our job to build on it and make this vision a reality.