

Safety and health in micro and small enterprises in the EU: from policy to practice

Description of good examples

Table of contents

1	Introduction	6
2	Methodology	6
3	Results	7
4	Good examples.....	10
4.1	Orchestrated examples built on multi-dimensional strategies	10
	▪ Example 1. Prevention packages - economic support for improvement of OSH in MSEs - Denmark	11
	▪ Example 2. A programme for road transport and restaurants using OiRA — Online Interactive Risk Assessment - France	20
	▪ Example 3: Safe Forestry — a combination of activities to improve safety in forestry - Sweden	27
	▪ Good example 4. Weld Right (SvetsaRätt) — a web platform for improving OSH and OSH management in welding - Sweden.....	34
	▪ Good example 5. - Network activities and instruments in the construction sector — Initiative for a New Quality of Work's (INQA) 'Advance Good Construction' and its instruments (Check-Bauen, BauWertInWest) - Germany	39
	▪ Good example 6 - A broad programme aimed at improving safety and health in small construction companies - France.....	46
4.2	Get MSEs aware of, interested in and working with OSH	50
	▪ Good example 7. Labour Inspection Diploma as an incentive for micro companies to work with OSH - Poland.....	51
	▪ Good example 8. - Best Workplace Practices Award for interest in OSH and for providing solutions to specific problems - Estonia.....	57
	▪ Good example 9. Health Calendar ('Tervisekalender') to help employers develop healthy lifestyles and a positive safety culture, as well as to ensure employees' well-being at work - Estonia.....	65
	▪ Good example 10. 'Safety and Health in SMEs' — a campaign that aims to increase OSH awareness and initiate OSH improvements - Romania.....	69
	▪ Good example 11. Information and awareness campaign on changes entailed by the provisions of the EU Regulation on classification, labelling and packaging of chemicals - Romania.....	73
4.3	Strengthening OSH infrastructure through structures for providing personal OSH support to MSEs.....	78
	▪ Good example 12. BAMBUS — The Safety and Health Preventive Service Bus for the Construction Sector - Denmark	79
	▪ Good example 13. Regional safety representatives — OSH actors supporting workers and employers in Swedish MSEs - Sweden.....	86
	▪ Good example 14. OSH advisors in the construction sector disseminating OSH knowledge and supporting construction companies, mainly MSEs - Sweden	94
	▪ Good example 15. Consultancy service in OSH and face-to-face consultancy on site to increase employers' OSH knowledge and to support OSH management - Estonia	100
4.4	Non-OSH intermediaries engaging in OSH.....	107
	▪ Good example 16. National programme: OSH training for agriculture advisors. OSH information days for agriculture in different regions of Estonia - Estonia	108

▪	Good example 17. The Health and Safety Executive’s Estates Excellence Initiative – United Kingdom	112
▪	Good example 18. The General Pharmaceutical Council as an OSH support for pharmacies - United Kingdom	118
▪	Good example 19. The Care Quality Commission — impact on OSH in small companies in the care sector - United Kingdom	124
4.5	Using requirements from the value chain as a lever for OSH	130
▪	Good example 20. VCA — ensuring safety for subcontracting companies carrying out work in high-risk industries - Netherlands and Belgium	131
▪	Good example 21. The Olympic Park Legacy – United Kingdom	139
▪	Good example 22. Compulsory OSH courses and identity cards to provide and control basic OSH knowledge in the construction sector - Sweden	145
4.6	OSH training for MSEs and their employees.....	150
▪	Good example 23. National programme: a comprehensive OSH training programme for safety managers and senior managers of SMEs - Estonia	151
▪	Transferability of the results.....	156
▪	Good example 24. Subsidies for companies — free training courses for the staff in charge of safety in SMEs - Italy	158
▪	Good example 25. OSH training for the construction industry in combination with OSH support for workplaces - Italy.....	161
▪	Good example 26. Safety and health at work — a prerequisite for competitiveness. Regional seminars in the Horeca and construction sectors - Romania	168
▪	Good example 27. ‘Safe in the store’ — a widely used web course about OSH in retail - Sweden	173
▪	Good example 28. ‘Synergie’ — OSH introduction for the newly employed - France.....	177
▪	Good example 29. Access — a project for free professional and OSH training of cleaning workers - Romania	186
4.7	Economic support for OSH improvements	191
▪	Good example 30. ISI-INAIL — incentives to companies for the implementation of interventions relating to health and safety at work - Italy	192
4.8	Provision of tools and methods suited to the support of OSH and OSH management in MSEs.....	198
▪	Good example 31. Occupational safety management system in the construction industry (AMS BAU) - Germany	199
▪	Good example 32. GDA Orga Check and INQA tools — self-evaluation checklists for small companies - Germany	207
▪	Good example 33. SOBANE and the Déparis guide — tools to support participatory risk management - Belgium	214
▪	Good example 34. Checklists for sectors — support in risk identification, selection of control measures and making an action plan - Sweden.....	219
▪	Good example 35. OiRA —sector-specific Online interactive Risk Assessment for SMEs - Belgium	229
▪	Good example 36. Ireland’s BeSmart.ie initiative — OSH tools for MSEs in many sectors- Ireland	234
▪	Good example 37. ‘Health and safety at work’ guidance for understanding OSH legislation - Romania	240

- Good example 38. A framework for cooperation within sectors to stimulate, facilitate and share OSH management practices - the Netherlands..... 244
- Good example 39. A network that brings together experts to support small companies in Germany — INQA network ‘Offensive Mittelstand’ (Advance SMEs) - Germany 249
- Good example 40. Knipperlichten — a tool for indicators for psychosocial risks at work - Belgium 256
- Good example 41. A tool for the risk assessment and risk management of work-related stress - Italy..... 261
- Good example 42. ‘Mavimplant’ — a tool supporting the good design of workplaces - France..... 268
- 4.9 Methods for authorities’ supervision adapted to MSEs 274
 - Good example 43. OSH labour inspections adjusted for MSEs - Denmark..... 275
 - Good example 44. Coordination between Danish public authorities when inspecting MSEs - Denmark 278

▪ **Good example 41. A tool for the risk assessment and risk management of work-related stress - Italy**

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▪ **Background**

According to the Italian regulatory framework, there is a demand for the assessment of risks associated with work-related stress. The INAIL (Istituto nazionale Assicurazione Infortuni sul Lavoro (Italian workers compensation authority)) has developed a methodology for the assessment of work-related stress as an integrated management risk approach comprising two main assessment phases: a preliminary assessment (using a checklist for measuring objective and observational risk indicators of work-related stress) and an in-depth assessment (using a validated questionnaire to collect employees' perceptions of work-related stress risk factors) (Persechino et al., 2013; Rondinone et al., 2012). The methodology for assessing and managing the risks of work-related stress was made available to anyone wishing to access it by the Department of Occupational Medicine, formerly ISPESL (Istituto superiore per la prevenzione e la sicurezza del lavoro (Superior Institute for Prevention and Safety in the Workplace)), in May 2011. Development of the project is still ongoing. Today, INAIL is the organisation responsible for the method, which is integrated into the experiences of the Interregional Technical Coordination for Prevention in the Workplace and the National Network for the Prevention of Work-related Psychosocial Disorders.

▪ **Target group**

The methodological proposal offered by INAIL is targeted at all organisations who must assess and manage risks associated with work-related stress according to national legal requirements (D.Lgs. 81/08, Art. 29 — procedure of performing the risk assessment). In principle, the target group encompasses all enterprises regardless of sector and size.

▪ **Description of the good example**

The aim of the methodological approach is to provide organisations with a useful guide for assessing and managing risks associated with work-related stress. Reducing stress at work can lead to greater efficiency and improved OSH, with consequent economic and social benefits for companies, workers and society as a whole. This methodology aims to provide a logical path resulting from a thorough and long-lasting research process, providing both employers and health and safety representatives with a 'step-by-step' guide to managing risks associated with work-related stress. It involves the same basic principles and processes as all types of risk assessment covered by the current regulatory framework, through a simple and — at the same time — rigorous approach to the use of validated instruments.

A series of resources and tools accessible to all companies before registration are offered free of charge. All of these network supports (resources and tools) can be used voluntarily in order to check that the company is aware of and is in control of the risks associated with work-related stress. In addition, the risk assessment of work-related stress is required by law, and the methodological process made available by INAIL allows organisations to assess and manage work-related stress, answering to at least the minimum level of implementation of this obligation.

The methodological path consists of a modular approach with different phases and respects the specific differences in enterprises throughout the country; it ensures the minimum level of implementation of the obligation, allowing a scientifically validated full assessment and ensuring coordinated, integrated participation of workers and health and safety representatives. In regard to the assessment phases, the methodology offers a checklist for the preliminary assessment of objective and verifiable indicators of

stress at work. This checklist is effective for all kinds of enterprises irrespective of company size. A questionnaire is provided for in-depth assessment, which is the Italian version of the Indicator Tool developed by the HSE in the United Kingdom.

It is worth noting, however, that no matter the adopted approach or the organisational typology/size, the involvement of all actors must be ensured to enable them to take active part in assessing and managing work-related stress. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy has defined principles on which work-related stress risk assessment relies. One of these is the 'identification of a methodology applicable to all types of organisation.' Furthermore, the Consultative Commission (entity representative of the central government, the regions and the social partners and responsible for development and implementation of preventive and protective measures) indicates that the assessment process must be performed 'not on the single worker but on homogeneous groups of workers ... exposed to the same type of risk, identified independently by the employer depending on each specific organisational structure,' and 'the assessment should cover all female and male workers, including senior management and line managers.' From the above, the only thing to keep in mind is to apply the tool to the same group of workers (i.e. exposed to the same type of risk); however, nothing prevents the tool from being applied to different types of companies without losing quality in the results. This simply comes from the fact that the tool has been tested and validated on a relatively large number of companies regardless of their type and size, thanks to the intrinsic adaptability of the tool in any content and context.

The methodology provided by INAIL is based on the risk management paradigm, which is a dynamic and ongoing process that, starting from the identification and estimation of risk, clarifies the resources, strategies and essential actions needed to correct and prevent risk. This methodology (refer to Ronchetti et al., 2015) consists of four main phases, each essential to arrive at a correct identification and risk management of work-related stress:

1. preparatory phase;
2. preliminary assessment phase;
3. in-depth assessment phase; and
4. interventions planning phase (monitoring and intervention).

Before starting the assessment, it is necessary to actually 'prepare the organisation', which is a key element to other forms of evaluation processes and particularly to the risk assessment of work-related stress. Preparation of organisations is articulated in three different moments: establishment of steering group (this may just involve a couple of people within a rather small organisation); development of communications and employee engagement strategy (again, the 'formal' engagement may significantly vary depending on the size of the company); and development of a risk assessment plan. Therefore, in this 'communicative' phase it is important to provide all the employees — including managers and supervisors — with a proper amount of information. It is noteworthy that this kind of involvement may be easier to achieve in MSEs than in companies with a large number of workers.

To support the work of the steering group, a preliminary assessment tool has been developed. This instrument is a checklist that provides a number of indicators that are subdivided into three different 'categories' (sentinel events (adverse events of particular gravity), work content factors and work context factors), and is the start of the preliminary assessment. The checklist identifies a number of broad parameters that are typical stress indicators with respect to sentinel events, job content factors and job context factors. Employees and their representatives for health and safety should be involved in completing the checklist sections related to job content and context factors to guarantee their active participation and to include several views.

Subject to the obligation expected by the Consultative Commission, to perform the assessment process on homogeneous groups of workers, one or more checklists must be completed, depending on the organisational complexity, taking into account, for example, different organisational partitions and/or homogeneous tasks. In cases of high-risk levels in an identified area, suitable corrective actions are required (for example, organisational, technical, procedural, communication, and training interventions) with respect to those content/context indicators with the highest risk levels. Successively, even through the use of checklists, the effectiveness of implemented actions must be evaluated; if they prove ineffective, an in-depth assessment must be performed.

An in-depth assessment consists of an 'evaluation of the employees' perceptions' aimed at identifying and characterising the risk for work-related stress and its causes. This process goes hand in hand with and integrates the analysis of the indicators conducted in the preliminary assessment but cannot replace it. The in-depth assessment represents a precious opportunity to improve understanding of the health of an organisation and its employees and to better identify risks in those areas (e.g. helping professions, call-centre agents, air-traffic controllers and so on) where, as a result of operational or technical reasons, risk characterisation appears so complex that it cannot be determined only through the use of checklists. The Indicator Tool represents the 'instrument' designed to evaluate workers' perceptions and consists of 35 items measuring *working conditions* that are recognised as potential causes of work-related stress. These working conditions correspond to the six organisational factors of the Management Standards Model. This model covers six key areas of work content and work context, namely demands, control, support, relationships, role and change. *Standard Support* is subdivided into *Manager Support* and *Peer Support*. In each of the standards, the 'what should be happening/states to be achieved' section defines a desirable set of conditions for organisations to work towards. Once data have been recorded, the tool produces a tab and assigns a score and a colour for each of the six management standards. Results offer a comparison with the national cut-off by positioning companies for each of the management standards that identify a level of risk (green and blue = low or moderate risk; yellow = medium risk; red = high risk). The tool may also permit the development of an analytical approach to each standard and gain a better understanding of the risk levels relative to the single items that each standard is made up of in order to optimise the action plan and to schedule time into them.

Focus groups, despite their methodological limitations in MSEs, may help transform the risk assessment findings into programmatic and corrective actions; in fact, focus groups may prove effective in managing those steps where the direct involvement and participation of workers must be guaranteed (e.g. in-depth assessment and/or analysis of results). Focus groups can be particularly helpful in raising specific issues relevant to the organisation and transforming data obtained in the previous phases. Ensuring adequate employee consultation and providing opportunities for employees to directly take part in the process remains essential.

In summary, the tools that comprise the integrated methodological approach that is highlighted in the manual 'Risk Assessment and Management of Work-Related Stress' are:

- *Preliminary assessment checklist.* The assessment management group may use one checklist for the whole company (small enterprises) or one checklist for each homogenous group of workers in larger organisations.
- *Indicator Tool.* This is a useful tool for the in-depth assessment phase. This questionnaire is developed for the evaluation of the subjective perception of workers and is useful for the identification and characterisation of the risk of work-related stress and its causes. It is meant to be applied to homogenous groups, in an effective manner, in all companies with 10 or more workers.
- *Guide to the adaptation methodology of focus groups in the process of the assessment and management of risk associated with work-related stress.* This is a tool for assisting with the management of those passages that require the direct involvement of employees, both during in-depth evaluation and the analysis of the results obtained.
- *Web platform where companies can access the tools and useful documentation through free registration.* Using the web platform, companies can insert data collected through the checklist and questionnaire and draw up a report of the results to insert into the risk assessment document.

The INAIL methodology, including all assessment tools and supporting documentation, is available for free to companies after registering on the INAIL online platform. This platform consists of a real operational web interface, where users can access online tools provided by the methodology (checklist and Indicator Tool), find useful documentation for further study and produce evaluation reports (including identification of the levels of risk). Therefore, by registering for free at the INAIL platform, companies have full access to the resources available in a reserved area useful for processing data collected in the assessment phase.

▪ Results and evidence of impact

The strength of the methodology is that it appears to be a solid and scientifically based tool that can be used in a sustainable manner by companies through the active involvement and participation of all figures of prevention in the company (health and safety manager, occupational health physician, workers' representative for safety). Thanks to the online platform, enterprises can download all necessary and useful documentation, and can have easy access to the use of the assessment tools. The tools are also easy to fill in and they generate reports that help complete the information collected.

The main problem related to the use of the platform is the way in which the methodological approach is implemented. Recent studies have shown that certain aspects of the process, if not implemented by the company, lead to significant differences in results with the possibility of underestimation of risk. These aspects include: employee engagement, carrying out a preparatory phase for organisations and lack of training. However, the INAIL methodology is a good practice for implementing policy at the national level and to explore how to overcome the gap between policy and organisational practice.

Although the Indicator Tool proves to be effective for organisations with 10 or more employees (Rondinone et al., 2012), it may also be used by smaller organisations, taking into consideration the methodological limitations of using a questionnaire on a small number of respondents. The proposal suggests the use of more suitable techniques for collecting data in small enterprises; for instance, focus groups or semi-structured interviews can also host an in-depth discussion on the information collected. Finally, according to the indications of the Consultative Commission, smaller organisations with up to five employers may find it useful to adopt a shared approach to discussion through regular meetings, which is what usually happens.

In regard to scientific evaluation, several studies have been conducted and published by INAIL on their methodology, and many are still in progress. Some of the published studies aim towards an in-depth analysis of both the methodology and the psychometric characteristics of the tools offered. In particular, the factorial structure of the Italian version of the Indicator Tool was tested on 65 Italian organisations (6,378 workers) through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) on the 35-item 7-factor model. The results showed acceptable fit to the data. These findings show that the HSE model adapts satisfactorily when used in a sample of Italian workers (Rondinone et al., 2012).

Recent studies conducted by the Department of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Epidemiology and Hygiene of INAIL are focusing on the contextualisation of the methodology on the basis of specific requirements related to the relevant sector and company size. In particular, as part of the recent project funded by the Ministry of Health, additional tools for the social and health sectors (which are particularly at risk in respect to work-related stress) and for SMEs will be tested in collaboration with the University of Bologna and the University of Verona.

The instrument was also used for the analysis of differences in work conditions and risk levels resulting from work-related stress, as a result of socio-demographic and/or labour market characteristics. Study results showed that the assessment and management of risks associated with work-related stress has to consider — both singularly and in combination — specific socio-demographic and occupational risk factors such as gender and age, educational level and job status, shift work, commuting time, and temporary fixed-term job contracts (Marinaccio et al., 2013).

A recent follow-up study conducted by INAIL on companies that used all the methodological paths constituted by the four phases detailed earlier — (1) the preparatory phase, (2) the preliminary assessment phase, (3) the in-depth assessment phase and (4) the interventions planning phase — explored the usefulness and effectiveness of the methodological approach and tools, and ultimately investigated how the methodological approach was applied (in terms of employee involvement, motivations behind the in-depth evaluation, types of interventions developed and so on) in order to determine which factors contribute to the quality and effectiveness of the results (Di Tecco et al., 2015).

The number of companies registered on the platform that have uploaded the INAIL methodology seems to grow day by day. In May 2016, the usage data of the online platform showed that 7,000 companies had registered, 14,000 had created homogeneous groups, 7,400 had compiled checklists and more than 96,000 had loaded questionnaires. Recently, in order to ensure cleanliness and robustness of the data, a sample of companies was selected to monitor the use of the tools; all incomplete data or data from users who had improperly used the tools (e.g. by inserting more company data using a single account) was excluded. After cleaning up the data, the monitoring sample was as follows: 2,128 companies were

monitored, 5,301 compiled checklists, 66,188 completed questionnaires and 8,793 created homogeneous groups. The majority of the companies came from northern Italy (62 %), with 22 % from central Italy, and the remaining 16 % from the south of Italy and the islands. Concerning company size, 61 % were small companies (fewer than 50 employees), 17 % were medium-sized (between 50 and 249 employees) and 14 % were large (8 % missing data). The productive sectors most represented were manufacturing (18.8 %); professional, scientific, and technical (14 %); health and social work (12.6 %); other activities (10 %); and trade (9.6 %) (C. Di Tecco, INAIL, 28 November 2016, personal communication).

▪ **Learning from weaknesses and failures**

The main problem related to the use of the platform is the way in which the methodological approach is implemented. As reported above, recent studies have shown that certain aspects of the process, if not implemented by the company, lead to significant differences in results with the possibility of incurring an underestimation of the risks. These include employee engagement, carrying out a preparatory phase for the organisation and lack of training. The latter may be even more pronounced in the MSEs, and for this reason INAIL significantly reinforces the need to follow the entire methodological process at all stages. However, it is necessary to continue to increase the awareness level of companies. In addition, the general methodology should be compared with instruments adjusted to the specific requirements of the sector involved (or the type of company). In fact, recent research on INAIL is oriented around these concerns. Nonetheless, the INAIL methodology is a good practice to implement as a policy at the national level towards overcoming the gap between policy and organisational practice.

▪ **The future of the good example**

In the coming year, INAIL will launch a new edition of the methodology manual, which provides an update of both the state of knowledge on the risks associated with work-related stress, and the guidelines to follow for a correct implementation of the evaluation process and risk management through INAIL methodology. In addition, new tools and documents will be continuously published on the platform in line with the obtained evidence.

The recent project that was funded by the Ministry of Health and coordinated by INAIL developed a set of tools to be disseminated to companies, including the electronic factsheet, which is differentiated for each of the main labour sectors:

- banking sector;
- trade/industry large-scale retail trade;
- trade sector (hotel-restaurant-catering);
- education sector;
- manufacturing sector;
- municipal police and private security sector;
- healthcare sector;
- telecommunications;
- transport sector.

▪ **Conclusions**

The INAIL methodology represents a path that, from benchmarking the main European models for the assessment and management of risks associated with work-related stress, gives businesses that need to carry out the assessment of such risks approaches and scientifically robust tools adapted to both national experiences and Italian regulatory requirements. It is a modular course, which requires the active participation of all the prevention stakeholders in the company, and adapts itself to each of the companies that use it, especially for organisations with 10 or more employees, on which the methodology has been validated. In fact, the questionnaire was structured to fit most SMEs, and has been validated scientifically for them (Rondinone et al., 2012). The methodological path and tools are

available to businesses through an online platform with free access after registration. The wealth of data collected through the online platform allows the continuous updating of current research over time. The path is therefore also easy to use and sustainable for small businesses. Studies undertaken by INAIL will also allow the integration of the tools provided with additional tools most suited to the needs of MSEs or the peculiarities of the sector (further data on the number of MSEs that have applied the methodology will be available soon).

One of the strengths of this model is that it can be used by companies in a fully independent way, without using external resources. For this reason, both managers and the persons in charge of prevention within companies take on a central role throughout the methodological procedure. Thanks to the direct involvement of workers in the assessment phases, it is possible to obtain detailed and specific information on risk factors. Therefore, the INAIL methodology represents an integrated approach not only in terms of methodology, but also from a practical/operational point of view (Marinaccio et al., 2013). By combining the points of view of the different company actors (OSH professionals, employers and employees), it is possible to obtain an overview of the problems linked to working conditions, which is mainly useful in identifying appropriate corrective and preventive measures in order to manage the sources of risk.

▪ **Transferability of the results**

As for the transferability to other national contexts, we know that the process is based on reliable scientific experience aimed at testing and validating both the Management Standards Model (illustrated in the introduction) and the tools used all along its phases. The Italian translation, contextualisation and adaptation of the HSE methodology as well as the validation of the Indicator Tool are the result of a long research process involving more than 6,300 workers from all parts of the country, numerous organisations, universities and institutes within the Italian National Health Service.

The INAIL experience can be a guide on how to adapt an existing method (such as the HSE Management Standard) to specific experiences and different national contexts, including the re-adaptation to different regulatory requirements. In fact, the INAIL methodology started from an English model, adopting their philosophy, steps and tools (e.g. Indicator Tool), but has also integrated the model with useful tools that can be moved to different realities (checklists, online platform and identification document of homogeneous groups). Therefore, it is essential to consider the potential of transferring such experience to other countries, even for the utility and ease of use demonstrated by the reported experience of companies.

▪ **References, key literature, web pages and so on**

The current overview has been compiled from web-based sources, drawn up in collaboration with Dr Cristina Di Tecco, PhD (Occupational Psychologist, Department of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Hygiene and Epidemiology, INAIL), who was responsible for the data retrieval, first draft and intermediate revision of the document.

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The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) contributes to making Europe a safer, healthier and more productive place to work. The Agency researches, develops, and distributes reliable, balanced, and impartial safety and health information and organises pan-European awareness raising campaigns. Set up by the European Union in 1994 and based in Bilbao, Spain, the Agency brings together representatives from the European Commission, Member State governments, employers' and workers' organisations, as well as leading experts in each of the EU Member States and beyond.

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