Exploring psychosocial risks in Greek SMEs - A qualitative study

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Psychosocial risks concern aspects of the design and management of work and its social and organizational contexts (Leka, Griffiths, & Cox, 2003). Psychosocial risks are linked to stress, workplace violence and harassment, and they are associated with negative impacts on health and safety outcomes as well as performance and organizational aspects of work (Cox, 1993; McDaid, 2008; Leka, Jain, Cox, & Kortum, 2011).

The societal and economic crisis that burst out in Europe in 2008 and still continues poses an even more important reason for the urgent need to addressing psychosocial risks in the workplace in more broad and deep ways. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs), the backbone of the European economy, face even more difficulties than larger enterprises in terms of tackling these issues (and not only), and should therefore, be considered for priority actions. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) dominate the Greek business economy, accounting for 72% of added value and 86% of employment (European Commission, 2014).

The aim of the study was to explore emergent psychosocial risks in Greek SMEs as well as the opinion of participants regarding obstacles in addressing the psychosocial risks and potential solutions.

Method

Participants and procedure

A purposive sample of participants was recruited from SMEs in the area of Thessaloniki, Greece. Three professional sections were chosen to be included in the study, namely, transportation, private education and tourism. In addition, representatives of working units, consultants and health and safety inspectors related to SMEs in the same professional categories were included. Participants were contacted by phone and an interview or focus groups was scheduled on a time and place convenient for them. Participation in the study was anonymous and voluntary.

All discussions were conducted using a protocol template consisting of questions generated from a literature review on psychosocial risks.

Data analysis

Data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis involved detailed readings of interview transcripts and initial coding was produced. Then, all relevant codes were collated into themes.

Results

Sixteen individual interviews and one focus group were conducted. In the individual interviews 8 women and 8 men participated.

Three people participated in the focus group. The participants of the focus group were all working in the same SME (restaurant). The age of participants ranged from 25 to 73 years.

The following people participated: a health and safety inspector, one representative of the Hellenic Institute of Health and Safety at work, two consultants, three union representatives (private education, tourism, taxi owners), one representative of association of directors of private foreign language schools, one kindergarten teacher, one kindergarten owner and director, one kindergarten psychologist, one bus driver-owner, one owner and director of cargo transportation company, two waiters, and one hotel executive.

Reported psychosocial risks in SMEs

The most frequently reported psychosocial risks included: job insecurity, employability, changes in contract agreements, excessive job demands/ long working hours/ excessive workload, and work-family conflicts.

Other psychosocial risks mentioned included effort reward imbalance, high competitiveness between employees or between SMEs of the same sector that results in excessive pressure in employees for higher performance and a negative working environment.

Participants' major concern was employability due to the financial instability in the country.

> The managers, directors go to the employees and say: "look, some must eventually go." (The employee) has collapsed - not only psychologically, he cannot sleep at night. When you know that tomorrow you are at risk of losing your job, when you know that you cannot get another job, when you are forced to work for 400 or 300 or 500 euros per month, working 10-12 hours per day. These are inhuman job offers... I don't know how others see this...that's the truth (union representative, tourism)

Second, participants reported that recent laws have brought new employment relations and new types of contracts as well as changes in the working conditions. For example unpaid overtime is common and together with exploitation in employment relationships under the premise that "the employee cannot easily leave a job and the employers exploit this situation" cause excessive strain.

Seasonality represents an added risk for private education and tourism employees causing job insecurity and negative employee employer relationships. For example, in private schools it is common that the contracts of the teachers are terminated at the end of the school year (mostly June) leaving them unpaid during the summer and with an insecurity in terms of contract renewal. Equally, in the tourism industry employers are more likely to ignore psychosocial risks and "exploit" the employees given the short time that they hire staff.

On the other hand, employees working in seasonal jobs can also be reluctant in reporting and actively challenge negative working conditions. In the focus groups conducted with employees in a restaurant, they stated that:

> For most of the employees that is a temporary job - they don't invest at work.

This attitude creates a cycle of negative behaviors.

The role of SME owner/ director

The director or owner of the SME was reported as a key person in the prevention or creation of psychosocial hazards at work.

> If the mentality of the employer is rigid, it is very hard to change/ in the best case employers treat employees like rubbish - and they are only thinking of money" (union representative, teachers in private education)

Participants reported that directors/owners could either engender a positive working environment or adopt a focus limited to profit.

> The employer translates many things into money (director of a transportation company)

> They (the owners) don't care about employees because anyway the clients will choose the place regardless the bad service or the bad behavior from the waiters. Only if the owners see that the income is reduced, then they will be interested to look for the causes and for solutions (waiter)

Pressure and negative behavior by the immediate supervisor was reported, especially for the employees of the lower level in hierarchy as an important psychosocial risks.

Legislation regarding psychosocial risks at work and existing inspection bodies

Participants reported the need for strict laws regarding prevention and management of psychosocial risks as the only way to force employers to pay attention in these issues.

> If there was a law that obliges companies to address psychosocial risks, the employers would realize the benefits of preventing these risks and they would be more sensitive (waiter)

According to Greek law, enterprises with more than 50 employees should have an occupational physician. However, the occupational physician tends to spend only few hours per month in each enterprise and as a result psychosocial risks are rarely part of their remit.

Inspection authorities rarely include in their inspection the evaluation of psychosocial risks. Participants viewed the existing laws regarding health and safety as inadequate to prevent and manage psychosocial risks.

> There is awareness regarding the issues, but there is no real interest. There are committees, there are unions, there are occupational physicians in the companies but there are no laws, or the laws that exist are vague. (Health and Safety inspector)

Participants viewed the importance of stricter laws but also penalties in cases of poorly managed psychosocial risks

> More inspections that will last for days so that the inspectors can understand the real situation and there should be fines instead of lawsuits (union representative, tourism)

Obstacles in dealing with psychosocial risks

All participants reported that dealing with psychosocial risks given the current financial situation seems like a luxury for most SMEs.

> Nowadays it seems like a luxury. There are so many financial issues that preventing psychological problems, even though it is essential, seems to be secondary. (director of a kindergarten).

In addition, the failure to link prevention and interventions regarding those issues with a financial benefit makes those issues less attractive for the managers of SMEs. There seems to be fear to speak out, especially among younger employees who are afraid that reporting any negative behaviors exhibited by their employer would create problems in finding a job in the same sector.

As a teacher in private education stated:

> I would not report it (a bad behavior exhibited by the director). I would prefer to leave the job, I wouldn't like to expose them because afterwards I might be on a black list for a future job in another school. (teacher in private

education sector)

Participants reported that the problem of psychosocial risks is compounded by employees feeling that the consequences of risks represent a personal failing and not an organizational or sectorial issue. Another obstacle in seeking help is that mental health issues can be a taboo.

Psychosocial risks are still a taboo in our society - it's hard to go to a psychologist to talk about your problems/ the existing public services are not very good (long waiting lists), they are not able to accept and help everybody. (union representative, teachers in private education).

Suggestions for the future

Interestingly, participants were not aware of the European campaigns regarding awareness of psychosocial hazards at work. This shows that campaigns rarely reach the end users. Participants identified the importance of information and awareness campaigns, however they stressed the importance of them being periodical, on a regular basis and involve all interested parties.

In addition the need for an interdisciplinary collaboration was reported

Collaboration with external professionals - a third person outside of the school can be more objective about the problems, causes and solutions. (director of a kindergarten)

A participant suggested the establishment of a bonus or reward system for companies that actively take steps to deal with psychosocial risks at work.

Some ideas could be: advertise that other companies do similar things, rewards, recognition for dealing with these issues with something similar to ISO or Great Place to Work

badge. (director of a transportation company)

Participants expressed the need to make a clear link between prevention of psychosocial risks at work and well-being/performance.

One size fits all solution to prevent psychosocial risks did not seem to be suitable for any type of SME and an emphasis was given to adapting a prevention or intervention program to the specific characteristics and needs of every SME.

Discussion

The results of the qualitative study showed a high degree of agreement between the examined sectors with regard to the existence of psychosocial risks, their impact on employees and the suggested solutions.

The current financial situation exacerbated the occurrence of psychosocial risks in Greek SMEs. Job insecurity, unemployment, fewer opportunities in the market, working with insurance and with flexible contracts (part time, seasonal work) was mentioned from all participants.

The focus by many employers on profit and not creating a healthy working environment, as well as the limited number of inspections by the responsible bodies were mentioned as important obstacles in recognizing and addressing psychosocial risks in SMEs.

Among the suggested solutions, information and increasing awareness about psychosocial risks was regarded important but not sufficient. Changes in legislation and highlighting the link between profit and employees' wellness for the employers were considered crucial by the participants of this study for successful psychosocial risk prevention.

European studies (e.g. the ESENER study, or PRIMA-EF) have shown that the fulfillment of

legal obligations is one of the most important drivers for occupational safety and psychosocial risk management (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2002; 2007; 2012; Leka et al., 2011).

The results of this study are in agreement with research that indicates that the active participation of all interested stakeholders such as employees, union representatives and public bodies are important for a sustainable outcome (Nielsen, Randall, Holten, & Rial González, 2010)

Further targeting of interventions requires taking into consideration the cultural and legislative context, specificity, and other organizational characteristics (Leka, Jain, Zwetsloot, & Cox, 2010).

Note

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