



An integrated approach to the assessment of work-related stress risk: Comparison of findings from two tools in an Italian methodology



M. Ronchetti*, C. Di Tecco, S. Russo, T. Castaldi, S. Vitali, S. Autieri, A. Valenti, B. Persechino, S. Iavicoli

INAIL Research Area, Department of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Epidemiology and Hygiene, Italy

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: In the past few years much progress has been made in European Union in recognizing the importance of the work-related stress risk, and in adopting specific measures to assess such type of risk. In Italy, the legislative framework on occupational health and safety confirmed the obligation to assess the risk for work-related stress, according to the European Framework Agreement.

Material and methods: The Italian Workers' Compensation Authority developed a methodology for the assessment of work related-stress risk as an integrated management risk approach comprising two main assessment tools: a checklist for measuring objective and observational risk indicators and a validated questionnaire to collect employees' perceptions. This study aimed to explore the convergence degree among the results of the two assessment tools in a sample of 137 companies.

Results: By applying the univariate ANOVA the mean values of the questionnaire were compared to the levels of risk obtained in the preliminary assessment. The analyses highlighted that when the risk is higher in the preliminary assessment, there is an increase in the perceptions of the risk factors. In line with Cohen's methodological guidelines findings revealed moderate values. Finally, the analysis of discrepancies shows a good concordance level among the results of the two assessment phases.

Conclusions: The study highlighted the effectiveness and reliability of the INAIL's methodology. Such process enables companies to use two complementary tools for a more complete definition of the risk factors, in order to develop interventions.

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1. Introduction

Over recent decades, important changes in work organization and management (e.g. outsourcing, intensification of work-related activity, greater job insecurity, ageing workforce, new technologies, etc.) have led to increasing risks in occupational safety and health (OSH) [European Commission, 2002, 2007; Eurofound and EU-OSHA, 2014]. Some of the main challenges to be tackled are psycho-social risks and work-related stress, mainly because they are distributed widely across Europe and have high socio-economic costs for companies and the society at large.

According to the results of the latest pan-European opinion poll on Occupational Safety and Health (OSH), conducted by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA, 2013), 51% of workers reported that work-related stress is common in their workplace and four workers out of ten stated that stress is

not managed adequately within their organization. A recent survey on health and safety at work in Italy (INSuLa) revealed that workers generally feel more exposed to work-related stress risk than to the other risks in the workplace (INAIL, 2014). Beyond the extent of the issue and its detrimental effect on workers' psychological and physical well-being, there is also growing evidence of its impact on companies and society in general. In Europe, the overall cost of mental health disorders, including costs not directly linked to work, are estimated in 240 billion Euros per year, less than the half of which are linked to direct costs, such as medical treatment, while loss of productivity for companies accounts for nearly 136 billion Euros, including days lost for sickness absences (EU-OSHA, 2014).

Over the past few years, significant progress has been made in many European Union Member States in recognizing the importance of psycho-social risks, in particular work-related stress risk, both at policy and implementation levels (e.g. development of policies and legislation, best practice standards, stakeholder agreements towards a common strategy, promotion of social dialogue, dissemination of scientific knowledge on work-related stress and psycho-social factors), which led to the adoption of specific

* Corresponding author at: INAIL – Department of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Epidemiology and Hygiene, Via Fontana Candida, 1, Monte Porzio Catone, Roma, Italy. Tel.: +39 0694181578.

E-mail address: m.ronchetti@inail.it (M. Ronchetti).

measures to evaluate and manage this risk (European Parliament, 2013).

In order to support the prevention of psycho-social risks, the OSH Framework Directive 89/391/EEC adopted the WHO's definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO, 1948).

Starting from the Community Strategy 2002–2006, the European Union set out a global approach to well-being in the workplace, focusing on changes to the labour market and the new and emerging risks, psycho-social risks, in particular.

This interest translated, in 2004, into the European Framework Agreement on work-related stress, signed by the representatives of European social partners. The objective of the agreement is "to provide employers and workers with a framework to identify and prevent or manage problems of work-related stress". Problems of work-related stress are identified in the document, together with several "potential stress indicators", however, there is no proposed model to evaluate the specific risk at work, and the agreement simply specifies that "if a problem of work-related stress is identified, action must be taken to prevent, eliminate or reduce it."

This agreement has had some positive effects, accelerating social dialogue and the development of policies on work-related stress in most countries. About ten years since being signed, the agreement has been implemented, in various ways (European Parliament, 2013), in several European Union countries. One of the subsequent European initiatives was the European Pact for Mental Health and Well-being of 2005 (European Communities, 2005), a Green Paper with the aim of stimulating debate among European institutions, governments, health professionals, stakeholders and the research community on the need for an EU-wide strategy and possible priorities in the prevention of mental health illness. Community Strategy 2007–2012 also supports mental health, specifying that the workplace can be a preferential environment for the prevention of psychological disorders and promotion of better mental health.

At implementation and research levels, a significant number of initiatives have been carried out into stress at work, sometimes within the context of psycho-social risks. The research project entitled Psycho-social Risk Management: European Framework (PRIMA-EF) has produced a range of practical tools and guidelines on how to prevent and manage stress. Under the impulse of this Framework Agreement and in conjunction with actions at policy level, many countries have developed approaches and methods to evaluate and manage work-related stress risk at a national level. Among others are the UK's Health and Safety Executive Management Standards (HSE MS) for work-related stress (Cousins et al., 2004), the Italian methodology to assess and manage work-related stress risk developed by INAIL (Persechino et al., 2013; Rondinone et al., 2012), the Belgian Screening, Observation, Analysis, Expertise (SOBANE) strategy of risk management (Malchaire et al., 2008) and the German Stress-Psychology-Health (START) process (Satzler and Geray, 2006).

In Italy, the legislative framework on OSH, Legislative Decree no. 81/2008, confirmed the obligation of evaluating work-related stress risk, in compliance with the European Framework Agreement of 2004, leaving to the Permanent Consultative Commission for Health and Safety at Work the task of providing the guidelines to evaluate and manage that risk. According to the Consultative Commission's Guidelines, Work-related stress risks should be assessed by employers, in collaboration with OSH professionals and also with employees or their representatives. Such assessment should focus on workers grouped on the basis of similar characteristics (such as their sex, age, nationality, type of contract, or any other working conditions), which identify specific and common risk factor(s) for employees, named homogeneous groups of

workers. The Committee's method consists of two main phases. A first preliminary assessment where objective risk indicators related to work-related stress are assessed by the means of checklists. If no work-related stress risk factors are found in this preliminary assessment, results are entered on the risk evaluation report and a monitoring plan is developed. In the case where some risks factors have emerged from the preliminary assessment, companies must develop appropriate corrective interventions and verify their effectiveness. An in-depth assessment must then follow if such interventions prove to be inadequate (no reduction in risk). In this phase, the workers' perceptions regarding work content and work context factors are assessed through several possible tools, namely questionnaires, focus groups and semi-structured interviews (Persechino et al., 2013).

In line with the Italian regulatory framework, INAIL developed a methodology to assess work related-stress risk, in the form of an integrated approach to risk management 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).

One of the strengths of such methodology is the multi-method approach to assess the risk. While the minimum legal requirements require companies to move to the in-depth phase if, following medium or high-risk results in the preliminary assessment, the corrective measures taken were inefficient, the method prepared by INAIL highlights the importance of both phases in evaluating the risks and/or proposing possible prevention actions in a more complete way, by putting together objective and verifiable data and perceptual information.

The aim of the preliminary assessment is to gather objective and observational data on three main issues: organizational outcomes (e.g. sickness absences, injuries, staff turnover) and data linked to the work context and content (e.g. workload, physical environment, working hours, autonomy), all of which are collected at organizational/group level using a checklist. By observational data, we mean indicators that can be found, verified and backed by supporting documents (e.g. working days over the week, work shifts archive, night work and communications to staff, organizational charts and work cycles, information reports, reports made by workers, etc.).

It was necessary to develop an organizational checklist to meet regulatory requirements and, in part, to fill gaps in other European methodologies, which often made use of self-reporting tools and did include a formal phase of collecting objective and observational indicators without offering a specific tool (e.g. UK HSE MS; Cousins et al., 2004).

A major strength of the in-depth assessment phase is in its use of questionnaires to evaluate work-related stress risk, since, by surveying the workers on risk conditions, this meant, in other words, discovering the views of those best informed and most aware of the specific aspects of their work. However, despite employing measures with clear evidence of construct validity, self-report measures are affected by methodological biases resulting from the use of common methods. The discussion at scientific level of the impact of common method biases on the quality of results goes back to the 1960s (Campbell and Fiske, 1959). Among the main causes of distortion are social desirability, consistency effects, implicit theories, acquiescence and tendency to positive or negative affectivity (Mowday and Sutton, 1993; Podsakoff et al., 2003; Spector, 2006). In addition, whereas data based on self-reports are totally appropriate to measure attitude towards work, for other issues, such as the actual characteristics of the work in question, it is advisable to include other tools (Conway and Lance, 2010).

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