



# Preventing psychosocial risks at work: An evaluation study of labour inspectorate interventions



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## ABSTRACT

Workplace responses to labour inspectorate interventions regarding psychosocial risks at work are not well known. This study aimed to assess the effects of inspection visits at company level. A survey was conducted in two groups of companies. In one group, companies were visited by a labour inspector some days after the survey, and in the other group, not. The survey was repeated one year later in both groups. It relied on a structured phone interview with the person within the company who best knew about occupational health and safety. We collected information about health and safety management, worker participation, as well as ability, willingness and measures for the prevention of psychosocial risks. Two kinds of prevention measures were distinguished: specific psychosocial risk management measures on one side, and more general improvements of working conditions on the other side. 185 companies with an inspection visit and 161 companies without took part in the study. The results were encouraging, since inspected companies improved their management of health and safety, increased their ability in psychosocial issues, and demonstrated a stronger willingness to act. To a lesser extent, they implemented specific psychosocial risk management measures. However, visits did not lead to improvements regarding scores for employee participation or general improvements of working conditions, such as work organisation, working schedules or staffing levels. A further step for regulatory initiatives would be to emphasise more strongly the need for a prevention approach grounded in the assessment and improvement of job designs, content and organisation.

## 1. Introduction

In the last two decades, a growing number of health and safety authorities have developed public policies and programmes to prevent psychosocial risks at work (PSRs) such as occupational stress, burn out, harassment or aggression (Lippel and Quinlan, 2011). These risks have been defined as “those aspects of the design and management of work, and its social and organisational contexts, that have the potential for causing psychological or physical harm” (Cox et al., 2003, p. 195). Several publications have described regulatory interventions aimed at controlling these risks (Leka et al., 2015a; Lippel and Quinlan, 2011; Weissbrodt and Giauque, 2017). Labour inspectorates play a central role in informing, advising and monitoring workplaces. However, due to their complexity, PSRs remain a challenge for companies and regulating bodies, and authors have observed a gap between policy and practice (Bøgehus Rasmussen et al., 2011; Hansen et al., 2015; Leka et al., 2015a; Lippel and Quinlan, 2011). There are indications that

inspectors are quite successful at convincing employers during inspection visits, but that prevention policies have not really improved the psychosocial working environment at a more macro level. A possible explanation might be that inspectors are only able to inspect a fraction of workplaces, and perhaps not the worst ones (Langenhan et al., 2013; Leka et al., 2011; Weissbrodt and Giauque, 2017; Zoni and Lucchini, 2012).

Judgements about the effectiveness of inspection visits in this field have usually relied upon qualitative research or narrative reviews. A recent systematic literature review (Weissbrodt and Giauque, 2017) found no published research measuring labour inspection outcomes – in terms of PSR prevention – in an experimental or quasi-experimental setting. Several authors have encouraged researchers to develop evaluation studies of occupational health and safety (OHS) interventions, in order to provide sound bases for practice, inform the development of standards and regulations, and avoid wasting time and money on ineffective interventions (Landry, 2008; Lindblom and Hansson, 2004;

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Robson et al., 2001; Shannon et al., 1999). As labour inspectorates have limited resources (Weil, 2008), there is a strong demand from regulatory agencies to assess their inspection outcomes. Therefore, a quantitative assessment of inspection effectiveness in improving PSR management at company level would be both innovative and useful for public policy; this was the aim of the study.

## 2. Conceptual model and hypotheses

Science makes the invisible, visible. This catchphrase applies well to evaluation research in occupational health and safety. Indeed, OHS interventions generally do not produce self-explanatory effects. Prevention is much about *avoiding* the occurrence of something visible – an accident, an occupational disease or a work-related health disorder. Tompa et al. (2016) and Robson et al. (2007) have published comprehensive reviews of studies addressing the prevention of workplace injuries through regulatory enforcement or OHS management systems. Some authors, such as Bourbonnais et al. (2011), have also conducted research to evaluate the final impacts of organisational stress prevention programmes, for instance by using self-assessed health questionnaires among employees. However, because of the “wicked” nature of psychosocial risks (Jespersen et al., 2016), it is most difficult to establish causal relationships between interventions and health outcomes. This is especially true for regulatory inspection visits, which occur over a few hours, while organisational stress prevention programmes may last several months.

In this context, Hansen et al. (2015) suggested an “impact ladder” to define the expected outcomes of working environment inspections and to measure their actual achievements. It includes seven steps: (1) changes in knowledge at the workplaces, (2) changes in attitudes, (3) improvements in the enterprises’ working environment efforts, (4) safer production technology and work processes, (5) reduction in exposures, (6) reduction in the rate of accidents and work-related diseases, and (7) improved health. The authors have recommended the labour inspectorates to concentrate their impact measurements on intermediate outcomes (steps 1–5), as the causal relationships at steps 6–7 are very complex. In the same vein, Robson et al. (2001) have explained that safety interventions occur at three levels of a workplace safety system: the organisation of safety management, the technical subsystem and the human sub-system. Regulatory interventions on psychosocial risks can affect these three layers. They can result in formal policies, procedures or structures; in an improved work organisation, design or environment; and in stronger ability, knowledge or motivation among managers and employees.

Because of this multiplicity of outcome levels, developing a conceptual model may help clarify what the intervention is supposed to change, and how (Kompier and Aust, 2016; Robson et al., 2001; Shannon et al., 1999). This study uses a simple model based on a realistic evaluation approach (Pawson, 2006); it is presented in Fig. 1. It focusses on planned proactive company visits by labour inspectors to assess the quality of the workplace OHS management system. This is consistent with the practice observed in advanced liberal economies (Walters et al., 2011). Since the late 1980s, inspectorates have strongly focussed on the monitoring of OHS systems within workplaces. They check if processes are in place to ensure the detection and prevention of occupational hazards; this strategy has shown some success, at least in Nordic countries (Walters et al., 2011). In response to the increasing importance of psychosocial issues, the mainstream approach has been to cover them by broadening the spectrum of regulatory OHS management systems. Indeed, previous research has shown the prevention of PSRs to be closely related to OHS management (EU-OSHA, 2012b; Jain, 2011). Consequently, labour inspectors mostly investigate psychosocial issues by assessing their inclusion in workplace policies and procedures (Toukas et al., 2015). Because of this mechanism of action, one of the expected outcomes of the campaign is a better OHS management. Beside this process approach, literature often describes

“enlightenment” (i.e. educating, advising and persuading) as another generative mechanism (Bøgehus Rasmussen et al., 2011; Quinlan et al., 2009; Saksvik et al., 2007; SLIC, 2012; Walters et al., 2011). There is some evidence of positive results of this approach on employer awareness, documentation of OHS activities, assessment of risk factors, workplace ability to prevent PSRs, and implementation of prevention measures (Hansen et al., 2015; SLIC, 2012; Walters et al., 2011). The conceptual model also suggests an effect of inspection on worker participation. Participation is an important precondition for effective prevention of PSRs (Kompier, 2004; Walters, 2011). OHS management systems must provide consultation and information rights to employees; it belongs to the inspectors’ task to verify that these requirements are met (Walters, 2004).

The model also includes elements of context. According to the realistic evaluation approach, a given programme can generate different results, depending on the circumstances (Pawson and Manzano-Santaella, 2012). Factors interacting with the inspection process may relate to workplace structure. There is a positive relationship between company size and prevention efforts (EU-OSHA, 2012b; Hasle et al., 2014; Jain, 2011; Pinder et al., 2016); besides, manufacturing and construction firms have less developed prevention practices than service companies (EU-OSHA, 2012b). Economic situation at company level could also be of importance; this parameter was kept for exploratory purposes. Other factors relating to the broader context might play a role and are listed in Fig. 1 (Bruhn and Frick, 2011; Hansen et al., 2015; Johnstone et al., 2011; Leka et al., 2015b); they were investigated in other parts of this study, in order to better interpret the results. Based on the model, the following research hypotheses were studied:

- H1. *Inspection visits result in an improvement in OHS management.*
- H2. *Inspection visits increase worker participation within workplaces.*
- H3. *Inspection visits increase employer willingness to prevent PSRs.*
- H4. *Inspection visits increase employer ability to deal with PSRs.*
- H5. *Inspection visits induce firms to implement measures to prevent PSRs.*
- H6. *Inspection visits have most effect in large service companies.*

We tested the hypotheses by means of a quasi-experimental design, described in the next section.

## 3. Study population and methods

### 3.1. Study design and sample selection

From 2014 to 2018, the Swiss cantonal labour inspectorates participated in an inspection campaign on PSRs coordinated by the federal government (State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, SECO). The SECO organised specific training courses for inspectors, produced guidance (brochures, leaflets, website and tools), and participated in several events to heighten awareness among inspectors, employers and OHS specialists. Inspectors were requested to address PSRs during their workplace visits; all branches were concerned, with a special focus on service companies and health care. Based on internal documents of the SECO, Box 1 describes the programme theory (Kompier and Aust, 2016), i.e. the way the campaign was expected to work and produce its outcomes.

A pre- and post-intervention design with a control group was used to assess the outcomes. Two questionnaire surveys were conducted at a one-year interval to compare the evolution of two groups of companies. The intervention group was made up of firms in which labour inspectors conducted a systematic visit. For approximately one year, the inspectors informed the investigators in advance of every planned visit so that the company could be contacted beforehand. The control group was randomly selected from the Swiss business and enterprise register

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