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## Developing a concept for external audits of psychosocial risks in certified occupational health and safety management systems

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### ABSTRACT

Psychosocial risks are closely related to work organization, management and organizational context. Therefore, the nature of psychosocial risks is complex and differs from more traditional OHS risks. The OHSAS 18001 standard explicitly claims to deal with all OHS risks, including psychosocial risks, and the audit is a key element in OHS management systems. However, the literature indicates that audits of psychosocial risk management are difficult and multifaceted, and the available practice excludes psychosocial risks from audits. Based on an analysis of the literature and available methodological approaches, we propose a new conceptual model for audits of psychosocial risk management. The model is grounded in the British “Guidance on the management of psychosocial risks in the workplace” (BSI, 2011), which has recently been developed to remedy the shortcomings of the OHSAS standard. The model builds on an interpretation of audit evidence that includes an integration of general scientific knowledge regarding psychosocial risks with local contextual knowledge. A key tool for the application of the integration is realistic evaluation, which provides the opportunity to assess the link between psychosocial risk management measures and expected outcomes. Another important tool is the qualitative interview, which is the primary method for data collection. The concept has important implications for the dominant audit practice and auditor competencies. It leads to an expanded knowledge base and a broader concept of audit evidence that further presupposes considerable auditor resources, and changes the required knowledge base and skills of auditors.

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### 1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, changes to the world of work have affected workplaces considerably. These changes have resulted in a rise in psychosocial risks associated with the way work is designed, organized, and managed (Cox et al., 2000; EU-OSHA, 2007; Bluff and Gunningham, 2004; Walters et al., 2011). The majority of organizations have difficulty incorporating psychosocial risks into their Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) management practices, and the prevention of psychosocial risks is still challenging to address in workplaces (Leka et al., 2015; Iavicoli et al., 2014; EU-OSHA, 2014; Langenhan et al., 2013). Psychosocial risks at work represent a complex and diverse array of phenomena. They are related to a variety of job and organizational characteris-

tics and working environments, and range from bullying and harassment to an array of organizational risks such as work overload, lack of social support, role ambiguity, and demand control or effort balance (Johnstone et al., 2011; Pejtersen et al., 2010; Cox et al., 2000). Psychosocial risks are acknowledged to be conceptually distinct from other more traditional OHS risks (I-WHO, 2008), and the majority are ‘invisible’, difficult to measure, intangible, multi-causal, subjective, and contextual (Hohnen et al., 2014; Johnstone et al., 2011). Moreover, psychosocial risks are generally considered to be sensitive and related to power, and addressing them directly may be seen as an interference in the employers’ prerogative (Bruhn and Frick, 2011; Walters, 2011). Taken together, psychosocial risks have a strong resemblance to what can be characterized as “wicked problems” (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Jespersen et al., 2016b).

One way of controlling psychosocial risks is through the application of OHS management systems. Such systems can be certified according to the standard OHSAS 18001 (Occupational Health and Safety Assessment Series), which has gained considerable world-

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wide acceptance in the past decades (Frick and Kempa, 2011). The standard implies the option of third party certification, and claims to control all OHS risks, including psychosocial risks (OHSAS 18001, 2008). However, it is reported that the standard does not adequately address psychosocial risk factors at work (Leka et al., 2011; Hohnen and Hasle, 2011; Frick and Kempa, 2011; Abad et al., 2013; Nielsen and Hohnen, 2014; Jespersen et al., 2016a). In practice, the OHSAS 18001 standard narrows the scope of OHS and predominately focuses on technical accident risks, and physical risks (to some extent), while largely neglecting psychosocial risks (Frick, 2004, 2011).

A crucial element of certified OHS management systems is the audit, which is used to review and evaluate the performance and effectiveness of the OHS management system (Robson et al., 2012). It must, in principle, ensure effective control of all OHS risks, comply with national OHS regulations, and show continuous improvement of OHS performance (Frick and Wren, 2000). The audit has an evidence-based approach (ISO 19011, 2011), and auditors must collect evidential material that is sufficient to make valid and reliable judgments about the implementation and effectiveness of the OHS management system (Robson and Bigelow, 2010). However, it is not made clear how an evidence-based approach should be understood within the audit context. This has implications for the effectiveness of certified OHS management systems auditing. The present audit practice tends to focus on objectively measurable and directly observable issues, thus leading to a bias towards safety and traditional OHS risks wherein compliance can be objectified. Consequently, psychosocial risk factors tend to be excluded (Hohnen and Hasle, 2011, 2016; Hohnen et al., 2014; Hasle et al., 2014a; Jespersen et al., 2014, 2016a).

To the best of our knowledge, research concerning psychosocial risk management audit tools is limited to a recent study on developing and testing an internal audit tool in the oil and gas industry (Bergh et al., in press). While it is a quite comprehensive tool for use in internal audits, and it may be too extensive for external auditors to apply. Thus, there is a need for audit methods that can cover psychosocial risks in an adequate manner. The aim of this article is to develop a concept for an audit methodology that is able to capture the special character of psychosocial risk management. In order to do so, we have analyzed the present shortcomings of audits as well as the requirements for audits encompassing the relevant standards. We have therefore based the development of the concept on an integration of three separate analyses:

- The requirements for qualified audits as outlined in the OHS management standard OHSAS 18001, the guidance PAS 1010, and the ISO 19011 standard about the general audit principles.
- The challenges for audits of psychosocial risks where we use the concept of wicked problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Jespersen et al., 2016b) as an important point of departure for understanding the special nature of psychosocial risks.
- Expansion of the audit knowledge base with data collection and assessment methods that are suitable for psychosocial risks. This builds on recognized methods such as realist evaluation (Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Kazi, 2003) and qualitative interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008) as well as an expansion of the auditor competencies.

We use these three analyses to suggest the basic audit principles for psychosocial risks and to discuss the implications for auditor competencies. The article contributes by providing the first example of a potential way to carry out audits, one that is able to capture the special nature of psychosocial risks, thereby increasing the likelihood that these risks are integrated in certified OHS management systems.

The structure of the article is as follows. This introduction is followed by a presentation of the management systems standards OHSAS 18001 and PAS 1010 and an analysis of the key principles in auditing management systems. We then analyze the challenges of addressing psychosocial risk management within the established audit discourse based on findings from empirical case studies of certified OHS management systems in Denmark. This is followed by a discussion of available methods for audits of psychosocial risks. Subsequently, we merge these analyses into a general concept, which can handle the soft, invisible, and contextualized OHS risks. Finally, we discuss auditor competencies, and the challenges in applying our proposed conceptual model in audit practice.

## 2. OHS management systems standards and psychosocial risks

The OHSAS 18001 standard specifies requirements for OHS management systems in order to enable organizations to develop objectives and to achieve those objectives by controlling all their OHS risks, including psychosocial risks (Robson et al., 2007; OHSAS 18001, 2008). Managing OHS risks to the OHSAS standard is described as a systematic evidence-based problem-solving strategy (Leka and Cox, 2010). Systematic management of OHS risks is inevitably directed by evidence claims that determine the causes and effects. Renn (2008) categorized risks as linear or simple, complex, uncertain, or ambiguous, working with different approaches for risk management depending on the characteristics of the risk. However, the OHSAS standard does not distinguish between different types of OHS risks and it appears as if OHSAS 18001 treats psychosocial risks as linear or tame problems that can be identified and solved in the same mono-causal and technical-rational approach as that used for simple, visible, and tangible risks (Jespersen et al., 2016b). This approach in the standard may be one of the reasons for not adequately addressing psychosocial risk (Leka et al., 2011; Hohnen and Hasle, 2011; Frick and Kempa, 2011; Abad et al., 2013; Nielsen and Hohnen, 2014; Jespersen et al., 2016a). The importance of building on characteristics of psychosocial risks for the selection of the risk management approach (I-WHO, 2008; Leka et al., 2008, 2011) is reflected in the “Guidance on the management of psychosocial risks in the workplace”, Publicly Available Specification 1010 (PAS 1010). This standard, which has recently been published by the British Standard Institute (BSI, 2011), is expected to help solve the special problems of psychosocial risk management. A similar Canadian standard (CSA Group and BNQ, 2013), has also been published.

### 2.1. PAS 1010

The management paradigm in PAS 1010 (BSI, 2011) is explicitly directed towards psychosocial risks. PAS 1010 is, as with OHSAS 18001, based on the PDCA model. The difference is that PAS 1010 distinguishes between different types of OHS risks, such as psychosocial risks, which are acknowledged to be of a qualitatively different nature than more traditional OHS risks. Psychosocial risks are understood as complex and multi-causal. Because understanding the specific context is necessary to assess psychosocial hazards and the risks they may pose, they cannot be managed in an objective and technical manner (Leka et al., 2008; I-WHO, 2008; BSI, 2011). Furthermore, the OHS scope is broader in PAS 1010 because it includes work organization and management as risk factors. It also applies a dynamic organizational perspective, as psychosocial risks are frequently directly related to changes in work that are continually taking place (I-WHO, 2008).

Another important difference between OHSAS 18001 and PAS 1010 is the level of employee participation. PAS 1010 includes a

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