



# Occupational health and safety in the framework of corporate social responsibility

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## ABSTRACT

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has been defined as the voluntary integration of social and environmental concerns into the firm's decision-making. The search for a good Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) environment and the promotion of a culture of risk prevention are two of the firm's main social responsibilities, and consequently an integral part of CSR. This paper discusses how the growing interest in corporate social responsibility can contribute to improving the implementation of adequate systems of prevention. For this purpose, we study to what extent OHS issues are present in the field of CSR, and consequently determine which aspects have received the most attention, and which are less well developed; we offer some proposals as well. The methodology followed is a content analysis of the main international CSR management tools.

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## 1. Introduction

Society is currently witnessing a very intense development of initiatives aiming to boost and promote Corporate Social Responsibility (henceforth, CSR), which means the voluntary integration of social and environmental concerns into the firm's decision-making (European Commission, 2001, 2002, 2006). To be socially responsible means to think beyond just complying with the law, by investing in human capital and managing relationships with the social stakeholders that are affected by the consequences of the firm's decisions.

There is little doubt that the search for a good Occupational Health and Safety (henceforth, OHS) environment and the promotion of a culture of risk prevention are two of the firm's main social responsibilities, and hence an integral part of CSR (Swoden and Sunil, 2005).

In Europe, a considerable amount of legislation in the area of workplace accident prevention is in place, but companies differ greatly in their level of compliance. This problem generates impor-

tant social concern.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, different protagonists in prevention issues are exchanging accusations and attributions of blame. To date, the strategy based on extensive legislation does not appear to have led to the results expected. Implementing strategies that promote a preventive culture seems to be an urgent task.

Transcending the opposing positions in the OHS debate, is it possible to re-position the problem of accident prevention in another framework that is richer in ideas and strategies? Could the CSR approach, with its basic concepts of volunteerism, inclusiveness of stakeholders and new management tools, provide a possible framework that encourages compliance with the law and allows firms to go beyond that minimum requirement?

The current article aims to address these questions. For this purpose, the work starts from a qualitative study on the presence of OHS issues in the main CSR management tools. On the basis of the conclusions drawn from this analysis, there is a discussion on the potential role of CSR in promoting a culture of safe and healthy work.

<sup>3</sup> In January 2007, one Spanish newspaper published the following editorial: *There is no more persistent social problem in Spain than workplace accidents. Spain's level of deaths and injuries in the workplace remains shamefully higher than that of other European labour markets. Last year 977 workers died, just 13 less than in 2005, and there were more than 937 000 cases of sick leave due to this type of accident according to the trade union Comisiones Obreras. This curse is well known and has been much regretted for decades, but the loss of human lives grows unceasingly. The work safety measures and regulations that all governments introduce in the Spanish Official Gazette do not appear to be having any effect. In order to solve such a social problem it must be confronted as a national problem. ...*

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## 2. Occupational Health and Safety and its link with Corporate Social Responsibility

Work fulfils an essential function in our lives, since we usually spend an average of eight hours a day in the workplace. Thus, labour environments should be safe and healthy, something that is very often not the case for far too many workers. Every day turns up many examples of workers all around the world exposed to risks to their health, including dust, dangerous fumes, noise, vibrations and extreme temperatures. Unfortunately, some employers are not really concerned about the protection of their employees' occupational health and safety, and even worse, some employers do not even realise that they have the moral, and often legal, responsibility to protect their employees.

Occupational health and safety is a broad discipline that concerns (Reese, 2003; Erickson, 1996):

- the promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of physical, mental and social well-being of workers,
- the prevention of departures from health caused by working conditions,
- the protection of workers from risks adverse to health,
- the adaptation of the occupational environment to the physiological and psychological capabilities of workers.

In summary, OHS covers the social, mental and physical well-being of workers.

There is no doubt that concern for the well-being of employees should constitute one of the main aspects in any firm's corporate social responsibility. The expression "Corporate Social Responsibility" (CSR) – ignoring diverse interpretations, contents or conceptions for the moment – clearly reflects, considering the words that form it, the demands that society or people make towards the firm as a social institution. These demands become expectations that individuals as a group expect the firm to satisfy in a particular social model, including not only the creation and distribution of wealth from a purely economic perspective, but also the contribution to resolving any social problems that emerge (Wheeler and Sillanpää, 1997; Argandoña, 1998; Araque and Montero, 2006). The concept of CSR has evolved over time (Carroll, 1999), becoming richer as academics and practitioners have shown growing interest in the field. There has been evidence of companies' commitment to society since over three centuries ago (Steiner and Steiner, 2000, p.121). But it has been in the 20th century when formal studies of this issue have appeared in large numbers (Araque and Montero, op. cit. pp. 22–25), particularly by US authors (Carroll, op. cit.).

Within the field of prevention, CSR can be conceived as a voluntary commitment whose objectives and actions must always be directed beyond the minimal levels of worker protection laid down by national and European legislation. This means both ensuring that employees benefit from higher standards of occupational health and safety than required by the law, and also taking into account external implications, like the application in the workplace of health, safety and welfare criteria in the recruitment of sub-contractors or in the process of commercialising goods and services.

CSR can provide the framework to connect occupational health, safety and welfare to other relevant aspects like (Bestratén and Pujol, 2004; Boix et al., 2006; Segal et al., 2003):

- Human resources.
- Balance between work and family life.
- Other fundamental rights.
- Environmental issues.
- Safety and public health (including product safety).
- Profitability and productivity.

The need to harmonise instruments, methods and vocabulary is one of the most important questions at first. OHS and CSR executives need to speak the same management language, and one way to do this is to make the role of OHS explicit within CSR (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2004a). The current study aims to discuss this question.

CSR can be seen as an opportunity to integrate OHS aspects into a broader framework (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2004b), or in other words, as an opportunity to address OHS questions beyond, and on the basis of, compliance with the legislation. Also, and as we discuss later, CSR may make the relation between the firm's social concern and its reputation in the market more evident. OHS practitioners are launching initiatives aimed at presenting the firm's actions in a positive light (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2002), but CSR can show how best to capitalise on these actions ("learning" effect). CSR allows business to deeply commit itself to workplace health, safety and welfare. This, however, also means carefully following a path towards consolidating the achievements of CSR and OHS while avoiding the risk of overwhelming management with yet another new priority.

In order to effectively determine how OHS could potentially develop under the influence of CSR, it is necessary to analyse the presence of OHS in CSR nowadays. Thus, we decided that the best way to approach the CSR reality was to review its instruments.

## 3. OHS in CSR Management Instruments

If there has been a single constant concern in CSR, it has been the question of how to convert an idea into something that can be managed (Moore, 1999, p. 117), and so guide firms about how to integrate it into their management. In this sense, we have seen the development of a great number of instruments for managers, from principles and codes to indicators and processes.

The research methodology is based on an analysis of secondary information sources. More specifically, we made a textual analysis (content analysis) of diverse documents from different European CSR initiatives. Fig. 1 illustrates the methodology followed.

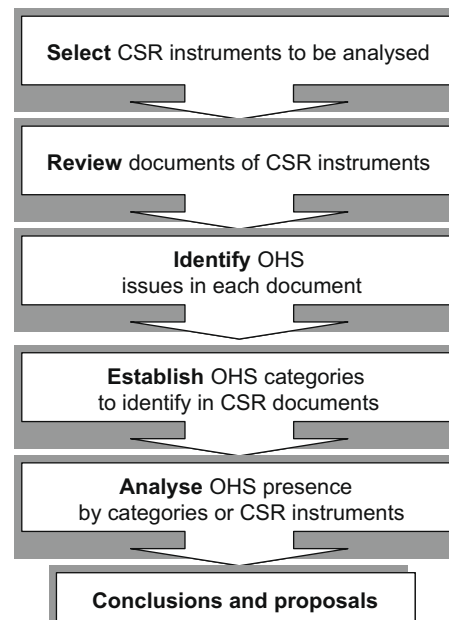


Fig. 1. Methodology.

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