



OHS management and employers' perception: differences by firm size in a large Italian company survey



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The Italian Workers' Compensation Authority (INAIL) carried out a national survey to investigate the employer's perception and awareness about Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) implementation. The aim of this study is to point out if there is any difference in employer's perceptions on OHS management with respect to different firms sizes. **Methods:** The study has been conducted on a sample of 1010 employers. All measures were self-reported through a computer-assisted-telephone-interview (CATI). **Results:** Employers of microenterprises resulted less persuaded of the usefulness of occupational risk assessment and management activities. Employers of microenterprises more often perceived OHS as a law duty than an added value if compared with large ones (OR = 7.09, CI 95%: 1.80–27.95). About 56% of employers in our sample found the levels of OHS increased after the enforcement of Legislative Decree n. 81/2008, even if micro and small businesses more frequently than others reported it to be unchanged (OR = 2.07, CI 95%: 1.19–3.58). **Conclusions:** These findings may drive policy implementation at national level in order to improve OSH in SMEs, taking into account their structural, economic and productive characteristics.

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1. Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), defined as enterprises which employ less than 250 people (Commission Recommendation 2003/361/EC) representing 99.8% of all businesses and almost one third (66.8%) of the entire workforce in European Union (EU). Up to 99.9% firms in Italy are SMEs, most of which (94.6%) fall within the “micro” size category, employing 80.4% of the workforce and accounting for 67% of the national added value, among the highest proportions in EU (OECD, 2014). Despite their economic and social relevance, SMEs have received little attention from Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) research in most countries. However, in the last decades, a growing interest was shown by policy makers and scientists in identifying critical OHS issues in SMEs (Targoutzidis et al., 2014). At EU level, interventions have been focused on relaxing requirements and promoting OHS, mainly through the involvement of social partners, including their participation in consultative committees on OHS policies, and national agencies (Eurofound, 2010).

These efforts are warranted in light of evidences showing that small enterprises have higher frequency and magnitude of work accidents (Fabiano et al., 2004) and poorer level of OHS performance (Sørensen et al., 2007; Hasle and Limborg, 2006; Champoux and Brun, 2003) with respect to medium and large sized firms. The European Commission estimated that 82% of occupational injuries and 90% of fatal accidents occur in SMEs (EC, 2004); the impact of work accidents is likely more disruptive for this kind of businesses too (HSE, 2005). Poor OHS levels in SMEs are commonly attributed to fewer economical and human resources, making it difficult for small businesses to comply with mandatory OHS requirements (Cagno et al., 2011). Nevertheless few studies have investigated the effects of OHS legislation implementation on small and even more on microbusinesses, having the latter also been excluded from previous large European surveys (Eurofound, 2015; EU-OSHA, 2010). Awareness of this pitfall made the recently concluded second European enterprise survey on new and emerging risks (ESENER) extend its sampling population to businesses with 5–10 employees (EU-OSHA, 2015).

Other factors contributing to disparities in OHS management between small and medium-large firms have been suggested, such as a weaker management commitment to OHS (Park et al., 2013; Cagno et al., 2011; Eakin, 1992), especially when the owner/

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employer acts also as OHS manager (Hasle and Limborg, 2006; Barbeau et al., 2004), a lower attitude to risk analysis, inspection and audit (Gardner et al., 1999), and a tendency to adopt non-systematic and informal OHS systems and human resource practices by small businesses employers (Arocena and Núñez, 2010; Hasle et al., 2009; Sorensen et al., 2007; Champoux and Brun, 2003). Small businesses are less likely to invest in health promotion and have less awareness about the usefulness of monitoring injuries or absences from work (Niskanen et al., 2012) and assessing costs of OHS (Cagno et al., 2013; Haslam et al., 2010). Owners with higher attitudes toward OHS could be more willing to conduct industrial accident prevention programs (Park et al., 2013) and to believe that improving workplace health and safety will increase workers' wellbeing and productivity and reduce workers' compensation costs (Brosseau and Li, 2005). It hasn't been fully investigated whether the lack of time and in-house expertise, as well as production pressure could enhance stressful workload for employers. Furthermore, specific risk assessment tools and simplified procedures are not completely tailored for small enterprises yet, while effectiveness of interventions based on training and safety audits or on behavioral approach is poorly documented (Breslin et al., 2010).

A secondary analysis of the first ESENER highlighted that a number of factors, including firm size, influence the performance of OHS management systems and that the gap between small-medium and large size enterprises differs across European countries (Stolk and Cockburn, 2012).

In Italy, the Legislative Decree No. 81/2008 and its subsequent amendments, acting a comprehensive restructuring of previous OHS laws in compliance with EU directives and agreements, led to an increase in the number of mandatory requirements and to greater complexity of OHS management procedures and practices for employers. Even if few exceptions are provided for some specific sectors, workers' categories and micro and small enterprises, most of the employers have the same OHS obligations regardless of the enterprise size. As in the previous national OSH legislation, the employer keeps the option to take on the role and functions of Health and Safety Manager in his enterprise, with some limitations related to sector, number of employees and hazardous activities. Legislative Decree No.81/2008 introduced also standardized procedures for risk assessment¹ in enterprises up to 10 employees and defined the minimum contents of workers' OSH training² by risk category, as identified for different economic sectors.

Taking into consideration the continuous changes in the world of work subsequent to recent economic crisis, the Italian Workers' Compensation Authority (INAIL) carried out a national survey in the framework of INSuLa Project (Rondinone et al., 2014; Gagliardi et al., 2014) to investigate the perception of OHS risks and the levels of awareness among all the figures involved in the OHS system, in the context of Legislative Decree N. 81/2008 implementation into practice. This project was aimed at providing useful data for the development of prevention tools tailored on the needs of the OHS system key players and at contributing to build up a periodic National surveying system to assess their needs, in line with the changing working conditions. In particular, the survey's focus on employers was structured to investigate their perception and awareness about OHS issues in the context of Legislative Decree N. 81/2008 implementation (Gagliardi et al., 2014). The

present paper focuses on the secondary analysis of constraints and needs of the employers, as the main responsible of the application of law duties and of workers' safety and health at company level. In particular, the aim is to investigate if there is any difference in employer's perception on OHS management with respect to business size.

2. Materials and methods

The survey has been conducted on a total population of 5340 firms extracted from the archive of the companies insured with INAIL, updated to 2011 and stratified by economic activity sector, firm size and geographical area (Gagliardi et al., 2014). The economic activity sector was coded by NACE Rev. 1.1. According to the number of employees, the firms were classified in micro (1–9), small (10–49), medium (50–249) or large (250 and over). Each firm was assigned to the geographical area where the production unit was located: North, Centre and South and Islands. Since no experimental procedure was conducted on study participants, ethical approval was not required (Italian Legislative Decree n. 211 of 24 June 2003).

After an analysis of background literature and a benchmarking of the main European surveys on the investigated dimensions, an *ad hoc* questionnaire was developed. The contents were discussed with and approved by social parties. The final questionnaire consisted of a section on socio-demographic and firm characteristics (age, gender, educational level, nationality, role seniority, economic activity sector, firm size, geographical area and Role of Responsible of Protective and Preventive Service) and 42 items structured in the following sections: Risk assessment and management; Workers' health surveillance; Annual safety meeting and workers' consultation; Inspection activity; Personal OHS education; Workers' education; Concerns and needs; OHS players; Safety culture. The questionnaire included dichotomic, Likert scale and nominal/ordinal items. The items concerning barriers, drivers and reasons for addressing OHS issues were retrieved from the first ESENER Survey Questionnaire and adapted to the Italian context (EU-OSHA, 2010).

Employers were interviewed through Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI), one of the most commonly used methodology in public health surveys, also thanks to its cost effectiveness (Choi, 2004).

Interviewers were informed about the survey's objectives and methods and were specifically trained for the questionnaire administration. They were coordinated by internal supervisors across the surveying campaign; at the end of the working day, de-briefing meetings were made in order to discuss and solve any potential problem.

A pilot study was carried out in July 2013, with the aim of measuring the questionnaire duration, verifying items' complexity and understandability, assessing the logical flow of questions and evaluating the adhesion rate. The final survey was completed in November 2013.

Firms were sampled using a web-based platform, starting from a list ordered by the three stratification variables and structured in groups of 5 names (1 base name and 4 in reserve) up to the goal of 1000 interviews. Telephone numbers were withdrawn only after a four-time recalling in different hours of the day. Before starting the interview, the employers were given information on methods and objectives of the survey and asked for informed consent to participate.

Descriptive statistics were performed for all the variables. In particular, for items with 5 or 10 Likert scale the overall unadjusted mean was calculated. All analyses were made after applying a weighting variable accounting for population distribution by

¹ Detailed guidelines, including forms to be filled in and containing the minimum requirements for risk assessment that shall be applied in enterprises up to 10 workers and could be partially used in enterprises up to 50 workers.

² Minimum contents of mandatory OSH training courses for workers have been divided into three risk categories (High, Medium and Low), based on NACE classification sectors. The minimum duration of training courses is 16 h for workers employed in High risk enterprises, 12 h for workers employed in Medium risk enterprises and 8 h for workers employed in Low risk enterprises.

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