

## MANAGING PSYCHOSOCIAL RISKS WITH CLEANING WORKERS

### Introduction

Psychosocial risk factors for professional cleaning workers are many and varied. Psychosocial risks include any psychological and social factors that can affect people's health and well-being, such as stress, violence and bullying.

The Agency website<sup>1</sup> provides a lot of information on the subject. It defines psychosocial issues as:

1. **Work-related stress:** experienced when the demands of the work environment exceed the worker's ability to cope with (or control) them. It can lead to mental and physical ill health. Work-related stress is a symptom of an organisational problem that can arise as a result of unsocial working hours, monotonous tasks and time pressure, to list just a few factors.
2. **Violence at work:** any incident where people are abused, threatened or assaulted at work, and which endangers their safety, health, well-being, or work performance. It covers insults, threats, or physical or psychological aggression exerted by people from outside the organisation against a person at work.
3. **Bullying:** repeated, unreasonable behaviour directed towards an employee or group of employees that creates a risk to health and safety. Note that bullying is "internal" (i.e. from someone within an organisation) and violence is "external".

Research shows that psychosocial health and dissatisfaction with work are influenced by the type and demands of the work. They are also influenced by the availability of resources to deal with such demands successfully. Important resources for well-being and satisfaction at work are, for example, the freedom to plan and organise the work, to be informed and to be able to use sources of social support (such as help and support from colleagues, family and friends) if necessary, as well as respectful relationships and recognition at work. Professional cleaning workers are often ignored and treated with a lack of respect and recognition for their work. When analysing psychosocial risks faced by cleaning workers it must be taken into account that cleaning work is mainly done by women, with a relatively high proportion of older women and immigrants. Difficulties because of language barriers for immigrant workers and harassment at work for female workers make the situation more complicated.

This e-fact focuses on ways to manage psychosocial risks for cleaning workers, including contract cleaners; office, school, hospital and catering cleaners; hotel cleaners / maids; domestic cleaners (those employed by agencies and sent to homes); and day-to-day cleaning in industry. It describes the psychosocial risk factors that workers can experience in their everyday work, outcomes for their health and well-being, and ways of managing these risks.

### Statistics

Professional cleaning is one of the most common occupations in the European Union. Cleaning is a common task – it is carried out in all industry groups and all workplaces. Because cleaning workers are not presented as a separate occupational group in EU

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<sup>1</sup> [http://osha.europa.eu/good\\_practice/risks/stress](http://osha.europa.eu/good_practice/risks/stress)

statistics or in the European Working Conditions Survey, it is difficult to determine their numbers.

In 2006, it was estimated that cleaning contractors employed more than 3.5 million employees in Europe.<sup>2</sup> Over the past ten years, the number of employees in the sector has grown continuously. Between 1989 and 2006 employment grew by an average of almost 5.6% annually (EFCI, 2008). However, any estimate of the number of cleaning workers is likely to be an underestimate, as many cleaning workers are not registered as “professional cleaners”.

In 2006 there were nearly 130,000 companies in the sector, of which more than 88% had fewer than 50 employees and about 73% fewer than 10 employees (EFCI, 2008). About 70% of the employees in the sector work part-time, doing an average of 23 hours per week.

Two important characteristics of the cleaning sector are, first, the preponderance of females (76%) in the workforce, and second, as various studies of different European countries indicate, that a high percentage of the workers are ageing workers (EU-OSHA, 2009).

In addition, a high proportion of workers in the cleaning sector are immigrants (30% on average, reaching 67% in Austria). The real percentage of immigrant workers is estimated to be even higher, because some countries do not register the ethnic origin of workers but only their nationality (EFCI, 2008).

In 2006, the cleaning sector generated a turnover of EUR 54.4 billion. The sector has recorded almost continuous growth since 1989 (EFCI, 2008).

Although office cleaning represents the largest part of the market in Europe, other activities have become more and more common: industrial cleaning (including the hygiene of food chains), specialised cleaning services (hospital cleaning, cleaning specific rooms, etc.), cleaning of public transport, cleaning of schools, etc., now represents almost half of the sector's turnover (47%) (EFCI, 2008).

## Legislation

The Council Directive 89/391/EEC of 12 June 1989, on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work, is often referred to as the “Framework Directive”. This directive, transposed into law in all Member States, has a number of key requirements (mainly concerning risk assessment and employee involvement) which also apply to cleaning workers:

- Employers must assess all the risks to workers' health and safety. In the light of the results obtained from this assessment, employers must take any measures needed to prevent occupational risks.
- Every employer has to ensure the health and safety of workers in every aspect related to the work.
- Employees are entitled to be consulted by their employer.
- Workers are entitled to receive adequate and specialised training in matters relating to health and safety.
- In a situation of serious and immediate danger which cannot be averted, workers may stop work and leave their workplace.
- Employees are also responsible for cooperation on OSH issues and compliance with such measures.

Action against work-related stress (WRS) should consist of:

- aiming to prevent WRS;

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<sup>2</sup> Numbers taken from the EFCI survey 2008. They cover the following countries: AT, BE, CH, CZ, DE, ES, FI, FR, HU, IT, LU, NO, NL, PL, PT, SI, SK, SE and UK

- assessing the risks of WRS;
- taking action to prevent the harm;
- having systems in place to deal with occurrences of WRS-related issues.

When taking action, ALL workers should be considered, including:

- part-time workers;
- shift workers;
- temporary workers;
- women and men;
- workers with disabilities;
- older and young workers.

The Framework Directive 89/391/EEC states that the employer's duty is "to ensure the health and safety of workers in every aspect related to the work". Work-related stress is a problem with many facets, which can be related to organisational, physical or social characteristics of the work and the work environment. It is therefore necessary to assess all aspects of work that can impact on the experience of stress, including characteristics as diverse as the work equipment, the physical environment, and the social environment.

Relevant directives exist on workplaces, carcinogens, biological agents, chemical agents, manual handling, work equipment and personal protective equipment. Employers and risk managers ought to be aware of these in order to be able to assess and manage work-related stress comprehensively and successfully.

With regard to pregnant workers the Council Directive 92/85/EEC sets special rules of protection: pregnant workers cannot be obliged to do night work during pregnancy and after childbirth. Furthermore they have to be protected against working postures that may lead to mental and physical fatigue.

Young workers under 18 are subject to the rules of Council Directive 94/33/EC, which establishes special rules for work scheduling and night work.

Finally, the framework agreement on harassment and violence at work from April 2007 should be mentioned. This aims to increase the awareness and understanding of workplace harassment and violence and to provide employers, workers and their representatives with a framework to identify, prevent and manage problems of harassment and violence at work.

## Psychosocial risk factors

Psychosocial risks for professional cleaning workers can be affected by two factors: the actual demands of their work, including influences of the social working environment, and the availability or lack of resources to deal with these demands successfully. Resources can help people find solutions to work problems, and also help fulfil individual psychological needs that give rise to job satisfaction (Krüger et al., 1997) and well-being (such as a sense of achievement, reward and appreciation).

Psychosocial issues at work that can affect health and well-being include hazards and demands such as:

- little influence on working conditions (about one in two cleaners state that they have little or no opportunity to influence their work arrangements, work pace, tools, the division of labour or choice of work partner; Krüger et al., 1997);
- no influence on the order in which work tasks are performed; lack of control over work conditions (Zock, 2005);
- a lack of information and involvement in wider issues affecting the organisation and their job;
- a lack of social support from managers;

- a lack of help from co-workers in view of the fact that many cleaners work alone;
- limited possibilities to develop professionally. Almost all the cleaners interviewed by Krüger et al. (1997) stated that they had no opportunities to develop in their professional career;
- a lack of respect and recognition from managers and other professionals;
- a lack of positive evaluation or feedback on their work;
- poor wages;
- shift work, early or late working times;
- isolated work locations;
- time pressure, especially the need to do physically hard work in a short space of time;
- monotonous and repetitive tasks giving rise to physical strain on one side or part of the body; awkward postures at work;
- fixed work schedules and methods; no freedom to make decisions;
- unexpected situations at work such as occupied offices, running out of cleaning equipment or having no access to a room that was planned to be cleaned;
- language and communication problems for some immigrant workers;
- bullying and discriminatory comments made by people;
- increased risk of harassment and violence at work; in Europe, work-related violence has been recognised as a growing problem, however, the full extent of the problem is not well known especially among women; risks caused by commuting to the work location at night; the risk of violence at work is higher when an employee is working alone and at night, etc.;
- harassment at work: sexual harassment, racist remarks and other forms of harassment at work exist in all European countries. However, because of victims' fears of losing their job and other consequences, these problems are often not reported nor addressed;
- bullying and discrimination: while in the US lawsuits over bullying and discrimination are becoming more common, such cases have been rare so far in Europe. Nevertheless, the employer should implement measures to prevent bullying and discrimination;
- possible problems based on combining the demands of work and family life;
- contradictory demands at work and a lack of transparency in the decision-making process related to work tasks, schedules or organisation;
- poor management style; not including the employees in decision making, lack of communication;
- high (unrealistic) demands in terms of the quality of work and the workload, especially when there is no support.

Most of the time, organisations and workers are flexible and creative enough to deal with these demands (or possible hazards) successfully. Often, however, the resources to balance these demands are lacking. In situations where hazards are not managed successfully or where individuals do not have the resources to deal with these issues, these demands or hazards can pose risks to the health, well-being and safety of workers and the workplaces or organisations. As the relevant legislation states, it is the employer's responsibility to make sure (1) that work is organised in a way that does not make excessive demands on the workers and (2) that workers are given the necessary resources to deal with these demands.

## Up-to-date scientific knowledge

The psychosocial hazards faced by cleaning workers are many. However, most studies have only focused on the ergonomic and chemical hazards of cleaning work. Few studies have looked at psychosocial risks, such as stress, violence or bullying (Gamperiene et al., 2006).

This may be because of the high turnover of employees and the difficulty of doing research in this occupational sector (Gamperiene et al., 2006).

Exposure to psychosocial risks can give rise to work-related ill-health which, in turn, can increase absence rates: in the European workforce, more than a quarter of absences from work lasting two weeks or more are due to stress at work and related health problems (Eurostat, 2001, includes EU15). Exposure to psychosocial risks leads to above-average levels of work-related sick leave; in particular, exposure to violence and harassment fosters long-term absence of 60 days or more (Eurofound, 2007).

Studies carried out in various EU Member States and Norway have shown that sick leave among cleaners is significantly higher than the workforce average (see the overview in EU-OSHA, 2009). High absenteeism is one of the signs that can indicate a problem of work-related stress in an organisation. Further indicators are high staff turnover, frequent interpersonal conflicts and an increased number of complaints.

Stress-related mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety and burnout, are common among cleaning professionals. It has been shown that chronic work stress is related to increased mental and physical health problems (Hemingway and Marmot, 1999). A recent study has suggested that the type of leadership, the way that cleaners are managed, and the collaboration with co-workers have an effect on their mental health (Gamperiene et al., 2003). Cleaning personnel, among certain other groups, are more likely to leave the workforce because of mental health problems (Bultmann et al., 2002) than other professionals.

Finally, it is important to remember that hazards do not exist in isolation. Other occupational hazards (as listed above), such as lack of respect and recognition, poor wages and the low level of vocational training among cleaners, can worsen existing health problems (Krüger et al., 1997; Gamperiene et al., 2006). For example, research has found that psychosocial hazards can worsen musculoskeletal problems. This, in turn, can lead to poor physical health.

The WHO provides the following figures which show clearly the inter-relation between stress and physical health (see Houtman et al., 2007):

| Stressor                                | May result in           | Health results                       |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| High job demands                        | Seven times higher risk | For emotional exhaustion             |
| Low co-worker support                   | Two times higher risk   | For back, neck and shoulder problems |
| Low job control                         | Two times higher risk   | For cardiovascular mortality         |
| High strain (high demands, low control) | Three times higher risk | For hypertensive morbidity           |

## Prevention and intervention strategies

Table 1 lists possible strategies for dealing with occupational psychosocial hazards and risks in the cleaning profession. These strategies cover both prevention and intervention and are aimed at workers, worker representatives and organisations. They are separated into three levels: individual, enterprise and sector.

**Table 1: Prevention and intervention strategies for dealing with occupational psychosocial hazards and risks in the cleaning profession**

| Hazards or risk factors                  | Prevention and intervention strategies                                                             |                                                                                                                                                    |
|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                          | Employee                                                                                           | Enterprise                                                                                                                                         |
| 1. Time pressure                         | Enhance own time management.                                                                       | Carry out realistic time planning.                                                                                                                 |
| 2. High quality demands                  | Improve own competences.<br>Attend to vocational training.<br>Check own standards.                 | Communication of expected results.<br>Match the number of workers with the expected result of the cleaning work.<br>Provide good initial training. |
| 3. Contradictory demands                 | Prioritise and arrange work.<br>Improve own competences.                                           | Set and communicate priorities.<br>Set focus on quantity or quality.<br>Transparent decisions.                                                     |
| 4. Monotonous work                       | Break your own routine.                                                                            | Create diversity in job demands, e.g. by including preparation tasks, control and supervision.<br>Define key tasks for individual employees.       |
| 5. Little influence on tasks/work        | Work reliably on the essential tasks.<br>Try to see possibilities for own initiatives and changes. | Minimise strict regulations on how to do the work.                                                                                                 |
| 6. Language problems                     | Improve your language skills.                                                                      | Offer language courses.<br>Improve recruiting and staff development.                                                                               |
| 7. Lack of information                   | Ask for information.<br>Keep the contact with management.                                          | Enhance internal communication and flow of information.<br>Let workers participate in the decision-making process.<br>Make decisions transparent.  |
| 8. Lack of participation                 | Bring in own ideas.<br>Be “visible”.                                                               | Employee-oriented management style; ask workers for their opinion.<br>Vocational training for the management.<br>Make decisions transparent.       |
| 9. Repetitive/ constant physical strains | Make physical exercise.<br>Change working postures.<br>Learn to work ergonomically.                | Job rotation.<br>Modern equipment.<br>Instruct workers how to use equipment correctly.<br>Ensure sufficient breaks.                                |
| 10. High workload                        | Enhance own time management and work organisation.                                                 | Improve work flow.<br>Introduce time buffers.<br>Ensure sufficient breaks and recreation time.                                                     |
| 11. Unfavourable work time / shift work  | Change shifts,<br>Change enterprise,<br>Re-education.                                              | Improve shift plans / schedules.<br>Communicate schedules with workers.<br>Allow changing shifts.                                                  |



| Hazards or risk factors                                                                 | Prevention and intervention strategies                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                         | Employee                                                                                                                                | Enterprise                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 12. Lack of acceptance                                                                  | Vocational retraining.                                                                                                                  | Enhance image of cleaning workers, give them the feeling of being important and provide feedback.                                                                                                                                             |
| 13. Isolated work                                                                       | Try to stay in contact with mobile phones, try to get in contact with other professional groups at your work location.                  | Better organisation (group work).<br>Try to create a good working atmosphere.<br>Provide mobile phones, telephones, or intercom systems if needed.                                                                                            |
| 14. Low wages                                                                           | Consider changing your employer, or vocational retraining.                                                                              | Better payment.<br>Organise or provide the commute to the work location.<br>Offer reimbursement of commuting expenses.                                                                                                                        |
| 15. No possibility for professional career                                              | Participate in vocational training, Consider courses / training in spare time.                                                          | Create diversity in job demands, e.g. by allowing control, supervision, or preparation of tasks.<br>Organise frequent team meetings.                                                                                                          |
| 16. Lack of possibilities to learn on the job                                           | Courses / training in spare time,                                                                                                       | Organise vocational training or language courses.<br>Support workers who ask for training.                                                                                                                                                    |
| 17. Poor management styles                                                              | Employees can ask managers for feedback and vice versa, Address yourself to the workers' council or labour union.                       | Vocational training for management.<br>Change management style.<br>Involve workers / ask them for their opinion, select appropriate personnel for management positions.                                                                       |
| 18. Unexpected situations such as missing work equipment                                | Report problems.<br>Keep a log of equipment and its state.<br>Monitor whether problems have been resolved.                              | Check work equipment frequently.<br>Enhance work organisation.<br>Avoid interruptions.<br>Planning with time buffer.                                                                                                                          |
| 19. Lack of resources such as qualifications, technical resources and number of workers | Enhance own competencies.<br>Participate in vocational training.                                                                        | Enhance work organisation and technical equipment.<br>Planning with time buffers.<br>Plan an adequate number of workers for the workload.                                                                                                     |
| 20. Harassment at work                                                                  | Report incidents such as inappropriate comments and behaviour.                                                                          | Inform your employees about their legal right to protection, investigate complaints concerning harassment at work and take appropriate measures.                                                                                              |
| 21. Violence at work                                                                    | Ask for help to deal with psychological impact of an act of violence.<br>Report incidents such as inappropriate comments and behaviour. | Establish a policy of how to deal with violence, communicate criteria for violence, include them in the risk assessment, train your employees, establish a reporting system, analyse incidents and provide post-incident support for victims. |

| Hazards or risk factors                                                                 | Prevention and intervention strategies                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                         | Employee                                                                                                                                                                                            | Enterprise                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 22. Bullying                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Policy of no acceptance of bullying, a healthy corporate attitude (individuals are encouraged to report difficulties), risk assessment, take it seriously and handle it confidentially, establish a reporting system and procedure, train managers in conflict management, provide access to independent employee referral service.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 23. Discrimination against immigrant workers                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Encourage immigrant workers to talk to their manager about problems. Encourage and support workers in taking language classes if necessary or helpful. Communicate a zero tolerance policy for discriminatory comments or behaviour. Assess the risk of discrimination.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 24. Risk and hazards for older workers such as repetitive tasks causing physical strain | Talk to your employer about your individual needs and preferences at work.                                                                                                                          | Policy for the support of older employees. Promote good health through preventative measures such as effective and reliable work organisation. Try to avoid repetitive work; different tasks have different demands. Changing the task reduces strain at work. Regular working hours and breaks help older employees to establish a healthy routine. Take into account the individual qualifications and experience of your employees. Do they have preferences in their tasks and working times? A good and open corporate culture is a major asset for healthy employees – young and old. |
| 25. Special risks for female workers such as working alone                              | Talk to your employer about your individual situation; e.g. commuting to isolated work locations at late hours, needs of your family life such as taking care of children and older family members. | Women and men can face different risks at work. It is important to include gender issues in the risk assessment such as unsocial working hours, the risk of violence and harassment if working at isolated work locations or at night. Involve all workers, women and men, at all stages of the risk assessment. Avoid making prior assumptions about what the risks and hazards are. Encourage women to report issues that they think may affect their safety and health at work, as well as health problems that may be related to work.                                                  |



There are a few actions at the sectoral level that can also help to prevent some of these psychosocial factors in the cleaning profession. For example, wage agreements, agreements between labour unions and employers' federations on general working conditions, assessment of common work situations or problems, avoiding wage dumping and social dumping can help solve many of the hazards such as time pressure, excessive workloads, monotonous and repetitive work, lack of information and participation, isolation, poor management, lack of resources or equipment, etc. Frequent assessment of the work situation, risks, hazards and problems, can also help employers to prevent bullying and harassment at work.

## Policy overview

The characteristics of cleaning work (low occupational and educational status, non-standard working hours, part-time work, temporary contracts, shortage of staff, under-resourcing, a high workload, lack of control, negative customer attitudes, business rivalry (for example, in window cleaning), aggressive customers and lack of training) make it unattractive as a career choice. As a result, the sector continues to suffer from high staff turnover and difficulties in recruitment. This, in turn, can affect the skills available in the profession or create skills gaps. These negative factors can damage the reputation and perceptions of the occupation and the sector. The challenge is to reverse these negative perceptions by improving working conditions (Eurofound, 2003).

Psychosocial risk factors (such as work-related stress) are generally worsened by other occupational disadvantages, such as lack of respect and recognition, low wages and the low level of vocational training among cleaners (Louhevaara, 1999). Health problems at the workplace can cost the worker, the employer and the State large amounts of money.

The cleaning industry is a very labour-intensive sector (EFCEI, 2008): this means that a high percentage of total costs for the employer are labour costs. Therefore, changes in social and/or economic legislation in the industry can have a direct impact on the financial state of cleaning professionals.

One of the challenges in improving working conditions is to ensure that both employees and employers get involved in the process of managing psychosocial risks. This puts emphasis on social dialogue and the role of the unions. Moreover, cultural differences between countries and regions can lead to differences in enforcement and interpretation. Cultural differences between workers in different regions may also lead to differences in preferences about working conditions. This could present a challenge for worker representatives involved in social dialogue (Eurofound, 2003).

## Conclusions

The cleaning profession can be a dangerous job if action is not taken to manage the risk of workers getting hurt. Cleaners may be hurt by many things, but unfortunately, the harm done by psychosocial factors (such as stress, violence and bullying) is not always considered (Gamperiene et al., 2006).

Workers generally have limited opportunities to influence some of these hazards, such as the organisation, pace and scheduling of their work, and have low autonomy in deciding how to do their work. They have few opportunities for career advancement, and they enjoy few professional benefits. Support from their immediate supervisors is often lacking. Cleaners should be given more opportunities to take part in planning and developing their work (Krüger et al., 1997; Louhevaara, 1999) to reduce psychosocial risks and associated health problems.

To summarise, organisations must make sure that they manage the work environment and provide the resources for cleaners to deal with these hazards. A great deal of information and advice is available on the Agency website and other sources for both employers and employees for the management of work-related health and well-being.

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## Further information

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions  
<http://eurofound.europa.eu> – especially the European Working Conditions Observatory (EWCO) section.

European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) (2009): Preventing Harm to Cleaning Workers <http://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/reports/TEWE09006ENC/view>

European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) (2009): Workforce diversity and risk assessment. Case 3.2.3.: Reducing stress among female cleaners at a hospital (p. 55 ff.) <http://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/reports/TE7809894ENC/view>

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Health and Safety Executive UK <http://www.hse.gov.uk/>