

# FIFTH INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP ON BUSINESS DATA COLLECTION METHODOLOGY

19-21 SEPTEMBER 2018 – STATISTICS PORTUGAL, LISBON

## AN INTERNATIONAL ESTABLISHMENT SURVEY AND THE COVERAGE OF MICRO ENTERPRISES – DOES ONE-SIZE FIT ALL?

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### Background paper

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) carried out its second European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER-2) in 2014, involving almost 50,000 establishments across all business size classes and activity sectors in 36 European countries. Like ESENER-1, its focus was on how European workplaces manage occupational safety and health (OSH) risks in practice.

ESENER-2 built on and extended the approach used in ESENER-1 by including, for the first time, **micro establishments** with 5-9 employees<sup>1</sup>. Micro establishments are a heterogeneous group in many senses, including in relation to their OSH knowledge, awareness and management approaches<sup>2</sup>. In comparison with larger firms, micro enterprises generally continue to struggle to address the proportionally higher risks of their workplaces. Further, they are much more likely to lack the necessary means with which to address these risks, including not only material resources but also those of knowledge, skills, attitudes, education and training. As a result, the decision-makers in these enterprises are often themselves largely unaware of the problem of elevated risks in their workplaces. They are also frequently remote from, and unresponsive to conventional regulatory influences, while at the same time lacking both the motivation and knowledge necessary to initiate reforms. The majority, therefore, are at best *reactive* rather than actively seeking support or guidance to improve their OSH arrangements<sup>3</sup>.

Improving such OSH arrangements is not only a challenge for those in charge at the workplace, but also one for regulators and other stakeholders. It is therefore clear that a solid evidence base from which to develop more effective policies and supports is important. However, it is further evident that micro firms are a much harder group to reach and successfully recruit to OSH-related (or indeed other) research. In particular, such research frequently struggles to reach beyond those establishments that the owner-manager, rightly or wrongly, sees as

<sup>1</sup> It also expanded to include establishments in the agriculture, forestry and fishing sector, which are not covered in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> <https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/contexts-and-arrangements-occupational-safety-and-health-micro/view>

<sup>3</sup> <https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/safety-and-health-micro-and-small-enterprises-eu-final-report-3/view>

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successful in a business and an OSH sense – which the literature suggests is likely to be the tip of the iceberg.

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This paper presents some of the main findings of the review undertaken by EU-OSHA to consider the impact of the expansion of the survey universe in ESENER-2. The review was informed by and structured around the Total Survey Error and this paper focuses on its findings on **measurement error** in relation to the inclusion of **micro establishments**.

The review considered whether the survey questions were applicable to micro establishments and the selected survey informants. The work was completed via three main tasks:

- (i) a review of the ESENER-1 and -2 questionnaires and relevant background information,
- (ii) an initial assessment of capability based on ESENER-2 interview responses, and
- (iii) in-depth qualitative interviews with respondents from establishments within the expanded survey universe.

The first two tasks were used primarily as a means to develop the topic guide used for the third task, where in-depth qualitative interviews were carried out with respondents from 28 micro establishments: 14 each in Spain and Romania. Representation was chosen from these groups to focus data collection in areas where OSH implementation levels would be expected to be relatively low<sup>4</sup> and therefore, any potential issues with the content of the survey would be more acute. The participating establishments were operating in the construction, retail, HORECA (hotel, restaurant, catering) and agriculture/forestry sectors – in which micro establishments traditionally predominate.

## Findings

The review of the ESENER-1 and -2 questionnaires suggested four broad areas of concern, which were the topic of further exploration in the qualitative interviews.

### 1. Participants and participating in OSH surveys

Recruitment was very challenging in both countries, in particular among the smallest establishments. Overall, the research teams in these two countries *each* needed the contact details of around 800 firms to achieve the 20 interviews<sup>5</sup>. This was primarily due to refusals, most being due to the length (45 minutes) of the telephone interview. However, some also refused after learning that the focus of the study was OSH. Those involved with the recruitment process felt that this may have reflected a perception that the interview would be ‘threatening’ – perhaps indicating a relative lack of confidence in their OSH arrangements. In general, those who did agree to participate felt both that their establishments had OSH arrangements in place and that these were adequate and effective.

<sup>4</sup> Previous analyses of ESENER-1 ([Analysis of the determinants of workplace OSH practice in a selection of EU Member States \(2013\)](#)) and ESENER-2 ([Management of OSH in European workplaces \(2018\)](#)) identified differences between countries in relation to the various practices and procedures measured by the survey. In summary, the levels of implementation of these measures are generally highest in the United Kingdom and northern European countries. This suggests that establishments in countries where the process-based participative approach to OSH management required by the EU Framework Directive 89/391/EEC (<https://osha.europa.eu/en/legislation/directives/the-osh-framework-directive/1>) is more embedded in their regulatory systems are more likely to have high levels of implementation of ‘good’ OSH practices in their workplaces than those where these approaches are relatively newer.

<sup>5</sup> There were 14 micro establishments interviewed in each of the countries but a total of 20 interviews per country, which included establishments in the agriculture, forestry and fishing sector.

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Respondents, with only one exception, were all managers or owner-managers, and their businesses were often family owned and run. For most OSH was not their main responsibility but something they dealt with alongside their core duties. In accordance with national norms,

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virtually all of the surveyed establishments used an external service for support with OSH, so most respondents described their OSH responsibilities as, at least in the first place, primarily revolving around liaising with these organisations. In line with this, some respondents felt that the regulations had been developed to suit the needs and capacities of large companies and had not been adapted to the very different needs and resources of micro and small enterprises, especially those operating in what they saw as low risk sectors (such as retail).

## **2. Knowledge and understanding of OSH requirements**

The interviews suggested some awareness and understanding of the OSH regulatory requirements among all of the respondents. However, as indicated above, for many the task of ensuring that the relevant arrangements were in place was regarded as the duty of the external service provider. So although the person *'who knew best about health and safety'* within the enterprise was often aware that they should at the very least read through the documentation provided by the external service, even this was sometimes seen as something of a challenge.

This raises the issue of *'paper compliance'* – that is, firms being apparently compliant according to their documentation, but such paperwork having little or no correspondence with workplace practice. This potential mismatch between documentation and practice, and the difficulty of capturing it, is an area of concern for surveys such as ESENER. Furthermore, the priority afforded to OSH increased with the perceived level of risk. This was lowest in the retail sector, where risks were generally regarded as negligible, and highest in the agriculture and construction sectors, with HORECA falling somewhere in between.

These findings suggest that the ways in which survey questions are understood may vary with the circumstances of the participating establishment – in particular its size, sector of operation and the way in which it meets its OSH obligations (in-house or through an external service). This makes the interpretation of responses more complex.

## **3. Key areas and concepts**

The key areas identified by the review were (a) the presence of a written health and safety policy; (b) risk assessment; (c) worker participation; and (d) the labour inspectorate. They will be dealt with in the presentation at the workshop.

## **4. Supply chain position of the enterprise and its relationship to survey responses**

All of the participating establishments were part of supply chains, which varied in size and structure, and for the most part they were operating lower down the supply chain. In general, the supply chain relationships they were involved in, particularly in Spain, were described as being long-term and based on loyalty. While in some instances supply chain pressures impacted on the arrangements for the organisation of work and employment made by some



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establishments, respondents sometimes saw suppliers as a source of 'expert' information in relation to OSH concerns and queries.

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## Conclusions

Overall, the review suggests that one-size does not fit all, and care must be taken to develop survey methods and content that are appropriate for the smallest as well as larger businesses. To this end, a number of recommendations are made for improving data collection from micro businesses in future waves of ESENER.

- The questionnaire is developed to collect details of the **supply chain position** of all establishments and the influences of their relationships within that chain on their OSH decisions and procedures.
- Consideration is given to respondents' **understanding and interpretation of key concepts and terms**, and its implications for survey development. For instance, some areas of the questionnaire (and/or its prompts to interviewers) could be revised for clarity – for example, the questions on visits by the labour inspectorate, on employee involvement and on risk assessments.
- Consideration is also given to including a **qualitative element** for a proportion of establishments (of all sizes, but with the emphasis on the smallest) that explores the relationships between, for example, reporting that risk assessments are and are not carried out, and the realities of workplace practice. The power of such an element would be substantially increased if it were further extended to include a brief interview with a worker as well as the owner/manager in each case.
- The recruitment process and survey could be developed to ensure collection of sufficient **contextual detail** for meaningful data analysis and interpretation.
- Finally, more intensive efforts could be made to convert micro establishment **refusals** during or after the survey, to provide quantitative evidence on **non-response bias** and improve survey estimates where applicable.

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