

Risk assessment made easy

Experience shows that **proper risk assessment is the key to healthy workplaces**. Yet carrying out risk assessments can be quite challenging, particularly for micro and small enterprises which may lack the resources or the occupational safety and health (OSH) know-how to do so effectively.

To facilitate the process, EU-OSHA has developed a comprehensive yet **easy to use** and cost-free web application, the OiRA **Online interactive Risk Assessment tool**. OiRA helps micro and small organisations to put in place a thorough step-by-step risk assessment process – from the identification and evaluation of workplace risks, through decision making on preventive actions and the completion of these actions, to continued monitoring and reporting.

TE-31-11-316-ENC

Online interactive Risk Assessment

Facilitating Risk Assessment
for Europe's micro and
small organisations

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Safety and Health at Work is everyone's concern. It's good for you. It's good for business.

Why OiRA?

The **European Community Strategy on Health and Safety at Work 2007–2012** calls for the development of simple tools to facilitate risk assessment. Since the adoption of the European Framework directive in 1989, risk assessment has become a familiar concept for organising prevention in the workplace, and hundreds of thousands of companies across Europe regularly assess their risks.

Nonetheless, there is sufficient evidence¹ to conclude that many **micro and small enterprises have some shortcomings** when it comes to risk assessment and the adoption of a preventive policy in general (which the OiRA project aims to overcome):

- “It is not necessary, because we do not have any major problems”
- “The necessary expertise is lacking”
- The “lack of technical support or guidance” cited as a “major difficulty”

With a potential audience of some 20 million micro and small organisations throughout the European Union (EU27), OiRA has a key role to play in making Europe a safer, healthier and more productive place to work.

Total ownership

OiRA's real potential to improve occupational safety and health in Europe's workplaces lies as much in its development and diffusion model as in its technical characteristics.

EU-OSHA has created a free, open source tool, designed to be developed and ‘owned’ by public bodies and sectoral social partners. This collaboration ensures that the customised tool responds to the real needs of small organisations in a particular sector, and encourages widespread take-up and use of the tool at enterprise level.

It also leads to the development of an OiRA community (made up of the organisations developing OiRA tools) to stimulate the exchange of tools among Member States/ activity sectors, and to share knowledge, experience and good practice examples.

While other incentives can be introduced into the diffusion model, it is this ‘peer-to-peer’ communication that is central to bridging the gap between distant public authorities (whether at EU or national level) and Europe's micro and small enterprises.

Development benefits

The OiRA project is the first initiative at EU level to encourage and assist European micro and small organisations (mainly via Governments or Public Institutions and social partners at EU and at Member State level) to assess their risks.

The success of OiRA rests on the support and engagement of a number of key players; from political decision makers; to social partners; through to the end-users at company level.

The Dutch example

Under the Dutch Working Conditions Act (Arbowet), all employers must record the risks faced by their workers in their safety and health policy, as well as develop a plan for how they intend to reduce these risks. Since 1994, when the EU Framework Directive to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers was transposed into Dutch law, it has been obligatory for all employers who have paid labour working for more than 40 hours a week to carry out a Risk Inventory and Evaluation (RI&E).

The initial Dutch RI&E risk assessment consisted of a simple paper-based list of generic health and safety related questions to be answered by the employer. However as the questions were generic and not sector-specific, companies, SMEs in particular, frequently found it difficult to identify with the questions and complete the questionnaires adequately.

It was a time-consuming obligation and constituted a considerable burden, especially for small businesses, leading the Government and the employers' organisation for SMEs, MKB-Nederland, to look into possibilities of simplifying the process.

Moving Online

The result was the so-called ‘MKB Arbo Activiteiten-programma 2003–2005’ (the ‘SME occupational safety and health programme’), carried out in close cooperation between MKB-Nederland and the Government with the aim of developing a digital risk assessment tool (RI&E).

This first digital risk assessment tool, a generic tool developed by the MKB Nederland, was launched in spring 2004.

To facilitate the development of RI&E tools, the TNO, an independent research organisation, was commissioned to help provide technical support to sector organisations that wanted to develop their own sector-specific, digital RI&E tool. Acknowledging the problems faced by small businesses, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment decided to co-fund the development of tailor-made online RI&E tools for 20 different sectors.

For the organisations developing OiRA tools, engagement in the project demonstrates:

- A commitment to improving worker health and safety
- A commitment to supporting Europe's micro and small organisations
- An understanding of the challenges faced by micro and small organisations in completing risk assessment

It enables them to offer a risk assessment tool that is:

- Free of charge
- Online and user-friendly
- Targeted, sector specific and fully customisable
- Supported by the development of the OiRA community

The sectors were chosen in conjunction with MKB-Nederland and according to the needs and willingness of the different sectors to participate. Once the 20 sector-specific tools had been developed, a further step was made to take the unions on board. In this tripartite setting, more than 80 tools were designed.

Implementation

After having developed the sector-specific approach in 2004, a number of additional services have been added to the RI&E system. It currently consists of the following key elements:

- 172 different tailor-made digital RA tools
- A dedicated website (www.rie.nl) giving access to all the RI&E tools
- The RI&E Support Point hosting the system/providing general support
- A Help Desk for sector developers and end-users
- A system of social partner acknowledgement of RA tools

Partnership approach

A number of different partners were involved in the development of the RI&E tools from the outset, especially the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment and the small employers' organisation MKB-Nederland, who have been actively participating throughout. Later on in the process, the Dutch Trade Union Confederation, FNV, other workers' organisations and relevant sectoral social partners took on an important role in taking ownership of and developing the tools.

Top-level buy in

Though the process was largely driven from the bottom up, the Ministry played a significant role in pushing developments forward. It not only provided funding, it also agreed to change administrative and legal procedures to make the risk assessment process easier for small companies and lower the costs involved. Having this top-level support for the RI&E project from the very beginning was essential to its success.

RI&E's Impact

The fact that so many different sectors have developed a custom-made risk assessment tool is a testament to the scheme's success. Since the creation of the RI&E website in 2003, there have been a total of 1.6 million visits, and on average around 5,000 copies of the sector-specific RI&E tools are downloaded each month (since January 2005, when the first RI&E tool was developed).

Proven path to success

The goals and ambitions of the OiRA project may seem high, yet they are achievable. OiRA is based on the proven Dutch Risk Assessment instrument RI&E which now exists in over 172 sectoral variants, each tailored to the needs of the particular sector it serves. Thus OiRA is built on a successful predecessor at national level.

At both EU and national level, EU-OSHA has received wide interest in OiRA, demonstrating the clear need for the tool.

Moving OiRA Forward

2009 and 2010 saw the development (based on the Dutch RI&E) and the testing of the OiRA tool under the stewardship of the Steering Committee put in place by EU-OSHA, with representatives from the European Commission, the ETUC, BusinessEurope, UEAPME, national governments and the Dutch stakeholders.

Now countries throughout Europe have the possibility to benefit from the technical developments created by the Dutch and by EU-OSHA. The scope and scale of the opportunity is huge.

Engage with OiRA

For its realisation, the OiRA project rests on commitment at the highest level. Through the continued support and engagement of policy makers, governments and social partners, OiRA will meet the need for practical tools to facilitate risk assessment among micro and small organisations and **improve worker health and safety across Europe**.

To find out how you can get involved in the project, visit:

<http://www.oiraproject.eu>

or contact:

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¹ ESENER findings. Information available at: <http://www.esener.eu>