



Peer Review on the “Use of web-based tools for OSH risk assessment”

Dublin, Ireland, 2-3 October 2017

Online interactive Risk Assessment (OiRA) web-based tools - a first essential step to improve OSH awareness and prevention in the Belgium SMEs

Peer Country Comments Paper – Belgium



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1 Situation in the peer country relative to the host country

1.1 The context of the Belgian OiRA tools development

For a lot of points, the context situation in Belgium is quite the same as in Ireland.

Concerning the legislation, the Belgian "well-being" law of 1996¹ is based on the European Framework Directive 89/391. For 20 years this law tried to evolve to meet the Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) prevention needs of the companies in a changing society. The activities in companies are constantly and rapidly changing from industrial activities towards more tertiary and service activities. As a result OSH risks are also changing and for this, the legislation needs to be adapted as well as the tools to deal with new and emerging risks. Additionally, more awareness and knowledge of risks and prevention is needed.

The main OSH problems encountered by the Belgian companies are musculoskeletal disorders (MSD) (these include low back pain, repetitive strain injuries, upper limb disorders, etc.) and psychosocial risks (PSR). This was demonstrated by the last European Working Conditions Survey (2015)². In Belgium, one third of workers experienced stress always or most of the time. During the last 12 months, 1 out of 2 workers had backache problems, 4 out of 10 experienced upper limb problems and 3 out of 10 lower limb problems. Between 70 % to 80 % of Belgian absenteeism is due to MSD and PSR. The cost of absenteeism for the companies was estimated to be more than EUR 10 billion in 2016 (SECUREX 2017)³. The first demands of recognition as occupational diseases in Belgium in 2016 were mainly for MSD's (Upper limb tendinitis, carpal tunnel syndrome, back pain). In the last 10 years occupational accidents at the workplace have decreased in Belgium, from 76 accidents for 1 000 equivalent full-time in 2006 to 50 in 2015. On the contrary, the occupational accidents on the way to work stay the same, 9 accidents for 1 000 equivalent full-time in the last 10 years (www.fedris.be).

According to the Belgian National Institute for Disability Insurance (<http://www.inami.fgov.be>) more than 350 000 people took sickness leave (sickness for more than one year) in 2016, with a consistently increasing trend, rising by more than 25 % in the last five years. The cost for the Belgian State is also increasing and in 2015, the cost of sickness leave (more than EUR 6.3 billion) was higher than the cost of unemployment. The lack of primary OSH prevention in companies and the lack of efforts to improve the working conditions in an evolving labour world is certainly one of the main explanations for this increasing trend.

So the Ministry of labour needs to continue to adapt the legislation and to provide modern tools to help companies to comply with the law and deal with OSH risks.

As in the other European countries, most Belgian companies are very small enterprises: over 90 % in the manufacturing sector and over 96 % in the services sector employ less than 20 workers (EU-OSHA, SESAME project 2016⁴).

¹ Act of 4 August 1996 on well-being of workers in the performance of their work and its implementing decisions apply to every employer who employs workers in Belgium. This Act transposes into Belgian law the framework 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. Belgian Federal Public Service Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue: <http://www.employment.belgium.be/>

² European Working Conditions Survey, Eurofound, 2015:

<https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/fr/surveys/data-visualisation>

Quality of employment in Belgium: analysis of the Belgian data on working conditions collected by EUROFOUND (EWCS 2015), 2016, Belgian Federal Public Service Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue: <http://www.emploi.belgique.be/moduleDefault.aspx?id=44596>

³ L'absentéisme en 2016, Heidi Verlinden, White paper SECUREX, May 2017, www.securex.be

⁴ Contexts and arrangements for occupational safety and health in micro and small enterprises in the EU – SESAME project, EU-OSHA, 2016. Internet: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/contexts-and-arrangements-occupational-safety-and-health-micro/view>

By law and according to the size of the company, the enterprise must have either an internal and or an external OSH prevention service, with OSH specialists (known as 'prevention advisors' in Belgium).

In companies with less than 20 employees, the employer can take the role of prevention advisor and that's often without adequate OSH training. Therefore, employers need support and tools to help them with risk assessment, increase their knowledge and awareness on OSH risks and prevention, as well as ensure compliance with the legislation. The main problem within this context is how to reach small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs).

In Belgium, and similarly in Ireland (and presumably in most European countries), there is a lack of training in OSH risk assessment and prevention.

The Belgian Ministry of Labour in the last number of years faced budget cuts which led to a reduction of staff and budget. These budgetary cuts also occurred in companies, in particular, for OSH prevention and also in OSH external services.

The budget dedicated to prevention of health and safety risks, work accidents and illnesses is extremely small compared to the huge costs of non-prevention for the workers, companies and society. It would be better to invest in awareness and in primary prevention to reduce future occupational diseases, work accidents and absenteeism and their associated costs through the development of more and more sustainable working conditions.

2 Assessment of the policy measure

2.1 Origins of the Belgian OiRA web-based tools

At the beginning of the year 2000, it was clear that there was a lack of tools dedicated to OSH prevention in companies. A lot of quantitative tools existed to measure the OSH outcomes (e.g. health of workers, the perception of their health, occupational accidents, etc.), and the risk factors (e.g. measurement of noise or vibrations, exposure to chemical products, and the frequency, posture and the load during manual handling, etc.). These expensive quantitative tools need experts and measurement equipment, making it impossible for SMEs to use such tools. However, while these tools allow the measurement of risk, the OSH outcomes and the exposure to risk factors, they don't directly help employers in implementing preventive actions to eliminate or reduce the risks and decrease the exposure to risk factors. This is an essential step for SMEs.

This is why the Belgian Federal Ministry of Labour, with the help of the European Social Fund (ESF), funded a research undertaken by universities to develop OSH prevention tools: the SOBANE strategy of risk prevention. This strategy includes four levels of intervention: Screening, Observation, Analyse, and Expertise (www.sobane.be hosted by the Belgian Federal Ministry of Labour). The Belgian SOBANE strategy is one of the few existing tools which propose a first level (Screening) of intervention with a comprehensive approach and with the participation of the employees. In this first step, with a tool called "déparis" and developed to cover over 30 sectors, the risk factors are discussed with the workers in order to find solutions and prevention actions. After this first level, if required, other SOBANE tools (15 SOBANE observation methods specific for noise, vibrations, MSR, PSR etc.) can then be used to determine prevention actions. *"The strategy proved to make it possible to approach the work situations progressively in small as well as in large companies, to coordinate the cooperation between the workers, the technical staff and the OHS practitioners and to prevent the problems more rapidly, more efficiently and more economically"* (Malchaire 2010⁵).

More than 10 years later, and although many medium and large companies use SOBANE (which is now a reference tool in Belgium for risk assessment), it still remains difficult to disseminate this tool in the SMEs. The question of a digital version of the sectoral Déparis guides was often discussed to try to reach SMEs.

At the same time, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) was developing the Online Interactive Risk Assessment (OiRA) project addressed mainly to very small enterprises. One of the SOBANE authors, Alain Piette, is now working in the Ministry of Labour with his colleague Frank Dehasque, the EU-OSHA focal point for Belgium. This made it obvious that the Ministry of Labour could actively participate in the OiRA project by developing Belgian OiRA web-based tools. Due to lack of budget resources and a reduction in staff, it would have been impossible to develop such web-based software in Belgium without the help and the support of EU-OSHA.

The first Belgian OiRA was developed in the hairdressing sector in 2014. A research budget was granted to carry out an epidemiologic survey in this sector and to develop the OiRA tool. This research allowed not only identifying the main OSH problems in this sector, it allowed also to find good practices and to discuss with the social partners the main barriers and the main supporting factors for risk assessment. This was the basis for developing their OiRA and took one year to complete given that it was the first OiRA to be developed. This was necessary to take enough time to learn from this first pilot experience.

⁵ The SOBANE risk management strategy and the Déparis method for the participatory screening of the risks, Professor J.B. Malchaire, UCL, 2010, <http://www.deparisnet.be/>

Due to the central position of the Ministry of Labour in OSH prevention, all the main actors and main organisations were involved or at least well informed about the OiRA project: national social partners, sectoral social, labour inspectors, OSH specialists, experts' associations, external OSH services, etc.

A memorandum was signed between the Belgian Ministry of Labour and EU-OSHA for the management of Belgian OiRA web-based tools. So if a sector was interested in developing an OiRA tool in Belgium, they would have to collaborate with the Ministry of Labour. This means that the Ministry is guaranteed that any Belgian OiRA tools developed have the same standards and quality and are developed using the same procedures. A procedure to develop a new OiRA tool in Belgium was written by Frank Dehasque, EU-OSHA focal point. The development of a Belgian OiRA tool only starts when there is a commitment of the sectoral social partners (both employers and workers representatives) to actively support the development and promotion of the tool. This means that a development group of sectoral social partners is assembled, together with OSH specialists and sectoral specialists and a labour inspector and moderated by a Ministry representative (the focal point manager and his colleagues). The group meet every month to give input and feedback and to ensure that the tool is correct from an OSH perspective, user-friendly and in the language appropriate for the sector. After the development, the sector becomes owner of the tool and is supposed to promote it as much as possible via its communication channels and members.

Until now, five Belgian OiRAs are available online, with translations in French and Dutch: hairdressing, cleaning, woodworking, building sector and HORECA sector.

Four new OiRAs are under development in the following sectors; two in bakeries, parks and gardens (green sector) and two more in the live performance sector (productions and venues).

The development of one OiRA, in two languages (French and Dutch), costs approximatively EUR 15 000. The first four OiRAs were funded by the Ministry of Labour, one was funded by the sector and the four in development are funded by a EU-OSHA contract.

The most important feature for the Belgian OiRAs is the structural approach to develop an OiRA, with the Labour Inspectorate and social partners' involvement from the start of the development to the eventual promotion of the tool. The Belgian OiRAs cover the spectrum of all risks but try at the same time to be user friendly and understandable for the target group, SME managers. The user can add specific risk statements in the OiRA tool for his/her individual enterprise to deal with the risks that were not foreseen when originally developed.

As in the SOBANE Déparis guides, the Belgian OiRA tools are developed taking into account all the risks. This comprehensive approach is needed for an effective OSH prevention, especially for MSD and PSR prevention with multifactorial causes, and especially in MSEs. This comprehensive approach is also a challenge due to the many levels of detailed statements about all possible OSH risks. With a high level of details the web-based tool is likely to become too complex and difficult to use. This is why the participation of the social partners in each step of the OiRA development is so important. A compromise needs to be reached between a usable tool and a comprehensive approach to develop an efficient tool of high quality, recognised by the OSH inspectors.

Another important reason to involve the sectoral social partners since the beginning of the project is the dissemination of the tool. The OiRA tool must become their tool (ownership), the tool of their particular sector for risk assessment, and not a tool developed by someone else. This is a point of difference with the BeSMART tool which is mainly developed by a team in the Irish Labour Inspectorate. It may have been easier and cheaper to use all the 30 Belgian Déparis guides covering 30 sectors and transform them into 30 OiRA tools. However, this option was not taken for the Belgian

OiRAs. Nevertheless, the Déparis guides, as well as other Ministries, sectoral or other national and international OSH tools and information, were used by the developers, social partners and labour inspectors to develop the sectoral OiRAs.

2.2 Belgian OiRA web-based tools in the legislation and policy

The greatest need to act concerns improving the implementation of OSH legislation for micro and small enterprises.

Belgium engaged in the OiRA web-based tool from the EU OSHA. The tool helps these micro and small enterprises to implement OSH legislation by its user friendliness and its pedagogic function. OiRA is part of the Belgian national strategy and part of the policy agreement with the Minister of Labour. The tool is known and promoted by all members of the competent OSH administration and the labour inspectorate. In the legislation on external services for prevention and protection at work, there is an indirect reference to a sector-based tool, without an explicit mention of the web-based OiRA tool.

3 Assessment of the success factors and transferability

3.1 SWOT analysis of the Belgian OiRA web-based tool

To be able to progress in the development of the Belgian OiRA tools, a SWOT analysis was carried out to assess strengths and weaknesses.

Strengths:

- The software exists and has been tested. No time needs to be spent in developing it
- It's a European tool with strong EU brand
- It provides proposals concerning measures for action, not only risk assessment questions
- It is free-of-charge for both the tool developers and for the end-users
- It helps end-users to fulfil their legal obligations
- It is online and easily accessible
- It provides the possibility to promote existing information
- It offers the possibility of using the EU-OSHA network
- OiRA is mentioned in the national legislation and strategies
- It elicits a positive attitude from and involvement of social partners
- It has support from the Labour Inspectorate. End-users trust the Labour Inspectorate.

Opportunities:

- Demand for practical, easy-to-use risk assessment tools to comply with complex legislation
- Availability of government support or funding
- Availability of EU-OSHA grants for the development of tools
- Support from the OiRA community and the possibility of benefiting from best practices and international cooperation
- Potential to use as a training tool
- Reduces costs (printing, distribution, warehousing, etc.)
- Possibility of covering a significant number of sectors
- Possibility of developing long-term relationships with end-users

Weaknesses and threats

- Lack of resources (human and financial)
- Lack of resources for dissemination and promotion activities
- Dependency on external partners/possible contractors to create additional tools
- Lack of awareness and OSH culture among micro and small companies
- Low relevance of OSH for micro and small enterprises
- Resistance from OSH professionals and OSH specialists – threat to their business
- OSH is not a priority for SMEs

- Low take up by SMEs
- External prevention services and their negative "marketing strategies"

3.2 OiRA promotion and dissemination strategy in Belgium

On the political level:

- OiRA is part of the Belgian national strategy and part of the policy agreement with the Minister of Labour. The tool is already known and promoted to all the members of the competent OSH administration and the labour inspectorate.

On the national level:

- OiRA national landing pages at the www.beswic.be website are in development.
- When the new OiRA website and the promotion tool-pack are ready, they will be used, promoted and disseminated through all national websites
- A general OiRA promotion campaign is possible, using all the national websites of the Ministry of Labour, the OiRA website and the promotion toolkit, the social media and - if a national budget is available - also advertising on the web and in specialised (SME, professional or sectoral) press. This will be further developed according to the available budget, timing and priorities
- Seeking new partnerships for dissemination with school and educational, vocational and training institutes so that they use or at least mention the tool in their courses to possible future users of the tool
- Promotion of the tool at national events (ARP OiRA events, E.E.N. events, OSH events and fairs)

On the sectoral level:

Already existing OiRAs:

Further dissemination in collaboration with the sector by:

- Specialised training sessions by the sector for their members
- Publications in different sectoral media: paper + audio-visual and web
- Use of non-OSH related sectoral information dissemination
- Using the promotion toolkit for extra actions
- Promotion of the tool at sectoral events and fairs
- OiRA promotion or training in schools

OiRAs in development:

- Sectoral communication on the start and development process of the OiRA: why is it important for the sector, what are the benefits for the users, the progress made (creating a buzz)
- OiRA launch events
- Implementation of the promotion actions developed by the contactor (EU-OSHA low value contract)
- In addition, all actions mentioned for the existing OiRAs

3.3 Belgian OiRA statistics

Since the first Belgian OiRA on September 2013 (hairdressing sector), 4 559 assessments were realised by 3 019 users for the 5 different Belgian OiRA. The

published dates of the following OiRA were November 2014 (woodworking sector), November 2015 (building sector), September 2016 (HORECA sector) and May 2017 (cleaning sector). So the Belgian OiRA are quite recent and therefore it is difficult to get a good view and feedback.

We can see that 1 025 assessments were done in the first 8 months of 2017 but with only 12 % of top assessments (with more than 70 % risk answered) and 26 % with at least one preventive measure.

For the total 4 559 assessments, 33 % responded to the small survey at the end of the OiRA. 50 % are very small enterprises (1-9 workers), and 25 % medium enterprises (10-49 workers). For a large majority of users, the OiRA assessments were conducted by the staff, their needs were met and they would recommend the tool. Workers were invited to participate in 50 % of companies.

From these first statistics, it emerges that the main problem is not the tool, as the users are really satisfied. The challenge is to reach the potential users of each sector to inform them that there is a tool to help them with their OSH problems and to encourage them to actually use it. This takes time, money, a team to help and support the OiRA users and of course the collaboration of the social partners who know the best ways to reach their sector. Campaigns would help but these also need a budget. It is also important to start with the education of students, future workers of the sector, and to try to ensure that the OiRA tool is also used by them as OSH learning.

These statistics demonstrate that we are only at the beginning with the Belgian OiRA. Most of the 3 019 users are from very small SMEs which are the most difficult to reach. Without OiRA, they will probably never begin an OSH risk assessment so at least we are on a good path. The main challenge remains – that of OiRA promotion and dissemination in collaboration with the social partners.

3.4 Transferability of BeSMART and Belgian OiRA

Probably, it would be possible to use the Irish BeSMART tools as an inspiration in Belgium and in other European countries. Since the content, the risk assessment and prevention of OSH risks, are likely to be rather similar across all small companies (hairdresser for example) whether they are based in Belgium or in Ireland. The business activities are similar.

But to be suitable to Belgium or to another European country, all the national stakeholders need to be involved, especially the social partners of the concerned sector. They have to discuss all the risks statements first to adapt it with the Ministry of Labour and the labour inspectorate to the specificities of the Belgian legislation and then find the right balance between the comprehensive approach and the length of the tool.

It takes time but it is very important to develop a web-based tool such as BeSMART or OiRA with the national social partners and not to just impose a tool on a sector. If it becomes their sectoral tool, there is a greater chance that the tool will be disseminated throughout the sector and used to increase OSH awareness and prevention.

On the promotion side of the tool, Belgian can learn and use a lot of the Irish BeSMART approach which has proven to be very successful in reaching a great number of end-users.

4 Questions to the host country in the Peer Review

- It is very difficult to estimate the cost of using such a web-based tool. You estimated the total savings to be between EUR 31-45 million. How was this estimate calculated? What was the research methodology used to estimate the savings?
- What is the involvement of Irish social partners in the development of BeSMART and in the upgrade of the tool?
- Is BeSMART used at school to educate students and future workers with respect to OSH prevention?
- Which tools are used by non-BeSMART users?
- What are the reactions and/or the position of external OSH specialists who often have their own risk assessment tool?
- After BeSMART, do you have more detailed tools to go further in risk assessment and to finding solutions for the prevention of risks?
- How is it possible to support the users with a small team of four inspectors?
- In Belgium, we try to cover all the OSH risks using a comprehensive approach. Is it the same for the BeSMART tool? It does not seem the case for PSR and MSD?
- In the Belgium OiRA tool, for each risk statement, a lot of detailed information is given, including links and proposals for measures. Is this also the case in BeSMART?

Annex 1 Summary table

The main points covered by the paper are summarised below.

Situation in the peer country relative to the host country

- Belgian "well-being" law of 1996 is evolving in a changing world of work with new emerging OSH risks.
- Main OSH problems in the Belgian companies are musculoskeletal disorders and psychosocial risks.
- Most of the Belgian companies are SMEs without any awareness or knowledge about OSH assessment and prevention.
- Lack of education about OSH risks and economies in primary prevention: not a good position to be in given the huge costs of non-prevention.
- Objective of the OiRA web-based tools: to develop sustainable working conditions in SMEs.

Assessment of the policy measure

- 15 years ago there was a lack of appropriated tools to help companies to find concrete solutions for their OSH problems.
- Development of the SOBANE strategy risk prevention in to four levels with the first level being the Déparis guides adapted for more than 30 sectors.
- As Alain Piette (one of the SOBANE authors) and Frank Dehasque (EU-OSHA focal point) are working together, it was ideal setting/situation in which to begin to develop Belgian OiRA tools.
- All the main actors and main organisations were involved or at least well informed about OiRA. A memorandum was signed with EU-OSHA. OiRA is in the national strategy and in the policy agreement with the Minister of Labour.
- Five Belgian OiRA are online and three more are in development. Two most important principles: a comprehensive approach in the risks content and active collaboration of the social partners in the sector concerned.

Assessment of success factors and transferability

- SWOT analysis of the Belgian OiRA is presented: a lot of advantages but the main threats are the lack of resources (human and financial) and the lack of awareness especially in SMEs.
- The main challenge remains - the OiRA promotion and dissemination in collaboration with the social partners.
- OiRA are still new tools, the first dated to 2014. Difficult to have a correct feedback but the first statistics are positive as most of the users are satisfied.
- The content of the BeSMART could be transferred as the OSH risks tend to be the same in similar SMEs. But it must be done in consultation with the national social partners.

Questions to the host country in the Peer Review

- It is very difficult to estimate the cost of using such a web-based tool. You estimated the total savings to be between EUR 31-45 million. How was this estimate calculated? What was the research methodology used to estimate the savings?
- What is the involvement of Irish social partners in the development of BeSMART and in the upgrade of the tool?

- Is BeSMART used at school to educate students and future workers in the prevention of OSH?
- Which tools are used by non-BeSMART users?
- What are the reactions and/or the position of external OSH specialists who often have their own risk assessment tool?
- After BeSMART, do you have more detailed tools to go further in risk assessment and to finding solutions for the prevention of risks?
- How is it possible to support the users with a small team of four inspectors?
- In Belgium, we try to cover all the OSH risks using a comprehensive approach. Is it the same for the BeSMART tool? It does not seem the case for PSR and MSD?
- In the Belgium OiRA tool, for each risk statement, a lot of detailed information is given, including links and proposals for measures. Is this also the case in BeSMART?

Annex 2 Example of a relevant practice

Name of the practice:	Procedure with a structural approach to develop a Belgian OiRA
Year of implementation:	2013
Coordinating authority:	Belgian Ministry of Labour (Belgian Federal Public Service Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue)
Objectives:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To develop for SMEs sectoral Belgian OiRA to cover the spectrum of all risks in this sector but try at the same time to be user-friendly and understandable for the target group, the managers of SMEs. To improve OSH awareness and prevention in SMEs.
Main activities:	<p>A memorandum was signed between the Belgian Ministry of Labour and EU-OSHA for the management of Belgian OiRA web-based tools. So if a sector would like to develop an OiRA tool in Belgium, they need to collaborate with the Ministry of Labour. This means the Ministry has the guarantee that the Belgian OiRA tools developed are developed using the same standards and quality and follow the same procedures.</p> <p>A procedure to develop a new OiRA tool in Belgium was written by Frank Dehasque, EU-OSHA focal point.</p> <p>The development of a Belgian OiRA tool only starts when there is a commitment of the sectoral social partners (both employers and workers representatives) to actively support the development and promotion of the tool. This means that a development group is assembled of sectoral social partners, together with OSH specialists and sectoral specialists, and a labour inspector, and is moderated by a Ministry representative (the focal point manager and his colleagues). The group meet every month to give input and feedback and to assure that the tool is correct from an OSH perspective, user-friendly and in the language appropriate for the sector. After the development, the sector becomes owner of the tool and is supposed to promote it as much as possible via its communication channels and members.</p>
Results so far:	<p>Until now, 5 Belgian OiRAs are available online, translated into French and Dutch: hairdressing, cleaning, woodworking, construction sector and HORECA sector.</p> <p>Four new ones are in development: bakeries, parks and gardens (green sector) and two in the live performance sector (productions and venues).</p> <p>The Belgian hairdressing OiRA was used as the basis for the European hairdressers OiRA and the Belgian construction OiRA was translated into English by EU-OSHA. A discussion between the European social partners is ongoing to adapt the Belgian HORECA OiRA at European level. The actual and future Belgian OiRAs are used as good practice or inspiration by EU-OSHA to create European OiRAs, because of the structural approach with a high level of social partners' involvement during the whole development process.</p>

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