



Extract from the report to the  
Public Accounts Committee on  
the supervision of the psychosocial  
working environment in Denmark

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# 1. Introduction and conclusion

## 1.1. Purpose and conclusion

1. This report concerns the public supervision of the psychosocial working environment in Denmark. A survey conducted by the Danish National Research Centre for the Working Environment from 2012 shows that 14.6 per cent of all employees have been subjected to work-related bullying, violence or threats of violence, or psychosocial factors, and display symptoms of stress or depression.

It is difficult to assess how the psychosocial working environment develops in Denmark, since no statistics are available on the number of people who are absent from their work due to the psychosocial working environment. For the same reason, it is not possible to calculate the amount of sickness benefits that is related to a poor psychosocial working environment. However, research conducted by the National Research Centre indicates that approximately one fifth of all long-term sickness absence is caused by the psychosocial working environment. The socioeconomic consequences of a poor psychosocial working environment are thus substantial and include expenditure for sickness benefits and risk of early retirement from the labour market.

2. It is the responsibility of the companies to ensure that their employees are not exposed to security or health risks caused by physical, ergonomic or *psychosocial factors* related to the working environment. The Ministry of Employment has overall responsibility for the area and supervises, and ensures – through the Danish Working Environment Authority – that employees in Danish companies are not exposed to risks of this nature.

The purpose of the study is to assess whether the Ministry of Employment and the Working Environment Authority are appropriately supervising the psychosocial working environment in Danish companies. The report answers the following questions:

- Has the Ministry of Employment followed up on the effectiveness of the framework set for supervision of the psychosocial working environment?
- Has the Working Environment Authority defined objectives for the psychosocial working environment, and is the Working Environment Authority following up on the effect of the supervision?
- Do the methods and procedures employed by the Working Environment Authority allow identification of problems related to the psychosocial working environment in the companies?

The study was initiated by Rigsrevisionen in May 2014

*The **psychosocial working environment** covers various factors in the workplace including organizational and technological conditions, work content and work planning. It includes also the interaction between management and staff and among staff. The interaction of many different factors determines if the psychosocial working environment in a workplace is good or bad.*

***Psychosocial factors** are, for instance, deadlines that are difficult to meet, lack of support from immediate manager, limited influence on how tasks should be resolved and lack of recognition from colleagues.*

*In this context, **supervision** includes both the inspections carried out by the Working Environment Authority, oral and written guidelines, rulings and dialogue with the companies.*

### **Rulings on psychosocial working environment**

The concept of rulings includes the various types of enforcement orders issued by the Working Environment Authority. Before 1 July 2013, there were separate types of rulings for the physical and psychosocial working environment. If the Authority identified problems with the psychosocial working environment, it would make a "ruling on the psychosocial working environment". Since 1 July 2013, the companies will receive an enforcement order if the Authority identifies problems with the psychosocial working environment that entail a health risk for the employees.

The **methodology committee** was established in 1994 by the then minister of labour. Its purpose was to look at the role of the Working Environment Authority in connection with psychosocial risk factors at the labour market. The members of the committee were the permanent secretary of the then Ministry of Labour, representatives for the labour market parties and the then Director-General of the Working Environment Authority.

**Working environment certification** can be issued to a company by an accreditation body, if the company can document that its working environment organisation can identify and resolve working environment issues, including problems with the psychosocial working condition. The Working Environment Authority will only inspect certified companies if an accident happens or a complaint about the working environment is filed with the Authority.

**Collective agreements** are entered between labour market parties. The employers must document that the agreements provide the employees with the protection prescribed by the Working Environment Act. Companies that are covered by a collective agreement are only inspected by the Working Environment Authority in the event of accidents, since complaints concerning the working environment are to be directed to the industrial legal system.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Working Environment Authority's supervision is primarily focused on five factors that represent a great risk to the psychosocial working environment. Among the risk factors are, for instance, excessive workload and pressure to meet tightly set deadlines over a longer period of time, and the risk of violence or threats of violence. In 2013, 2 per cent of all workplace inspections carried out by the Authority resulted in rulings on the psychosocial working environment.

Rigsrevisionen is aware of the difficulties associated with identifying the causes of a poor psychosocial working environment, yet finds that the Ministry of Employment and the Working Environment Authority should strengthen their supervision of the psychosocial working environment in the companies.

Rigsrevisionen's study shows that the recommendations made by the so-called *Metodeudvalg* (methodology committee) define the boundaries of the Authority's supervision of the psychosocial working environment. These recommendations were elaborated in 1995 and they describe the Authority's enforcement options concerning the psychosocial working environment. The fact that the Ministry of Employment has not followed up on the relevance and topicality of these recommendations since the 1998 progress report is not considered satisfactory by Rigsrevisionen.

Our examination also shows that companies certified in accordance with the relevant requirements of the working environment provisions and companies that have entered collective agreements, are generally not subjected to supervision of their psychosocial working environment. The fact that the Ministry of Employment has not assessed the extent to which collective agreements and certification schemes contribute to enhancing the psychosocial working environment is not considered satisfactory by Rigsrevisionen. Nor has the ministry considered whether working environment organisations, established in companies covered by collective agreements, are effectively clarifying and resolving psychosocial working environment issues.

It is Rigsrevisionen's assessment that the Working Environment Authority should make an overall evaluation of how individual efforts like, for instance, supervision and guidance, affect the general psychosocial working environment.

Rigsrevisionen's study shows that one of the goals set for the Working Environment Authority is to reduce work-related stress at workplaces in exposed lines of business. Since it is difficult to demonstrate the connection between the effort made by the Authority and the development in the psychosocial working environment, Rigsrevisionen recommends that the Authority should define targets for the more immediate effects of its effort. Rigsrevisionen also finds that the Authority should follow up more diligently on the implementation and effectiveness of the companies' efforts to resolve identified problems.

Last, Rigsrevisionen is of the opinion that the Working Environment Authority should more extensively include written data sources like, for instance, statistics on staff turnover and sickness absence, when planning and implementing inspections. These sources could serve as supporting material for the interview surveys conducted by the inspectors. They could also contribute to targeting inspections at the units in the respective companies where a high rate of sickness absence may be an indication of a poor psychosocial working environment.