

# Tackling the growing problem of MSDs with original research

Responding to the growing problem of Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSDs) the European Union for Occupational Safety and Health Agency (EU-OSHA), sought advice and a deeper understanding around the topic. IOM has been a key advisor to the EU-OSHA around MSDs providing incisive insights and original research which have benefited society and informed policy. It's an important issue which affects 120 million people in Europe and can cost economies up to 2% of their GDP.

This work, which started in 2000, has formed part of EU-OSHA's campaigns which have focused on Healthy Workplaces. The Healthy Workplaces initiatives have covered topics such as managing the risks associated with psychosocial factors in the workplace (leading to stress-related illnesses); and the hazards associated with workplace exposures to dangerous substances - topics which IOM has supported EU-OSHA on.

## WHAT WAS THE CLIENT'S PROBLEM?

Despite widespread efforts to address them, MSDs remain one of the main causes of absence from work in the EU and worldwide. As part of a multi-year research programme started in 2018, the EU-OSHA wanted to investigate:

- Why work-related MSDs remain a major concern, despite decades of efforts invested in prevention at all levels, and to provide recommendations for new approaches to tackle work-related MSDs

- The occupational safety and health considerations of returning to work/staying in work with chronic MSDs to inform workplace interventions

The research IOM conducted through these two projects would then increase knowledge and improve access to key information to be used to inform policy instruments and guidance and improve understanding of the issues and what employers can do in practice. Overall, the research projects aimed to:

- To increase knowledge and improve access to key information related to support those with chronic MSDs and pain related to MSDs to stay in work
- To provide information on practical solutions in the workplace, including simple measures that can be taken to support staying in work (including information relevant to MSEs (micro and small enterprises) on what employers can do in practice)
- To improve knowledge on new and emerging risks and trends in

relation to factors which contribute to work-related MSDs and to identify the related challenges

- To identify gaps in current strategies for tackling work-related MSDs at both policy and workplace level
- To investigate the effectiveness and quality of workplace interventions and risk assessment approaches and identify new approaches for a more effective MSDs prevention

With a long-standing record of research into this important aspect of occupational health, together with its history of providing support to EUOSHA through successive campaigns IOM, following a competitive procurement process,



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was the clear choice for undertaking this work.

### HOW DID WE SOLVE IT?

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IOM took a multi-faceted approach which yielded both original research, incisive recommendations and policy guidance.

In relation to the prevention of MSDs, the project team conducted an exploratory literature review which aimed to examine the continued high levels of MSDs in the working population and to try to examine evidence in relation to prevention. In addition, an analysis of 142 national policy initiatives was conducted before the completion of six focus groups with European experts in MSDs to identify the drivers and barriers to MSDs prevention and the identification of new ways of preventing MSDs in the workplace.

To investigate chronic MSDs IOM undertook an overview of existing guidance and recommendations before identifying good practice cases by conducting original research. Our research took the form of interviews with 10 different organisations from across Europe, developing and designing the interview methodology to ensure its rigour and accuracy. Using that research, a comparative analysis was conducted to give an improved understanding of which adjustments were suitable for different environments and situations. Following this the project team also developed two OSH Wiki Articles 'managing low back conditions and low back pain' and 'working with rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases' for the occupational safety and health community.

The culmination of the research was a number of detailed reports,

summarising findings and providing recommendations and guidance for EU-OSHA to use as part of the European-wide Healthy Workplaces Campaign 2020-22 on MSDs. These included; examples of good practice, information on managing chronic MSDs at work, and how to support worker retention and return to work with practical advice to create a supportive working environment for those with MSDs.

### WHAT DID THIS MEAN FOR THE CLIENT?

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The EU-OSHA was able to provide evidence-based advice to affect changes in both behaviours and workplaces to support those with MSDs. When combined with support from public health systems and social and employment services, workers with chronic conditions were able to continue working. Even when no external support has been available these simple and actionable measures have allowed workers with chronic MSDs to continue working. It has led to lower costs and absenteeism within organisations and developed a healthier working environment for everyone.

### CLIENT FEEDBACK

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EU-OSHA set out to inform EU policy makers about the prevention and management of work-related musculoskeletal disorders, using the latest research to help define successful policies and actions. This three-year research activity for the agency is being followed up with a major campaign in the EU's 27 Member States and beyond to raise awareness about best practices in workplace prevention of MSD risks and the management of workers with MSDs. The depth of IOM's

expertise in the topic and experience in communicating with a wide range of target audiences resulted in their selection as a main contractor for this initiative. The quality of the team's work and their professional approach has played an important part in the impact that has been achieved by the research and the success of the campaign.

### WHAT DID THIS MEAN FOR BROADER SOCIETY?

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Broader society benefited greatly from this research. With an estimated 120 million chronic MSD sufferers in Europe costing countries up to 2% of GDP IOM contributed to the reduction of both those figures. The actual impact is difficult to ascertain given the long timescales of reporting but anecdotally the report and literature has been well received by companies across Europe - taking on greater importance as the working population ages and official retirement ages rise. Employers are in a better position too with reduced costs as staff are healthier. Employees benefit from a more suitable environment which alleviates discomfort and pain.

### KEY CONTRIBUTORS

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