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Vieira da Silva, Manuela; Oliveira, Rui; Rodrigues, Matilde; Nunes, Mafalda;
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**Scientific Area of Environmental Health of
Allied Health Sciences School of Polytechnic Institute of Porto**

Rua de Valente Perfeito, 322
4400-330 Vila Nova de Gaia
Porto - Portugal
t. +351 222 061 000
f. +351 222 061 001
e. geral@estsp.ipp.pt
w. www.estsp.ipp.pt

Is the crisis affecting the companies' commitment on the OSH issues? (The workers' perceptions)

Authors: Cláudia Vale¹, Isabel F. Loureiro², Matilde A. Rodrigues¹, Rui Azevedo³

¹ Research Centre on Environment and Health, Allied Health Sciences School of Polytechnic of Porto, Portugal

² Research Centre for Industrial and Technology Management, School of Engineering of the University of Minho, Guimarães, Portugal

³ Centro de Apoio Técnico à Segurança no Trabalho CATST, ISMAI, Portugal

Presenting Author: Email: vale.claudia@hotmail.com | Tel.: +351 911 784 462

INTRODUCTION:

Portugal is undergoing an economic crisis affecting the European Union since 2007. The financial unsustainability of the country required foreign aid and austerity measures have been implemented. In consequence, it is expected more financial difficulties to the companies at different levels, particularly in issues related with safety. In this context, Leahy *et al.* (2012) pointed out that, due to the crises, companies have to adjust their priorities regarding the investments namely, on the Occupational Safety & Health (OSH) issues.

Even though OSH is now one of the most important and most highly developed aspects of EU's policy on employment and social affairs, Kompier (2006) e Papadopoulos *et al.* (2010) confirmed that in the past few years, the work environment have suffered significantly changes. The most important ones are the workload, the schedule and worker flexibility, the extension of working hours for the weekend, the inconsistent schedules, the precarious work (Kompier 2006; Papadopoulos *et al.*, 2010). These changes are responsible for some effects on the workers' wellbeing, take as example the exposure to the psychosocial risks and stress at work.

Nowadays organizations need to be increasingly more competitive, in part due to the financial crises we are facing, but also due to the emergence of new competitors. In Portugal the most affected dimension was the Small and Medium enterprises (SME). This factor has a negative impact in the economic competitiveness as this type of companies is responsible for the employment of two millions people.

It is authors' believes that the effects of an economic crisis on safety and health are a challenging topic nevertheless, studies in this area, can stress new strategies to then OSH issues.

OBJECTIVES:

The aim of this study was to analyze the employment population feelings about the influence of the crisis on the companies' commitment on the OSH issues.

MATERIALS AND METHODS:

In order to perform this study, an observation tool was developed and data collection was carefully defined. The study adopted a quantitative methodology using a self-completed questionnaire named External Environment Questionnaire (EEQ). The EEQ included several questions to characterize the respondents profile and study their opinion about the current situation of Portugal and how does it affect their perception about security issues (Loureiro *et al.*, 2014).

The EEQ was divided into two different parts: (1) characterization of the respondent and (2) perception of the respondent regarding the engagement of the organization for which they work in relation to security issues. Briefly, the first part refers to the respondent characterization and gathers information such as age, gender, level of education and characterization of household. In part (2) of the EEQ gathers information about: the

perception of respondents regarding the current financial situation of the organization, the organization's awareness to security issues and the recovery workers on safety at work.

The target population for this survey was the working population. This survey was conducted in 8 cities of the north of Portugal. The questionnaires were sent by mail and / or email through a list of contacts or by hand from June 14 to July 11, 2013.

After data gathering a descriptive analysis was performed on all questions and depending on the relevance, correlations between variables were tested.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

This study surveyed 600 people of which 510 were considered to be valid questionnaires. Nearly half of the respondents were male. On average, respondents have nearly 39 years old (SD=11.40; interval range 17-76 years old). The respondents aged above 65 years old have a part-time job. It is important to notice that this age is considered to be the retirement age in Portugal. The majority of the respondents are from Portugal (98.6%). Most of them received primary education (37.7%), 32.7% received senior high school education, 28.6% went to college and 1.0% received an unspecified type of qualification. The respondents developed their professional activity mainly in the industry sector and services.

Almost 80% of the respondents agree that the companies that they work for are being affected by the economic crisis. Even though the crisis, 60% of the respondents reported that their companies are still investing in the training actions regarding the OSH issues and 51.6% remarked that companies value those who comply with the safety rules. This seems to indicate that there is a will on investing in this area. A vast majority of the respondents (80% of the respondents, on average) agrees that the crisis is responsible for the non-investment in protection equipment, increasing of the occupational psychosocial risks at work, excessive workload, lack of involvement, conflicting demands, mismatch between the workloads demands and production demands. In general, respondents feel that the crisis is responsible for the worst working conditions.

CONCLUSION:

As pointed out by Kousenidis *et al.* (2013), companies are facing economic constraints due to the crisis that is affecting all the Europe. Results of this survey indicate that workers are feeling job insecurity in addition to the non-investment in the OSH issues and these factors may contribute to profound changes in the working conditions. Indeed, competitiveness of the trade market is leading to the fact that companies are prioritizing the production in relation to compliance with the safety rules. The respondents' perceptions about the companies' commitment on the OSH issues is in line with the studies by Papadopoulos *et al.* (2010) that highlighted the increase of the worst working conditions in the past years till the current days.

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