

Paradoxes of risk assessment in the artisanal bakery sector

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Abstract

In the very small companies in the bakery-pastry making sector, risk assessment and prevention must meet contradictory expectations. Employees and employers carry out, at least in part, the same tasks, in the same workplace, and with the same organisational constraints. They are thus exposed to the same working conditions, with identical potential consequences for their health. However, in these companies, occupational hazard prevention and the way it is structured is, to a large extent, linked with the time that the employers are prepared to devote to this task, and with their representation of the risks to which they themselves are exposed.

To examine these contradictions further, we developed an approach to occupational hazard prevention at the level of the branch of activity. At the same time we consider production issues and the existence of occupational hazards, looking at the concrete reality for companies and the possibilities for action at national level.

Key words

Risk assessment, small enterprises, bakery-pastry making, prevention, ergonomics

Introduction

All French businesses, of whatever size, are obliged to carry out an assessment of the occupational risks to which employees are exposed and put preventive measures in place. In the very small businesses in the artisanal sector, a significant feature of this compulsory assessment is the proximity of employers and their employees, who often carry out, in part at least, the same tasks, in the same workplace, and according to the same organisational constraints. This proximity of experience could therefore facilitate their understanding of the difficulties encountered by employees as they carry out their work, and could thus be a possible a driving force to ensure prevention.

Moreover, businesses in this sector face two major challenges: complying with health standards which are becoming more and more restrictive, and the recruitment of qualified staff. Many artisans describe the considerable difficulties they have in attracting young people and ensuring that they work well in the bakery-pastry making sector. If some work were carried out on risk prevention and on improving working conditions, this could help make this profession more attractive to young people, who are not necessarily disposed to accept the same social constraints as those that existed twenty or thirty years ago.

However, in the artisanal bakery-pastry making sector, all the signs indicate that only one artisan in two (53% according to a study carried out by a department dealing with health and safety in the workplace) carries out this assessment procedure. Whenever a risk assessment document was produced, it was usually very formal and did not contain a true analysis of the work carried out and the conditions of exposure to hazards, and therefore provided little scope for effective prevention.

Confronted with this situation, the social actors in this branch of activity (employers' representatives and representatives from employee trade unions) agreed that a study was needed to understand what obstacles there were to carrying out risk assessment and then to draw up some concrete proposals and tools to be used by artisan employers in the bakery-pastry making sector. This studyⁱ was financed by a company foundation for research into prevention in the food sector. A national pilot committee was set up made up of representatives from employers' and employees' organisations and they determined the major directions of the study.

Approach and methods

Our working briefⁱⁱ was based on a double requirement. First, to establish the context of our research at branch levelⁱⁱⁱ mobilising all the key actors, and second to start from a thorough understanding of the work really carried out by bakers-pastry makers before moving on to the question of the actual occupational risks involved. Our working hypothesis was as follows: any obstacles to risk assessment and prevention were in fact linked to constraints associated with the working activities of artisan bakers-pastry cooks. The research covers a three-year period (2008-2010), with the first year devoted to learning about the reality of the workplace, mainly by carrying out a diagnostic assessment in several establishments in this sector.

Our task was not to carry out a detailed study of the occupational risks involved (many studies exist on this subject), but rather to focus on the obstacles to implementing prevention procedures in the workplace, in order to suggest a structuring of activities at the level of the professional sector itself. Several working methods were put in place:

- documentary work, consisting of compiling a comprehensive list of studies already carried out, especially by the national social security department for risk prevention

regarding accidents at work (CNAMTS) and the National Institute for Research into Occupational Health and Safety (INRS)^{iv}: manual handling, asthma in bakers, accidents at work, equipment, etc.

- observations of work in eight bakeries which were very different with regard to size, location, degree of mechanisation, type of oven used.
- interviews with the artisan bakers and with their employees: bakers, pastry cooks, sales assistants. Among these employees, different categories were taken into consideration: permanent employees, occasional workers (temporary, fixed-term contracts), apprentices. In all, 25 interviews were carried out. Using these interviews, we were able to define, validate and correct our earlier observations.
- interviews with different actors in this branch of activity: prevention advisers, occupational health officers, equipment manufacturers, heads of professional training bodies. These encounters enabled us to understand what aspects of the diagnostics carried out in the eight bakeries could be applied more generally and to incorporate these diagnoses into a multi-professional approach for the branch of activity.

On this basis, an overall synthesis was prepared and the main directions for the study were put before the pilot committee. As this work is not yet complete, the results that we present here relate to the first part of our research, i.e. the issues to be considered in an occupational risk assessment process in a sector of activity where businesses are particularly noted for being very small (the majority employ between two and ten workers) and for their very scattered, sometimes even isolated locations.

Results

Contradictory expectations to be considered

During interviews, depending on their position, the various interviewees expressed expectations and mentioned issues which were in part contradictory. It seemed essential that we address these contradictions if the tools that we intended to offer businesses to carry out occupational risk assessment and prevention were to be effective, or even used. These are the main points mentioned:

- risk assessment cannot be reduced to a simple list of existing risks and dangers, it must try to understand how these may come about based on an analysis of the actual work carried out by people in specific situations, **however** the procedure must be simple and quick to put in place;
- the diversity of bakery-pastry making must be taken into account, and we must not apply a reality that in some cases is totally unfamiliar, **however** we must produce a common tool which is as operational as possible;
- it will be useful to consider the assessment method just as much as the results, **however** we must ensure that users will be able to quickly grasp the essentials of the procedure, without discouraging them with a long presentation of the assessment method;
- we should avoid simply transferring solutions that have been produced elsewhere, **and** we should give the idea that there are possibilities and encourage reflection on the various courses of action;
- it is important to link the possibility of risks with the other factors that determine the activity, **but** assessment sheets should be proposed that can be used directly in the workplace;

- it must be understood that risks are not just technical or just organisational, but that they are the result of many factors that combine together in working situations, **however** they still need to be classified into types of area of action so that they can be more easily defined and decisions taken.

Two major points emerged in our study: the first, clearly expressed by all our interviewees, concerned the lack of time that they said they had to consider risk assessment; the second concerned the paradox of the proximity of employees and employers and the effect of this on the employers' representation of the risks incurred.

The question of time, and yet...

It must of course be recognised that artisan bakers-pastry cooks have very long working hours (especially bakers, whose working day starts very early). As well as the time spent in production, there is a heavy administrative burden of work which is done mainly in the evenings or on rest days. However, if we consider the matter more closely, we see that a considerable amount of time is spent by the employer on managing problems caused by their workers: worker absenteeism, accidents at work, recruiting staff, training new staff, minor incidents during production, etc.

Statistics for accidents at work and occupational illnesses provide us with some elements that give a better understanding of this situation (CNAMTS, 2007 statistics). Although the frequency rate for occupational accidents which involve lost time is not very high in the bakery-pastry making sector (about 30‰ on average in recent years, compared with 39‰ on average nationally in all sectors combined), we nevertheless note a large number of accidents among apprentices^v. The main material factors involved here are:

- Manipulation and handling, with 26% of accidents in bakery-pastry making activities, 32% in bakery activities alone, and 24% in artisanal pastry-making.
- Same-level slips and falls, with 27% of accidents in bakery-pastry making activities, 32% in bakery activities alone, and 29% in artisanal pastry-making.
- Falls from a height, with 11% of accidents in bakery-pastry making activities, 12% in bakery activities alone, and 15% in artisanal pastry-making.

Among the large number of occupational illnesses, we note in particular peri-articular disorders and respiratory disorders caused by allergic mechanisms which represent more than 90% of all occupational illnesses across all bakery or pastry-making activities. Also, many illnesses are not declared as occupational illnesses. It must be remembered that declaring an occupational illness is on the initiative of the employee, and that very few employees in very small businesses complete this formality. Often, the only response given when a declaration of occupational illness is made is to advise the employee to change careers, something which in most cases they do not want to do.

This assessment of working conditions clearly has consequences for the image portrayed of this career and hence of its attractiveness, and this was mentioned by the instructors that we questioned and the young apprentices that we met. This also explains in part the high turnover among employees. Although we have no quantitative data to evaluate the workload that this situation represents, all the artisan bakers and pastry chefs confirmed that they spent a considerable amount of their working hours on this. The question of available time which could be spent on an assessment and risk prevention procedure should therefore be set against the time that could be saved in terms of easier staff management.

The representation of risk

Occupational risk prevention and the way it is structured are not unrelated to the representation that the employers have of the risks to which they themselves are exposed. This representation is marked both by the similarity of the employers' own experience to that of their employees, but also by the way in which their own risks are recognised and dealt with by the social security system (employee *vs* self-employed persons).

Employers and employees are certainly exposed to the same working conditions, with exactly the same potential consequences for their health. However, in the bakery-pastry making sector, the social security system differentiates in the way it deals with occupational illnesses, depending on whether one is an artisan employer or a salaried employee, and is less favourable for the employers. The risk that is entitled "Industrial Accident/Occupational Illness" (AT/MP in French) is only recognised by the public health insurance system for salaried workers. This cover presupposes that a correlation has been established between the illness or the occurrence of the accident and the characteristics of the work carried out by that individual. This in turn leads to a certain number of advantages for employees, including better financial conditions (no waiting period, 100% reimbursement of medical expenses). Cover is through a particular branch of the health insurance scheme, called "AT/MP", and financed only through contributions from employers. For self-employed persons (e.g. artisan bakers, pastry-cooks), this cover cannot be offered under the conditions relating to occupational risks but only under the general health scheme, which is less advantageous. Another consequence of the non-recognition of the "AT/MP" risk for artisan employers is that, while they do not have the contributions to pay, nor do they have the benefit of being monitored by an occupational health service. Whereas it is compulsory for employees to be checked medically (once every two years for the general scheme, once a year for occupations

that require “enhanced medical supervision”), there is no such obligation for those who are not salaried. And yet, these consultations with the occupational health doctors provide an excellent opportunity to carry out screening tests, to ensure that workers are aware of the risks they may be running, and also to provide information about the principles of prevention.

Moreover, the professional artisans, mainly because they have not been alerted to the importance of these problems, often tend to minimise the hazards to which they are exposed, generally considering them to be “the risks of the job”. For them, knowing how to cope with these hazards is to some extent part and parcel of learning the profession. As we observed in the interviews, they can sometimes be quite critical of young employees, justifying this by saying that “they are less resistant”, which explains their frequent health problems. The artisan employer has a different attitude when he himself falls victim to an occupational accident or an occupational illness, like asthma, for example, or a musculoskeletal disorder.

All these factors contribute to making it more difficult to construct a common representation of the hazards, yet this is nevertheless an essential condition for effective preventive action. It seems clear that professional sector organisations could help bring about progress in this area through their dealings both with businesses in their sector and with the public authorities.

Conclusion

In the context of this study, an essential factor, in our opinion, is being able to link together risk prevention and production issues, especially in terms of health and staff management. For example, risk assessment could be considered as a kind of “project review” covering all the aspects that would need improving if a refurbishment of the bakery or the preparation room were to be carried out. We have started to compile such a list of generic questions which

employers could think about in association with work space design: limit carrying loads around, facilitate the use of trolleys, avoid restricting postures when taking cakes out of a refrigerated display in the shop, facilitate access to the machines, especially for cleaning, improve organisation in the refrigerators to avoid too much handling and protect the cold chain, etc.

By developing this kind of approach to occupational risk prevention at the level of the branch of activity it will be possible to link up the business reality with actions that are possible at this level. We will then be able to encourage, as we have already begun to do:

- mobilisation of all social partners, employers' representatives and employee trade union representatives;
- recognition of positive initiatives that already exist in some establishments;
- a more balanced exchange with suppliers and equipment manufacturers who play an important part in technical and organisational decisions taken by artisan employers;
- dialogue with the training bodies, to ensure that they include risk prevention in teaching programmes;
- improvements in dealing with occupational illnesses on the part of the social security and health bodies;
- establishment of a real dynamic force in companies in this sector.

This work with the different actors will continue as this research-action progresses, and ultimately we will produce proposals for concrete actions in this branch of activity (training, guides, recognition of initiatives in the field).

Word count: 2 822

Notes

ⁱ It would be more accurate here to talk about research-action, since the intention set out in the research protocol is to transform existing situations by producing tools to be used by actors in the branch of activity.

ⁱⁱ This work was carried out for the most part by Eloïse Galioot, European Ergonomist.

ⁱⁱⁱ In 2002 we carried out a study on the prevention of professional risks in the meat for human consumption sector and this work highlighted the importance of such an approach both in terms of understanding the problems to be dealt with and in mobilising the necessary resources.

^{iv} Internet websites: <http://www.risquesprofessionnels.ameli.fr> and <http://www.inrs.fr/>

^v There are more than 20,000 apprentices in the bakery-pastry making sector. They alternate a period of training in school with a period of practical experience with a baker-pastry chef.

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