



# MENTAL HEALTH AT WORK

## NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS IN NORWAY



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Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority. 2025.

# Preface

Mental health of employees is an emerging concern for the public and private enterprises in the Baltic Sea Region. People's mental health and ability to take individual and collective action are imperative for enterprises and societies to function during challenging periods. In the face of hardship, enterprises need resilience and resilient workforce.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Europe, half of European workers considered stress to be common in their workplaces, and it contributed to around half of all lost working days<sup>1</sup>. In addition, 1 in 6 workers experience mental health challenges in the European Union (EU)<sup>2</sup>. Combined with an already prevailing lack of qualified workforce in some key fields, such as health and social care, this puts the ability of enterprises and workplaces to withstand existing and future crises in jeopardy.

Protecting workers and preserving their work ability is the objective of Occupational Safety and Health (OSH). In the past, OSH legislation, standards and education have mainly focused on physical hazards and accident prevention. The MentalHealthMatters project wants to increase the attention given to psychosocial risk identification, assessment and prevention measures, addressing them as equally important as other workplace factors.

A key requirement for improving OSH policies and practices related to psychosocial work environment and thus mental health of the workforce is to work across sectors. Therefore, in the framework of the project, the project partners from Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Norway, and Poland have set up National Communities of Practice, consisting of key experts from the health, labour, safety and education sectors. The core aim of the Communities of Practice is to uncover the concrete areas in need of improvement and to propose actions to address them. Each National Community of Practice has chosen its focus theme that encapsulates a key challenge in their countries. These range, for example, from awareness raising among employers in Latvia to the education of OSH professionals in Finland.

In the *MentalHealthMatters* project, the Communities of Practice have found out the needs for improvement related to (1) policies and regulations on mental health and working life, (2) knowledge and data related to the well-being of the workforce, and (3) education and competencies of employers, workplace leaders and OSH professionals related to psychosocial factors at work. This report presents findings from Norway where the focus is on mental health of migrant workers in the cleaning industry.

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<sup>1</sup> European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2024) *Mental Health at work after the COVID-19 pandemic – What European figures reveal*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/mental-health-work-after-covid-pandemic>

<sup>2</sup> European Commission (2023). *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a comprehensive approach to mental health*. COM(2023). European Commission. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX%3A52023DC0298>

## Thematic focus

In Norway, the *MentalHealthMatters* project brings attention to the mental health of migrant workers, who are more likely to encounter mental health challenges than the local population. The migration process itself brings many stressors, and many workers, particularly those who were forced to leave their home countries, may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, heightened anxiety and depressive disorders. Simultaneously, language barriers and unfamiliarity with the local work culture can affect workplaces' inclusivity and migrant workers' possibilities to voice their concerns. Therefore, migrant workers' needs in workplaces warrants special consideration in the psychosocial risk assessment, prevention, and management.

The Norwegian National Community of Practice looks specifically at the psychosocial work environment in the cleaning industry. This industry has a high proportion of migrant workers, many of whose first job in Norway is in this sector. The objective is to investigate how the work environment in the cleaning industry impacts the mental health of migrant workers. More specifically, the project considers whether an organisational self-help tool developed for the cleaning industry might contribute to a better psychosocial work environment and thus impact the work-related mental health in a positive way among workers in the cleaning industry.

## National Community of Practice

In Norway, the National Community of Practice was established by the Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority, building on the existing cooperation model with employers' and employees' interest groups, NHO and LO respectively. The Confederation of Norwegian Enterprises (NHO) is the largest actor on the employers' side in the tripartite collaboration between employers, employees and political authorities. The Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) is Norway's largest employee organisation, with over one million members organised in numerous affiliated trade unions. The Community of Practice has also partnered with Regional Representative RVO to contribute with knowledge about safety and health in the cleaning sector. RVO focuses on improving safety services in small and medium-sized businesses in vulnerable industries, including cleaning.

It was in collaboration with these actors that the decision to focus on the cleaning industry in Norway was made. This sector has a significant number of immigrant workers, and limited research exists on their psychosocial work environments. Collaboration with partners like NHO, LO, and RVO has been essential for creating a platform for knowledge exchange, enhancing all the actors' understanding of the challenges related to mental health of migrant workers.

The Norwegian Community of Practice has been tasked with identifying and agreeing on the long-, medium- and short-term needed improvements related to the psychosocial work environment in the cleaning industry. To do this, the Community of Practice has convened together on numerous occasions to agree on psychosocial resources and challenges in the cleaning industry. This has been supplemented with semi-structured interviews with the cleaning industry representatives as well as a review of reports, knowledge summaries, and studies on the psychosocial work environment in the cleaning sector.

## Needs for improvement

The Norwegian Community of Practice largely confirms the findings from the Norwegian Institute of Occupational Health (Statens Arbeidsmiljøinstitutt, STAMI), which indicate that the cleaning industry is among the sectors most in need of preventive measures to improve the working environment. Almost 50% of sick leave is work-related, meaning that those who are ill report that their absence is fully or partially due to their work. Over 50% of those working in cleaning are immigrants from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, with some companies having over 80% immigrant workers<sup>3</sup>. The cleaning sector can be considered one of Norway's major inclusion engines, as it often serves as immigrants' first entry point into the Norwegian labour market.

The main areas for improvement lie in education and workplace practices. Effective preventive work requires managers to collaborate with union representatives and safety delegates to identify suitable preventive measures. However, one challenge in the cleaning industry is that unionisation rates are relatively low. Several companies engaged through the *MentalHealthMatters* project report challenges in recruiting employees to take on the union representative role. The same applies to safety delegates – many foreign workers are unfamiliar with the role, its responsibilities, or its workplace significance. This challenge is also confirmed in research, for example from Fafo Research Foundation<sup>4</sup>. Thus, there is a need for greater awareness of systematic health and safety work and different roles in this in the cleaning sector workplaces.

The Norwegian Community of Practice has identified psychosocial factors, such as "time and work pressure" and "working with other people", as significant challenges that, over time, can lead to work-related mental health issues among cleaning staff – in addition to musculoskeletal disorders caused by the heavy physical labour typical in this industry. However, it is not always the case that companies focus

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<sup>3</sup> STAMI (2025). *Fakta om arbeidsmiljøet blant renholdere*. <https://noa.stami.no/yrker-og-naeringer/noa/renhold/>

<sup>4</sup> Hagen, I. M., Jensen, R. (2016) .*Kan du representere meg? Rekruttering av tillitsvalgte blant innvandrere i Norge*. Fafo

specifically on preventing these issues. Reports from SINTEF<sup>5</sup> and Agenda Kaupaung<sup>6</sup> suggest that implementing preventive measures for the psychosocial work environment remains challenging. This highlights that there is a need for greater awareness of those work environment factors with most impact on employee health, and for practical tools that help increase understanding of the causes behind these challenges and provide specific preventive measures.

Time frame	Needed change(s)
Short-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Implementing updated occupational health regulations regarding psychosocial work environment, so that businesses increase their knowledge about psychosocial factors and how to work preventively with them.</li> <li>● Renewing the IA agreement so that the OSH authorities can continue disseminating knowledge and tools to companies.</li> </ul>
Medium-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Reaching individual companies and inflicting behavioural changes, following updated regulations.</li> <li>● Increasing knowledge about the importance of occupational factors affecting musculoskeletal disorders and mental health issues.</li> <li>● Developing, testing and evaluating interventions aimed at preventing occupational challenges in companies where employees have different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.</li> <li>● Evaluating the effectiveness of supportive self-help tools, such as Arbeidsmiljøhjelpen (Work Environment Aid), in improving workplace practices.</li> <li>● Providing training for middle managers in preventive occupational health work in collaboration with safety and union representatives.</li> <li>● Tightening the requirements for training on psychosocial issues for “employees leading others” (managers). The regulations already require training for employers, safety representatives and occupational health services, and encourage training for union representatives.</li> </ul>
Long-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Integrating psychosocial work environment in the systematic HSE (Health, Safety and Environment) work, rather than treating it as an isolated or separate concern.</li> <li>● Ensuring cleaning industry businesses have as much knowledge about psychosocial factors as they do about chemicals and ergonomics.</li> <li>● Understanding the advantages of the local-level social partnership, and how these can be established in businesses with linguistic and cultural challenges.</li> </ul>

**Table 1:** The needed improvements as identified and agreed by the Norwegian National Community of Practice.

<sup>5</sup> Thun, Sylvi; Buvik, Marte; Ose, Solveig (2022) *Kartlegging av psykososialt arbeidsmiljøarbeid*. Sintef. [sintef-rapport-kartlegging-psykososialt-arbeidsmiljoarbeid-fou-2021-15.pdf](https://www.sintef.no/rapport-kartlegging-psykososialt-arbeidsmiljoarbeid-fou-2021-15.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Agenda Kaupang. (2022). *Evaluering av arbeidsmiljøetsatsingen*. Agenda Kaupang. <https://www.agendakaupang.no/publication/evaluering-av-arbeidsmiljosatsingen/>

The Norwegian Community of Practice has, therefore, concluded that the most important task is to increase knowledge through education and practical tools specifically tailored to the cleaning industry, which can assist in preventive efforts in practice.

It is essential to acknowledge that no migrant or employer is the same. Not all migrant workers display mental health related symptoms due to psychosocial risks in their workplaces. Neither all workplaces have poor work design, organisation, management, or social context. However, system-level observations reveal common weak points across many workplaces, underscoring the need for targeted improvements.

## Data and knowledge

In Norway, mental health and psychosocial risks in workplaces have become significant topics of concern. Various studies, reports and surveys provide insights into the state of mental health and the prevalence of psychosocial risks among workers in Norway. According to numbers from Statistics Norway<sup>7</sup>, about 20% of sick leave among Norwegian workers report experiencing mental health problems such as stress, anxiety and depression. STAMI<sup>8</sup> has found that approximately 15-25% of Norwegian workers are exposed to high levels of psychosocial risks, including high job demands, low job control, and insufficient social support at work. Overall, extensive data is available to prove that action is needed to address psychosocial factors at work, which has also been reflected in the rising public awareness and attention on the topic.

However, little is known about the mental health of migrant workers specifically despite the additional challenges that they may meet in their working lives. Migrant workers constitute 58% of the workforce within the cleaning industry, but research on their mental health is limited. Existing data indicates that the cleaning industry, with 67,000 employees and 11,500 businesses, faces challenges such as high demands, lack of autonomy, and low social support<sup>9</sup>. Specific gaps in data and knowledge include:

- Inadequate data on the mental health of migrant workers in the cleaning industry
- Scarcity of studies on how the working environment affects the mental health of migrant workers
- A lack of targeted research on how psychosocial factors are addressed in the cleaning industry
- Limited knowledge on which tools the cleaning industry uses to develop their working environment.

Addressing these gaps is crucial for tailoring efforts to address the specific challenges faced by migrant workers, leading to more effective national regulations and workplace practices.

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<sup>7</sup> Statistics Norway (2024). *Sickness absence*. Statistics Norway. Available from: <https://www.ssb.no/en/arbeid-og-lonn/arbeidsmiljo-sykefravaer-og-arbeidskonflikter/statistikk/sykefravaer>

<sup>8</sup> Stami (2021) *Faktabok om arbeidsmiljø og helse 2021. Status og utviklingstrekk*. STAMI. <https://stami.no/publikasjon/faktabok-om-arbeidsmiljo-og-helse-2021/>

<sup>9</sup> Idib.



### The “Clean Presence” project

There are ongoing initiatives to increase the knowledge about psychosocial work environment in the cleaning industry. One example of such is “Clean Presence” (*Ren tilstedeværelse*), which seeks to revitalise and strengthen collaboration within Norway’s cleaning industry. Its primary goal is to elevate the status and competence of cleaning personnel and shift more cleaning activities to daytime hours. Key objectives include addressing common industry challenges, developing a robust knowledge base for participants, and promoting daytime cleaning to improve the industry’s reputation while exploring opportunities in digitalisation and workplace development. The project involves collaboration between Norwegian Automobile Federation (NAF), NHO Service and Trade, and various member companies.

As part of the project, a PhD candidate at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology is conducting research on gender and ethnic segregation in the labour market, examining mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Her work highlights the role of local collaboration and union as platforms for promoting diversity and inclusion in the workplace. She is particularly interested in the experience of immigrant workers in Norway, the challenges they face, and methods for fostering organisational development through reflection, dialogue, and learning.

The *Clean Presence* project has a great potential of increasing knowledge of how to promote inclusion through collaboration in the workplace for the cleaning industry. The project will be completed by October 2025.

## Policies and regulations

In Norway, there are numerous legislations, policies and initiatives that address the work environment, also including stipulations specific to the cleaning industry. Overall, Norwegian regulations are relatively well developed.

Nevertheless, there is growing recognition of the need to update regulations concerning the psychosocial work environment to address some critical shortcomings. Despite the existing framework, many organisations struggle to adequately manage psychosocial risks. Reports from Sintef<sup>10</sup>, Agenda Kaupang<sup>11</sup>, and Stami<sup>12</sup> highlight that many businesses lack the knowledge and tools to proactively manage psychosocial and organisational workplace challenges. This gap can lead to significant workplace challenges, such as high levels of stress, burnout, and mental health issues among employees. The lack of

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<sup>10</sup> Thun, Sylvi; Buvik, Marte; Ose, Solveig (2022) *Kartlegging av psykososialt arbeidsmiljøarbeid*. Sintef. [sintef-rapport-kartlegging-psykososialt-arbeidsmiljoarbeid-fou-2021-15.pdf](https://www.sintef.no/rapport/kartlegging-psykososialt-arbeidsmiljoarbeid-fou-2021-15.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Agenda Kaupang. (2022). *Evaluering av arbeidsmiljøetsatsingen*. Agenda Kaupang. <https://www.agendakaupang.no/publication/evaluering-av-arbeidsmiljosatsingen/>

<sup>12</sup> Stami (2024) *Faktabok om arbeidsmiljø og helse*. [Faktabok om arbeidsmiljø og -helse 2024, status og utviklingstrekk \(stami.no\)](https://www.stami.no/faktabok-om-arbeidsmiljo-og-helse-2024-status-og-utviklingstrekk)



comprehensive regulations results in inconsistent practices across different sectors, leaving many employees vulnerable to adverse work conditions.

Existing initiatives	Summary
Working Environment Act	Legislation governing the working relationship between employers and employees. It aims to ensure a healthy, safe, and meaningful work environment by, for example, outlining requirements for working hours, wages, holidays, dismissals, protective measures, and employee co-determination.
Inclusive Working Life Agreement (IA Agreement)	<p>A tripartite agreement involving social partners and political authorities to promote a more inclusive work environment. It has two primary objectives: reducing sickness absence and extend employees' participation in the workforce.</p> <p>The IA agreement was valid until 2024. From 2025 onwards, the work to reduce sickness absence must be framed in a new way.</p> <p>The government wants the continued dialogue with the parties on sickness absence to take place through the Working Life and Pension Policy Council. There, the parties are already discussing key challenges in working life and pension policy.</p> <p>Negotiations on a new IA agreement may take place during 2025, but any outcome is currently unclear.</p>
Working Environment Initiative	A key component the <i>Inclusive Working Life Agreement</i> . This web portal strives to encourage enterprises to adopt a systematic and knowledge-based approaches to preventing work-related health issues. It involves collaborative efforts, including from the Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority, to develop and disseminate knowledge and tools related to the working environment.
Working Environment Portal	Stemming from the Working Environment Initiative, this web portal provides knowledge-based resources and tools to help enterprises systematically prevent sickness absence and improve working environment. The portal is tailored to support various industries.
General Application of the Collective Agreement	Ensures the widespread implementation of the collective agreements, including provisions for minimum wage regulations.
Recognition Scheme for Cleaning Companies	A scheme that ensures a comprehensive overview of all approved businesses within the cleaning industry.
ID Card Scheme for All Employees in Cleaning Companies	A scheme that guarantees identification cards for all employees in cleaning companies.

**Table 2:** Summaries of the main policy frameworks and regulations in Norway

Some sectors with high job demands, such as healthcare and education, demonstrate greater awareness of psychosocial work environment factors. However, they often face difficulties in implementing lasting changes due to structural challenges<sup>13</sup>. According to Agenda Kaupang<sup>14</sup>, while the *Work Environment Initiative* has successfully raised awareness and built competence around preventive measures, there is still untapped potential to deepen understanding of the root issues. This is particularly true for nuanced psychosocial factors, such as stress management, social support, and work-life balance.

In September 2023, the Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority submitted a report highlighting the need for improved regulation of the psychosocial work environment. The report provides examples of how refined legislation can drive proactive workplace efforts. The process of developing and enhancing the legal text will continue throughout 2024, with the earliest possible changes related to this expected in 2025. This presents a window of opportunity to influence legislative change.

Strengthening regulations related to psychosocial work environment would ensure that all workplaces prioritise employee well-being, implement effective preventive measures, and adapt to changing work conditions. At the same time, further efforts are needed to ensure workplaces apply legislation effectively in practice. This would not only foster healthier workplaces but also contribute to higher productivity and reduced absenteeism, benefiting both employees and organisations alike.

## Education and training

In Norway, the health and safety of work environment are a joint responsibility of Occupational Health Services (OHS), safety representatives, and – most importantly – employers. Each of them has their role in the system, and qualification requirements are specified in regulations. The Norwegian Community of Practice assesses that there is a need for more education on psychosocial factors across these professional groups. The Work Environment Initiative, which fosters collaboration to improve workplace conditions nationwide, contributes to awareness raising. However, even greater outreach would be needed to fully untap the potential of evidence-based knowledge and tools presented in the portal.

## Occupational Health Services

In addition to reactive measures in response to already manifested health issues, the Occupational Health Services are expected to proactively prevent health problems from arising, for example through risk assessments, workplace mapping, and providing training for leaders and employees in HSE. There are key requirements for education and training that can qualify health professionals to work in occupational health services, including:

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Agenda Kaupang. (2022). *Evaluering av arbeidsmiljøssatsingen*. Agenda Kaupang. <https://www.agendakaupang.no/publication/evaluering-av-arbeidsmiljosatsingen/>

- **Professional Competence:** The OHS must consist of qualified personnel, including occupational health professionals, nurses, and hygienists, with expertise in areas like occupational hygiene, ergonomics, and the psychosocial work environment.
- **Basic HSE Training:** Personnel are required to undergo basic training in health, safety, and environment (HSE), focusing on legislation and preventive health measures.
- **Continuous Updates:** OHS members must stay updated through ongoing education to ensure they provide relevant advice based on the latest research and best practices.
- **Specific Training for High-Risk Industries:** Personnel in high-risk sectors, such as construction and healthcare, require tailored training to address specific hazards.
- **Approval by Authorities:** The OHS must be approved by the Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority, ensuring they meet competence, resource, and organizational requirements.

### ***Safety Representatives***

In Norway, a **safety representative**, known as a "verneombud," is a worker elected to safeguard the health, safety, and working environment of employees at the workplace. The position is legally mandated by the Norwegian Working Environment Act (*Arbeidsmiljøloven*), which outlines employees' rights to participate in creating a safe and healthy working environment. The safety representative plays a crucial role in fostering collaboration between employees and management to maintain and improve workplace safety and well-being. This system is a cornerstone of Norway's commitment to ensuring a healthy and safe working environment for all.

Safety representatives undergo specific training to effectively fulfil their roles, as mandated by the Working Environment Act. Safety representatives must complete mandatory HSE training to understand the Working Environment Act, risk assessment, and hazard identification. The training typically lasts a minimum of 40 hours, adaptable to the complexity of the work environment.

Safety representatives are encouraged to pursue further education and refresher courses to stay current with legislation and workplace risk. Employers are responsible for ensuring safety representatives receive necessary training and resources.

### ***Training for Employers***

Employers and other workplace leaders play a crucial role in implementing safety measures and maintaining a culture of safety in workplaces. There are some training requirements in place to ensure that they are equipped with sufficient knowledge to fulfil their responsibilities.

Employers require specific HSE training as outlined in the Working Environment Act. All employers must complete basic HSE training covering risk management, internal control, and health hazard prevention. Topics include risk assessment, compliance, preventive measures for various work environment factors, and HSE management systems.

While the law does not specify a minimum duration, comprehensive training is recommended to last at least 40 hours, although this is not always the case. Training can be tailored to address specific risks in various sectors, particularly in high-risk industries. Employers must ensure their managers receive necessary training and resources.

### **Union Representatives Training**

The IA Agreement emphasises the importance of work environment training for trade union representatives to foster an inclusive workplace. The agreement encourages cooperation between union representatives, management, and safety representatives to proactively address health issues. Union Representatives are vital in advocating for health and safety measures and collaborating with management in workplaces.

Their training is not regulated by law, but through workplace environment initiatives, there is a shared understanding that education and knowledge about the work environment are essential. This knowledge includes understanding the work environment, identifying risks, and implementing preventive measures, with a particular emphasis on psychosocial aspects. It is important for union representatives to stay updated on best practices and strategies for promoting health and safety.

### **Training for Middle Managers**

The report "*Need for Better Regulation of the Psychosocial Work Environment*" from Labor Inspection Authority<sup>15</sup> highlights the necessity for training middle managers in preventive health practices. It underscores their pivotal role in addressing psychosocial challenges and suggests that improved training could reduce absenteeism and related costs for organisations. Currently, there is no requirement for middle managers' training related to work environment issues.

The Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority is currently collaborating with STAMI and social partners to review the training requirements for middle managers and consider whether these should be further strengthened.

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<sup>15</sup> Arbeidstilsynet (2023) *Behov for bedre regulering av psykososialt arbeidsmiljø*. Arbeidstilsynet. Available from: <https://www.arbeidstilsynet.no/contentassets/1715bdd4ec5943358b024e206969a5d4/behov-for-bedre-regulering-av-arbeidsmiljoloovens-krav-til-psykososialt-arbeidsmiljo.-utredning-av-arbeidstilsynet-2023.pdf>

## Need for Further Education and Awareness Raising

There is a pressing need for enhanced knowledge and training on psychosocial factors across all professional groups involved in the management of the psychosocial work environment. Many organisations struggle to comply with current regulations, highlighting gaps in training resources. Strengthening education on psychosocial aspects is crucial for effective risk management and fostering a healthier work culture. Improved training will empower both workplace leaders and employees to identify and address workplace challenges, leading to better overall working conditions.

The *Work Environment Initiative* has established collaborative efforts to disseminate knowledge, offer training, and provide guidance on preventive work environment practices. Key partners – STAMI, the Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority, NAV, Havtil, and others – are actively involved in equipping workplaces with vital knowledge and tools. However, this work is far from complete and must continue to ensure broader reach and impact.

Experiences from the *MentalHealthMatters* project highlight that significant potential for improvement also exists in the cleaning industry. By sharing evidence-based knowledge, tailored guidance, and practical tools, the goal is to foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement across industries. This ongoing effort remains essential to achieving healthier and safer work environments nationwide.

## Further reading

For further reading from Norway, we recommend consulting the following documents produced through the *MentalHealthMatters* project:

- **Mental health at work: Discussion document on policy options** – A document that explores country-specific policy options and recommendations for addressing psychosocial factors and promoting mental health in workplaces in Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Poland, and Norway. In addition, it highlights shared challenges in the Baltic Sea Region and proposes transnational collaborative solutions to create healthier and more resilient workplaces.
- **Mental health at work: Overview on definitions, regulations & further guidance** – A document compiling definitions, legislation, policies and guidance on psychosocial factors in the workplace in the Baltic Sea Region Countries.