Theoretical and empirical background for the guidance tool

The following is a brief description of how the different main inspirations for the guidance tools are put together to create a balance model. The balance model is underlying the guidance tools, by dividing them into three main parts: “prevalence of risk factor”, “prevention” and “organisational consequences”.

Research from the National Research Centre for the Working Environment in Denmark (NRCWE) has identified 6 key elements of major importance for the PWE (COPSOQ, NRCWE 2003):

- **Influence/control** on own work and working conditions. Low influence/control is a stressor. High influence/control is a growth factor.
- **Meaning** at work. Low meaning is a stressor. High meaning is a growth factor.
- **Reward** (wages, career, appreciation/recognition). Low reward relative to the effort is a stressor. High reward relative to the effort is a growth factor.
- **Predictability**. Relevant information about important plans and changes. Low predictability is a stressor.
- **Social support** from managers and colleagues. Low social support is a stressor. High social support is a growth factor.
- **Demand** (workload, pace of work). High or low demand is a stressor.

Based on the NRCWE research and the recommendations by the Methods Committee on regulating PWE the guidance tool primarily focus on demands, influence/control, and social support. Obviously other factors are relevant for PWE too but in developing the guidance tool, the WEA focus on the elements relevant to labour inspection in the Danish context, i.e. the psychosocial factors which are linked to the working situation of the employees.

The conceptual framework underlying the guidance tool could be described as an extended Karasek model (Karasek and Theorell, 1990):

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![Demand-Control Model](image)

After Karasek and Theorell Demand-Control Model (1990)
The model highlights the importance of looking both at the specific demands in a given job and which means of control the employee has of his/her work conditions – in the model below translated into the resources made available by the enterprise to assist the employee in fulfilling the job demands.

The concept of resources in the guidance tool is a broader concept of influence/control. It also consists of e.g. support from colleagues and management, practical help, help with prioritisations, clear tasks and expectations, training, and balance between quantity and quality on one hand and time available on the other hand.

Furthermore, the tool is based on the risk management approach for managing working environment. That is, a focus on the organisational rather than individual level, a participatory approach (which, here, means that the purpose of the tool is to access the “local knowledge” of the employees and managers; i.e. the guidance tool is designed as questions for employees and management), and that the factors being assessed should cover the most important and prevalent PWE risk factors in a given sector. These considerations lead to the following 6 risk factors in focus:

- Quantitative demands (workload, pace of work)
- Emotional demands
- Work related violence
- Traumatic experiences
- Night- and shiftwork
- Bullying and sexual harassment

These risk factors are characterised by being both prevalent in many sectors and by being within the realms of what the WEA are entitled to inspect. Using the risk factor approach the aim of the inspections become to assess if and how a given risk factor is present in an enterprise and which means the enterprise uses to assure that the risk factor is either eliminated, reduced or handled to prevent health risks. This way, in the guidance tool, “demand” is translated into “prevalence of risk factor” and "resources" are translated into “prevention”.

The focus of the inspection is to assess whether there is a balance between the prevalence of the risk factor and the prevention measures taken by the enterprise. In making this assessment, the inspector can use knowledge about consequences of problems in the psychosocial working environment that can be measured on an organisational level, e.g. low quality, high turnover and high sickness absence. When
introducing the risk factor approach and organisational consequences the balance model ends up as follows:

Thus, the PWE risk factors combined with the extended Karasek model and the risk management approach are translated into the guidance tool consisting of three parts:

- At the left side are questions aiming at assessing the prevalence of the risk factor
- On the right side are questions aimed at assessing the measures the enterprises take to prevent that the risk factor becomes a health risk
- At the bottom are questions aimed at assessing organisational consequences.

The following is an example of the risk factor violence and threats, from the “office” guidance tool. Please note that in the Danish context the risk factor of violence and threats primarily encompass aggression from external parties (e.g. clients/ customers/ citizens) whereas the risk factor of bullying and sexual harassment encompass aggression inside the workplace (e.g. employee-employee aggression, which in some cases is described as horizontal violence; McKenna et al., 2003).
The idea behind the tool is that the prevalence of risk factors influences the necessity for prevention, and the level of prevention has implications for the organizational consequences, which in turn has implications for the prevalence of risk factors. Thus, more risks require more prevention while alternatively, more demanding work can be accepted with higher levels of prevention.