

THE COMPETENCIES AND TASKS OF WORKERS' REPRESENTATIVES IN THE FIELD OF OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract To achieve the European Union Council's zero-vision, aiming to reduce the number of fatal workplace accidents to zero, a crucial task lies ahead for the actors of tripartism, including workers' representatives involved in occupational safety and health. To this end, it is necessary to identify the competencies required for carrying out their tasks and their components.

In the systematic literature review, research trends regarding the competencies and tasks of workers' representatives from 2013 to 2023 were identified using the PRISMA method. The search terms, such as "competencies," "workers' representative," and "employee representative," were defined, along with exclusions necessary to narrow down the search results, such as "education," "student," "school," and "nurse." The research was conducted across three databases via university access: Web of Science and Scopus for their high-quality journals, and Google Scholar for its vast database.

Using this method, 860 articles were identified: 634 from Google Scholar, 99 from Scopus, and 127 from Web of Science. Duplicates (136 publications), books, and conference papers (144 publications), and non-English articles (16 publications) were filtered out. From the remaining 564 articles, exclusions were manually applied (495 publications). As a result, 69 articles remained for detailed analysis, of which 13 were not freely accessible, 22 were not journal articles, 1 was not within the specified timeframe, and 17 did not contain relevant information for research. Finally, 16 publications were processed.

Although only 1 article focused on the competencies of workers' representatives, communication was addressed in all works. Most publications dealt with labour affairs (10 articles), works councils and occupational safety and health (7 articles each), transnational tasks and collective agreements (5 articles each), labour law (4 articles), and conflict management (3 articles).

The findings of the research could be useful in defining tasks related to the education of workers' representatives in the field of occupational safety and health, as well as in measuring their performance.

Keywords: Workers' representative; employees' representative; competencies; competent; tripartism.

1. INTRODUCTION

To establish conditions for healthy and safe work and to realize the strong social Europe aimed at fair transition as outlined in the European Parliament resolution of 17 December 2020 [1], which calls on Member States to commit to eliminating work-related deaths by 2030 and reducing work-related illnesses by 2030, every participant in occupational safety and health, including workers' representatives, has an important task. Prepared and competent workers' representatives can contribute to the practical implementation of this endeavour. There is no overview available regarding the competencies, skills, and abilities that make these employees suitable and competent for carrying out the representative tasks.

Although the regulations hold the employer responsible for creating conditions for safe and healthy work, achieving these goals imposes essential obligations on all three participants of the tripartite system of occupational safety and health (the state, employers, and employees).

Workers' representatives can play a significant role in workplace decision-making and the protection of employees' interests. Especially due to the stimulating emotions elicited by the information conveyed through speech [2]. They can assist in the selection of personal protective equipment, monitor their use, or provide training related to their use [3], respectively they can also provide daily support in identifying and avoiding ergonomic risks [4]. One of their most important tasks is active participation in informing and consulting between the employer and employees [5], [6]. To fulfil their duties at a high level and in a manner that meets the needs of their constituents, they need to possess appropriate competencies and skills.

Despite not requiring professionals for representation, it is essential for these workers to have adequate training. To be competent in their roles, it is necessary to first gather the required competencies and skills for their activities and identify the areas for their education. The resulting knowledge, even if not entirely, will determine success [7].

The aim of the research is to gather from publications prepared by experts the tasks of workers' representatives in the field of occupational safety and health, as well as the competencies and skills required for this purpose.

1.1 Workers' representative

The Lisbon Treaty, amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community, addresses occupational safety in Article 153, specifically focusing on informing workers and consulting with them [5]. The European Union defines the concept of workers' representatives in various regulations, including those related to collective redundancies [8], transfer of undertakings or businesses [9], the establishment of community-level enterprises [10], or workplace safety and health [6]. While these regulations identify them as representatives of the workers, other terms have also become prevalent. For example, in some Eurofound studies, they are referred to as "employee representatives" [11], or in Hungarian regulations, as "occupational safety and health representatives" [12].

According to the European Union directive on the introduction of measures to improve the safety and health protection of workers, worker's representatives are those employees those elected, selected, or designated in accordance with national laws or practices to represent employees where issues arise concerning the protection of workers' occupational safety and health [6].

According to Hungarian regulations, a safety and health representatives are those employees elected by employees who represents workers' rights and interests related to safe and healthy working conditions in cooperation with the employer [12].

1.2 Competencies

Today, competency assessment and competency-based selection have become integral parts of our lives. One of the most well-known the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), conducted under the auspices of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) among 15-year-old students in OECD member countries and partner nations participating in the program [13]. Administered every three years in the domains of mathematical literacy, scientific literacy, or reading comprehension, the test aims to evaluate knowledge applicable in everyday life [14].

Another crucial area for measuring competency is the selection of workplace leaders and professionals [15]. A vital task of Human Resource Management (HRM) is the selection of competent individuals, those most suitable for the given tasks [16].

In the European Union, it was recognized as early as the late 1990s that the basis of competitiveness lies in the knowledge-based economy [17]. The key competences necessary for this were formulated in the 2006 recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union.

The key competences necessary for achieving the goal and to be acquired by everyone are [18]:

- Communication in the mother tongue;
- Communication in foreign languages;
- Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology;
- Digital competence;
- Learning to learn;
- Social and civic competences;
- Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; and
- Cultural awareness and expression.

According to Tucker and Cofsky, competence is a primary characteristic of an individual that can be used to predict efficiency, and it has five types [19].

- Knowledge – information accumulated in a particular area of expertise
- Skills, Expertise – the demonstration of expertise
- Traits – a general disposition to behave in certain ways
- Self-concepts – attitudes, values and self-image
- Motives – recurrent thoughts that drive behaviours.

Spencer and his colleagues further classified competencies into two main groups [20]:

- Foundational Competencies: These are essential for someone to be successful in a specific job or task, including knowledge and skills [20].

Foundational competencies are often acquired through training and development [19].

- Distinctive Competencies: These are the competencies that differentiate general performance from excellent performance. These include traits, self-concepts, and motives [20].

These distinctive competencies are generally challenging to develop [19].

The aim of the research is to explore the competencies and skills expected from workers' representatives involved in the field of occupational health and safety, as outlined in the professional literature. The significance of this lies in enhancing their training and increasing their effectiveness.

2. METHOD

For the systematic review of the literature in this field, the methodology of the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol has been chosen [21].

The research questions were as follows:

- What competencies and skills are required for workers' representatives in the field of occupational safety and health?
- What are the responsibilities of workers' representatives in the field of occupational safety and health?

During the research, it was determined as a criterion that the publications had to be published in English between 2013 and 2023 and freely available. Conference papers and books had to be excluded. The search terms used were "competencies employees' representatives" and "competencies workers' representatives". Furthermore, duplications and the words "education, student, school, nurse" were excluded from the search. The queries in all three databases were conducted on February 1st, 2024.

The research was conducted using online databases accessible through the institution. Search engines were selected based on predefined criteria to facilitate data collection. Therefore, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar databases were chosen. This allowed for inclusion of both high-quality scientific publications and those with lower international journal rankings in the results.

- Web of Science: contains a limited number of high-quality publications [22].
- Scopus: Includes publications from a wide range of high-quality journals [22].
- Google Scholar: Despite having a large database and a search list that includes not only high-quality publications, research shows that Google Scholar is gaining acceptance as a resource for open access literature [23]. The database is freely accessible to anyone. For the Web of Science and Scopus databases, approximately two-thirds of the results are present in both databases, but the remaining one-third is unique to either one or the other [24].

Due to the different structures of the databases, various search methods had to be employed. In the case of Web of Science, when using the search terms "competencies employees' representatives" and "competencies workers' representatives", the database search engine automatically supplemented the search expressions with an "AND" operator. The search was conducted according to the settings within the titles, abstracts and indexing. In contrast, the search in the Scopus database required the use of operators, so the search terms were "competencies AND employees' AND representatives" and "competencies AND workers' AND representatives". The search was conducted within the titles, abstracts and keywords. If no operator is specified, the search engine automatically supplements the search with an "AND" between the words. The most complex setting was in the case of Google

Scholar. To narrow down the results, special search options had to be used. Based on the settings, the search had to include the word "competencies" as well as the terms "employees' representatives" and "workers' representatives". In the search engine of this database, there was also the option to automatically filter out some of the exceptions, such as the words "education, student, school, nurse".

The results were processed in an Excel spreadsheet, and data from Web of Science and Scopus could be directly exported. For Google Scholar, search results could be copied to Excel using Harzing's Publish or Perish (Windows GUI Edition 8.9.4554.8721 2023.11.16 1208). All publications that dealt with the competence of workers' representatives were preserved. The results of the two types of searches conducted in all three databases were merged into a common list of hits.

First, duplicated articles were manually removed, followed by the automatic exclusion of publications labelled as "book" and "conference". In the next step, publications in languages other than English were excluded. In the next stage of the study, each of the remaining articles was individually reviewed for their titles, keywords, and, to avoid erroneous decisions, in questionable cases, their abstracts as well. Finally, the data extraction was completed through empirical research, involving selected publications, qualitative assessment, and text analysis, aided by word cloud generation using WordArt (<https://wordart.com/>).

3. RESULTS

In total, 860 publications were registered across the three databases. Of these, 634 articles were found in Google Scholar, 99 articles in Scopus, and 127 articles in Web of Science. The results yielded 136 duplicate records, which were removed. Additionally, 144 books and conference proceedings were excluded using automatic filtering. Furthermore, 16 non-English language publications were deleted.

After the initial screenings, the remaining list of 564 articles underwent manual review one by one. Primarily, titles and keywords were examined, but in cases of uncertainty, abstracts were also considered to avoid errors. Articles related to education, students, schools, and nurses were excluded. Following the filtering process, 69 publications met the criteria.

The remaining 69 studies underwent individual empirical method, text analysis. Among them, 17 articles did not contain relevant data, 22 works were not journal articles, 13 publications were not freely accessible, and one article was not published between 2013 and 2023. Finally, 16 studies met all the requirements.

The key identifiers of the 16 publications revealed during the screening process (the title of the work, the authors, and the year of publication) were recorded.

During the examined period (2013-2023), it cannot be conclusively stated that the number of publications is increasing. Instead, it is more discernible that interest in the field grows from time to time. It can be observed that there were no publications in 2013, 2016 and 2020, while there was a remarkably high result in 2022.

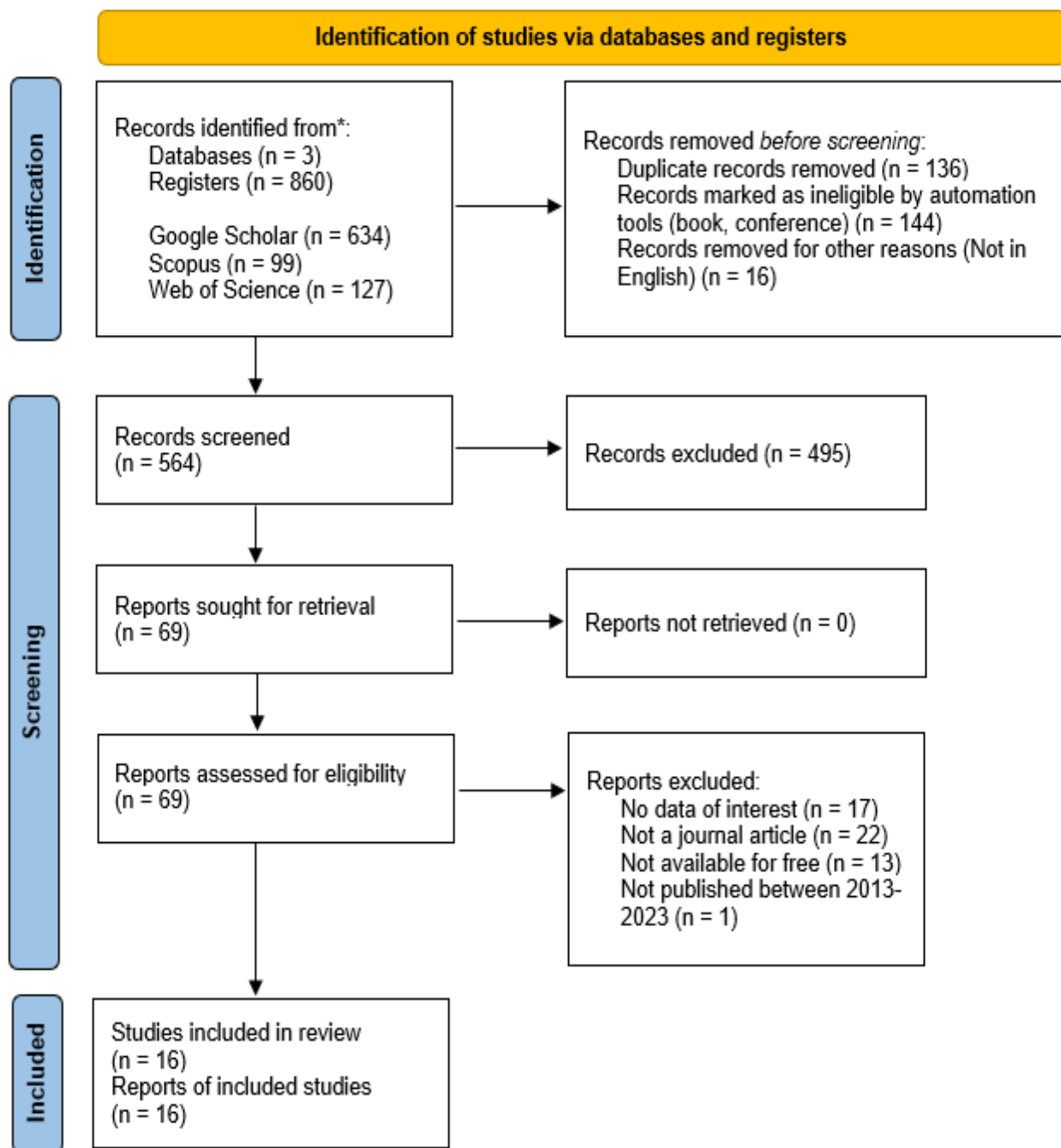


Figure 1. Flowchart of the systematic literature review, source: editing by the authors based on PRISMA recommendation.

Table 1. Title, author(s) with year of publication of results in alphabetical order.

1	Institution-Building on Shop-floor Employees' Representation with Reference to International Norms and Representative Industrial Democracy: A First Attempt to Model Dualchannel Representation in Turkey [25]	Toker DERELİ Aslı TAŞBAŞI Elif Çağlı KAYNAK Y. Pınar SARICA	2022
2	European Works Councils in the Pharmaceutical Industry [26]	Eleni Triantafillidou Theodore Koutroukis	2022
3	Competent or Competitive? How employee representatives gain influence in organizational decision-making [27]	Ana Belén García Lourdes Munduate Patricia Elgoibar Hein Wendt Martin Euwema	2015
4	General aspects regarding the evolution of the regulations of the collective labor conflicts in Romania [28]	Eufemia Vieriu Dumitru Vieriu	2017
5	Health and safety at work - a fundamental right of all participants in the labor process [29]	MIHAELA-LAVINIA CIOBĂNICĂ	2017
6	Legal and institutional framework for safety and health at work in the Republic of North Macedonia [30]	Andon Majhosev Vera Paraklieva	2019
7	Non-Union Representatives of Employees [31]	Iwona Sierocka	2022
8	Operation and Action of a Trade Union (in Terms of Czech Republic Labour Law) [32]	Jan Horecký	2018
9	Reforming Trade Unions in The Republic of Kazakhstan [33]	N.V. Gileva S.Zh. Aidarbayev D.Q. Zhekenov	2022
10	The Future of Social Dialogue in the Age of Artificial Intelligence [34]	Viorel Rotilă	2019
11	The importance of social dialogue and collective bargaining in the process of shaping working conditions [35]	Jan Horecký Michal Smejkal	2021
12	The legal status of the elected employees' representatives in the community normative acts and legislation of the republic Moldova [36]	Eduard Boisteanu Iulia DRUMEA	2014
13	The obligations to inform and consult the union / employees' representatives in the collective redundancy procedure [37]	Iordache Mădălina-Ani	2023
14	The Unification of Terminology in Terms of Impact of Employees on Decisions Taken in European Business Entities and Polish Law [38]	Aneta Giedrewicz-Niewińska	2017
15	Worker participation in a company's decision making process [39]	Kazimierz Ostaszewski Olga Ostaszewska	2015
16	Workers' Representation in European Law [40]	Monika Tomaszewska	2015

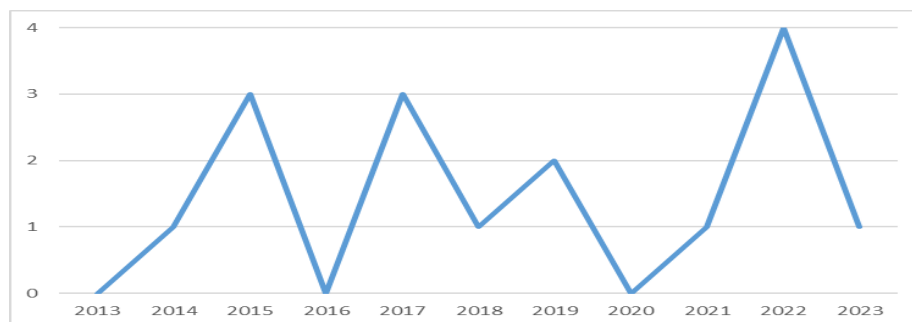


Figure 2. Publication time of the selected publications.

The distribution of publications by country shows a strong bias towards Eastern Europe. 81% of the published works (13 articles) originated from this region. There are 4 articles each from Poland and Romania, 2 from the Czech Republic, and 1 each from Spain, Greece, Kazakhstan, Macedonia, Moldova, and Turkey.

Table 2. The distribution of publications by country.

The distribution of publications by country	
Republic of Poland	4
Romania	4
Czech Republic	2
Spain	1
Hellenic Republic	1
Republic of Kazakhstan	1
Macedonia	1
Republica Moldova	1
Turkey	1

The majority of the studies (12 articles) emphasize the role of trade unions as representatives of workers. They consider an important task of representation to handle labour issues (10 articles), the role of works councils and occupational safety (7 articles each), and the establishment of transnational works councils and the conclusion of collective agreements (5 articles each), following the pattern preferred by the European Un-ion. Conflict resolution appears in only a fifth of the works (3 articles). While the emergence of artificial intelligence (1 article) was not the focus of the research, it could have a positive impact on the information and consultation areas. Despite being mentioned very rarely (1 article), tripartism remains a recurring motive in the processed literature.

Table 3. The majority of the studies.

The majority of the studies	
Trade union	12
Labor affairs	10
Occupational Safety and Health	7
Works council	7
Collective labour agreement	5
Transnational	5
Labor law	4
Conflict management	3
Tripartism	1
Artificial Intelligence	1

During the exploration of competencies, it can be noted that almost all selected articles exclusively focus on communication competencies. Knowledge comes into prominence only once.

Table 4. Identification of competencies.

Identification of competencies	
Consultation	10
Information	9
Dialogue	7
Social dialogue	5
Cooperation	5
Discussion	4
Exchange of information	3
Consulting	2
Expertise	1
Knowledge	1

Regarding communication competency, consultation (10 articles) and informing (9 articles) are the most frequently mentioned aspects. Dialogue (7 articles), cooperation and social dialogue (5 articles each), discussion (4 articles), exchange of information (3 articles), and consulting (2 articles) are also defined. Knowledge and expertise were identified in only one article.

Some main ideas of the examined literature:

- Trade unions play an important role in representing the interests of workers [32].
- Workers' representatives can also help in settling labour affairs with the employer [33].
- The works council model is also legally supported by the European Union [39].
- The role of workers' representatives is legally regulated in the area of workplace safety and health protection [30].
- Information and consultation must take place on a transnational level [26].
- The collective agreement plays an important role in terms of occupational health and safety [29].
- Labor law only provides an opportunity, not an obligation, to elect workers' representatives [36].
- One of the important tasks of interest representation is conflict management [25].
- The power lies in expertise and knowledge. A trained, competent representative holds greater influence [27].
- Information and consultation can also be provided with the help of AI [34].

4. DISCUSSION

The study examined which countries have been most engaged with workers' representatives in recent years. Although there was no requirement to prioritize works by authors from Eastern Europe during the selection of articles, two-thirds of them originated from this region. This could be attributed to the breakdown of the socialist system and the subsequent strengthening of workers' representation desires, as well as the increasing presence of foreign companies and changes in employer systems in the region.

Based on the results, it can be concluded that the efforts towards informing employees and consulting with them are present in the daily activities of workers' representatives. The publications do not specify the extent and amount of knowledge, as well as the behaviour required for their activities. The determination of these is indispensable for competency-based training. The primary aim of the

research was to map the current state of the scientific field in order to determine which areas should be focused on or considered in the training of workers' representatives.

In the systematic literature review, excluding books and conference proceedings may have resulted in missing out on significant information. To achieve a more comprehensive understanding, further exploration of additional databases, thorough examination of citations, and reconsideration and refinement of keywords are important.

During the examination of competencies, it can be observed that these articles are solely focused on communication and do not address areas such as knowledge, expertise, traits, mindset, and motivations. While this narrowed down the scope of the re-search, it provides an opportunity for these aspects to be explored and defined in more detail in future studies.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the research was to systematically explore the literature on the competencies of workers' representatives. Detailed analysis of the initially selected 16 publications revealed that experts are aware of the selection and appointment process of these workers and the legal background of their tasks. Based on the study, it can be stated that trade unions are considered the main pillar of employee representation, with their primary task being labour representation. Most articles focused on the establishment and operation of local and transnational works councils. The timing of publication does not indicate a rising interest, rather, it suggests periodic increases in interest in the field.

To implement the Vision Zero approach for occupational safety and health in the field, one of the most cost-effective options is the involvement of worker representatives in occupational safety. However, studies barely touch upon these employees, despite the potential to create healthier and safer workplaces through their training and ongoing consultation.

The first research question, which sought to identify the competencies required for workers' representatives to perform their tasks, remained unanswered, as only communication competence was defined in the publications included in the study. Knowledge and expertise were only briefly mentioned in one article.

The second research question, which sought to identify the tasks of workers' representatives, was partially answered, as the selected articles contain the main tasks de-fined in the legislation, but the duties related to occupational safety were not detailed.

During the literature review, many terms related to workers' representatives were identified, and further research on these terms could help determine the competencies of workers' representatives in the field of occupational safety in the future.

In summary, based on the study, it can be concluded that the examined publications do not comprehensively reveal the tasks and competencies of workers' representatives. This is particularly true for workers' representatives dealing with workplace safety and health.

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