

Even micro-enterprises are able to make risk assessments - a joint campaign by the Berlin and Brandenburg health and safety authorities together and the social accident insurance associations

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The report is a summary of the results of a joint action of the Berlin and Brandenburg health and safety authorities and the German Social Accident Insurance. The campaign was titled 'Risk assessment and implementation of health and safety measures in micro enterprises, and was the result of cooperation of the OSH authorities of the German states of Berlin and Brandenburg, the Statutory Accident Insurance Institution for the Building and Construction Trade (BG BAU), the North German BG for the Metal Trade, the BG for the Quarry Trade, the BG for the Precision and Electrical Engineering Trade and the BG for Administrative Occupations.

Risk assessments have been obligatory for more than ten years. This project focused on small and micro enterprises, which encounter particular problems with regard to the systematic approach required for successful risk assessment. In their case, the company's struggle to survive often means that health and safety considerations slip off the boss's radar. It is therefore even more important that risk assessment is not regarded as yet another bureaucratic requirement that is more trouble than it is worth.

Specific goals were:

- to identify risks that employers have problems in identifying
- to identify risks where the measures taken are insufficient
- to implement more systematic risk assessment and
- to improve the internal health and safety culture and organisation in micro enterprises.

The idea was to use the findings of the project to help the OSH authorities and the statutory accident insurance institutions to develop information strategies to improve knowledge about those risks and how to reduce them.

The campaign also had internal goals:

- to develop a common understanding among the various supervisory bodies and their inspectors about what is acceptable and what is not acceptable when it comes to risk assessments
- to develop a common understanding of the correct measures to take in the event of a particular risk being identified
- to develop a coordinated approach which is as convenient as possible for micro enterprises
- to use the findings of the campaign to improve the training of labour inspectors.

As a first step 1500 micro enterprises (i.e. enterprises with less than 10 employees) were surveyed to find out how they deal with the legal obligation to carry out a risk assessment. If the approach adopted by an enterprise proves unsatisfactory because the appropriate health and safety measures have not been determined by the boss, then it must be improved. Although establishing a suitable and practical approach is first and foremost a matter for the employer and his internal experts, it can and should also be supported by the health and safety authorities and the statutory accident insurance institutions.

Ten years after the Health and Safety Act came into force, one-third of micro enterprises had still not carried out their risk assessment. They were granted six more months to fulfil the legal obligation with the support of their statutory accident insurance institution. But the project also analysed the quality of the risk assessments that had been carried out. Unfortunately, the risk assessment records submitted by enterprises that had assessed their risks did not always come up to the expectations of the supervisory bodies. In such businesses, further inspections on the basis of previously unconsidered risks were found to be necessary. Micro enterprises that had conducted non-sufficient quality risk assessments were invited to improve the assessments and to report back independently to the appropriate authorities.

It was determined that the employers had particular problems identifying biological risks, risks caused by dangerous substances or by vibration, and psychological risks. In the case of these risks, measures taken to reduce or eliminate them were also found to be inadequate. These risks should be a priority for the OSH authorities in the coming years.

For the Berlin-Brandenburg region, the campaign refutes the theory put forward in national publications that the majority of employers in micro enterprises either don't do risk assessments, or they don't do them properly. The majority of employers in micro businesses are clearly motivated to protect the health of their employees through appropriate measures, even if they are not all aware that this decision-making process is called 'risk assessment'.

The action sets new standards in a number of aspects for future health and safety actions on the part of the institutional bodies in the Berlin-Brandenburg region. The development of a common basic understanding on the implementation of risk assessment and the task-sharing procedure of the state health and safety administration and accident insurers make it possible to provide employers with professional advice as well as joint approaches for the optimum use of resources. This approach is also currently being pursued nationally on the basis of the *Gemeinsame Deutsche Arbeitsschutzstrategie* (GDA) [Common German Health and Safety Strategy] established in November 2006.

Micro enterprises employ a large proportion of workers and are central to the country's economic success. As such, they are a priority group when it comes to the implementation of health and safety measures at the workplace.