Healthy Workplaces Summit, Bilbao, 3–4 November 2015

Healthy Workplaces Manage Stress

The Healthy Workplaces Summit 2015 marked the close of the Healthy Workplaces Manage Stress campaign, with more than 300 delegates attending from across Europe. Participants, including national focal points, official campaign partners and media partners, provided significant support throughout the two-year campaign and the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work was delighted to welcome them all to Bilbao.

The summit was a unique opportunity for networking among occupational safety and health (OSH) professionals, researchers, decision makers, policy advisers, representatives of employers and trade unions, and others. The aim was to reflect on the successes of the campaign and lessons learned, exchange good practice and foster discussion on managing stress and psychosocial risks. Highlights of the summit included political statements, parallel sessions providing insight and advice on contemporary OSH topics, and a panel discussion on putting research on psychosocial risks and stress in the workplace into practice.

During the event, #EUOSHAsummit was in the top 10 trending topics in Bilbao. And, over the 28-day period before the event, @EU_OSHA gained an average of eight new followers per day. @PPEorg summarised the key message of the event nicely: ‘Stress can affect any of us. But it can be beaten. Christa Sedlatschek. #EUOSHAsummit’. See the great social media response to the Healthy Workplaces Summit 2015 and keep up to date with all of EU-OSHA’s activities on Twitter and Facebook.

This event was held in memory of Dr Eusebio Rial González (1966–2014), who was Head of Prevention and Research Unit at EU-OSHA and the architect of the Healthy Workplaces Manage Stress campaign.
Opening session

With an engaging, warm and friendly moderator in Brenda O’Brien of EU-OSHA, the opening session of the summit was in good hands. The speakers comprised Marianne Thyssen of the European Commission, Nicolas Schmit of the Luxembourgish EU Council Presidency, Pedro Llorente of the Spanish Government and Angel Toñá of the Basque Government, and representing the social partners Esther Lynch of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and Kris De Meester of BusinessEurope. All speakers congratulated EU-OSHA on the tremendous work it had done in raising awareness of stress and psychosocial risks at work, and recognised the impact it has had on improving prevention across Europe by disseminating scientific evidence, tools and good practice solutions. Many speakers also congratulated the winners of the Healthy Workplaces Good Practice Awards and acknowledged their importance in demonstrating success stories.

Key points

- Prevention is the best option for tackling work-related stress and psychosocial risks. People need to be actively involved, and trust, respect and support are key. Employers need to take responsibility for the mental health of their workforce, but employees also need to take responsibility for themselves.

- Stress and psychosocial risks affect not only the individual, but also their family, businesses (in terms of productivity and functioning) and society and the economy as a whole.

- Focusing on people is essential. We need to adapt jobs to individual’s capabilities, which are changing over time with, for example, technological developments.

- Smaller businesses can often struggle to identify stress and psychosocial risks and greatly benefit from practical tools. This campaign has played an important role in raising awareness of and disseminating tools, particularly for this target group.

- Europe needs to converge at the top, prioritising its people, rather than its market. Internal markets do have to make progress but we also need social progress, and legislation is required to do this.

- The representatives of the Spanish and Basque Governments both drew attention to their new risk prevention strategies of 2015–2020, which identify objectives and set realistic goals.
The legacy of Dr Eusebio Rial González

This session began with a touching and heart-felt video compiled by EU-OSHA, which revealed just how influential, well loved and respected Seb (as he was known) was. Professor Thomas Cox, Seb’s long-standing mentor, delivered the dedication, describing it as an ‘honour tinged with sadness’.

He began by describing the metamorphosis of the field of work-related stress, from a subject of academic interest to one of great societal importance. Without the insight, belief and unwavering commitment of a number of key players (of whom Seb was certainly one), this transformation would not have been possible.

In describing their earlier years together at the University of Nottingham, UK, Seb’s obvious academic ability, excellent communication skills and dedication were the focus. Eventually, the call of his homeland and family were too strong, and Seb left Nottingham for EU-OSHA. But his continued support to the academy they had founded together, the European Academy of Occupational Health Psychology, typified the support and commitment he gave to everything he was involved in. Even without his later contributions to EU-OSHA, of which ESENER, OiRA and OSHwiki are but a few, Seb’s early achievements marked him out as someone special.

Seb’s vibrant sense of humour and fun and exhaustible good will towards others stand side by side with his significant achievements. Seb’s work is likely to be used in everyday life by OSH professionals for a very long time to come. Seb was greatly respected and now, sadly, is greatly missed. Gone now but not, and never to be, forgotten.

This session ended with the announcement of a new award in memory of Seb: the Eusebio Rial González Innovation and Practice Award in Occupational Health Psychology. This biannual award, set up to honour the work and life of Seb and to keep his memory alive, is open to OSH researchers and practitioners. Further information on the application process can be obtained from the European Academy of Occupational Health Psychology (www.eaohp.org). A winner of the first edition will be announced in April 2016.

Parallel sessions

With the aim of fostering discussion and debate on a range of contemporary OSH topics, three interactive and engaging sessions were run in parallel. In each session, questions were posed to the audience who could cast their votes using individual keypads. Results displayed both the consensus within the room and the correct answer — if there was one! Providing insights and advice on various OSH topics relevant to businesses and organisations throughout Europe, each session also featured opportunities for the audience to ask questions of the speakers.
Session 1: Good practices for managing stress and psychosocial risks at work

Chaired by Peter Kelly, the Healthy Workplaces Good Practice Awards jury chair, this session focused on the importance of demonstrating success stories and good practice. Representatives from four of the award-winning companies of the Healthy Workplaces Good Practice Awards 2014–2015 — Lån & Spar Bank, Denmark; Deutsche Post, Germany; Siemens, Belgium and Germany; and Zavarovalnica Triglav, Slovenia— were invited to give presentations about how they manage stress and psychosocial risks in their companies, after which a lively panel discussion followed.

You can find out more about the initiatives and programmes in each of these companies, and of all the other award winners, in the Healthy Workplaces Good Practice Awards 2014–2015 booklet.

Key points

- Success in managing stress and psychosocial risks requires the commitment of top management, using the business case to convince them, although the question of ethics and morals is also a factor. But other levels of an organisation also need to be considered. Line managers, for example, play an essential role in the effective implementation of measures aimed to prevent stress and psychosocial risks among their staff.

- Participative approach and a good corporate culture are crucial. Fostering trust, respect and openness can help to deal with the stigma that can surround stress and psychosocial risks. Employees need to be open with management about their concerns related to stress at work, but management also need to be open with employees. The intentions of the organisation need to be communicated to employees, and an atmosphere in which employees feel comfortable in talking is essential.

- Often, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are perceived as having difficulties in managing stress and psychosocial risks. But, in many of the speakers’ experiences, SMEs are also able to tackle these problems effectively, often ‘benefiting’ from their size by getting closer to the problem. Hotel Colón, another Healthy Workplaces Good Practice Award winner, was given as an example. SMEs need help primarily in the form of expertise related to, for example, practical tools applicable to their workplace.

- Corporate social responsibility is also an element for larger organisations: if health and well-being are at the organisation’s centre, this should also feature when outsourcing.

Session 2: Strategies and programmes for managing stress and psychosocial risks at work

The management of work-related stress is influenced not only by the direct actions of employers and employees in the workplace. Policy-makers, labour inspectors, experts, information providers and social partners all play a role in driving prevention and reducing the costs to Europe’s workers, businesses and States. This interactive session was chaired by Francisco Jesús Álvarez Hidalgo and considered the different roles and responsibilities of those influencing prevention. During the course of the session, the following aspects were discussed in more detail: legislation, compliance and the role of labour inspection, sectoral approaches, provision of professional support (e.g. by psychologists) and motivation of employers to take action.
Key points

- Various Member States have adopted legislation that specifically incorporates psychosocial risk assessment into prevention strategies. Legislation should be focused on prevention and employers and workers need support in terms of tools and guidance for implementation.

- Duty-holders have to be able to implement legislation and inspectorates have to be able to enforce it consistently. The law has to reflect the national needs, system, and culture. Duty-holders and enforcing authorities have to have access to the information and support they need.

- Measurement of inspection impact is difficult. Psychosocial work environment depends on much more than inspection but improvement notices and repeated visits in combination with appropriate guidance seem to be a very successful approach.

- Specific sectors may have specific problems, and those operating in the sectors are most aware of the challenges they face and their needs. Targeted tools, training, and other interventions can be very effective at sector level, but always there is the greatest effectiveness when there is social dialogue at workplace as well as societal level.

- As an external actor, a psychologist can obtain an objective view of an organisation and foster open discussions. Professional support can produce appropriate measures, usually related to work organisation. Managers can also gain a much deeper insight into their organisation. However, both employees and employers must have a clear view of what the psychologist is there to do.

- Stress and psychosocial risks have substantial costs for companies in terms of absenteeism and productivity losses. Demonstrating this cost to employers can be an effective way of motivating them to take action. The higher stress levels are, the higher the cost is to employers, and tools to measure stress levels can be very useful.

- There are measures and approaches available that are not going along with great investments and expensive measures, sometimes small changes, supported by management and the workforce can make a big difference. And it’s our joint responsibility to point these out, to make enterprises, stakeholders and politicians aware. Because only a motivated and healthy workforce will be able to cope with the challenges we face in this changing world of work.

- Across Europe there are many initiatives on psychosocial risks – from legislation to inspection campaigns and provision of tools to motivational approaches. Stakeholders can and hopefully will learn and be inspired by each other.

Session 3: Let’s talk about OSH — innovative ways for communicating on occupational safety and health

With a witty and engaging moderator in Philippe Borremans, an experienced communication consultant and trainer, this session focused on the importance of communicating OSH issues and innovative ways of doing this. It covered serious gaming, discussed by a representative of TNO, the Netherlands; ‘new media’ or social media as an opportunity for OSH communication, presented by the head of communication at INRS France; and storytelling in effective communication, explored by Philippe Borremans.

Serious gaming

- A serious game is one in which education is the primary goal, not entertainment.

- The applications of serious gaming are increasing (e.g. for children to understand their diabetes, flight simulations).

- Benefits: the user can experiment with situations without the fear of negative consequences, direct feedback can be received, and both short- and long-term consequences can be experienced.
Engagementgame, a game designed as an intervention to prevent work-related stress, targeting managers, was used as an example. The player is a manager of a Mexican restaurant and has to achieve good financial results, choosing appropriate actions to take and creating dialogue with employees.

**New media or social media**

- From promoting a risk assessment tool for very small enterprises to publicising a film competition for high school students, social media can be used in OSH in a wide variety of ways.
- You can monitor the success of your social media campaign, including any type of platform (e.g. LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest), using free online tools, and these tools can help to convince top management of the importance of new media.
- There are substantial benefits of using infographics to demonstrate scientific results: journalists may not attend a press conference, but can easily access and share via social media a simple, short and to-the-point infographic.

**Effective communication and the use of storytelling**

- Most people think that creating content is difficult, but the information is usually already available — you just need to tweak it to fit your purpose.
- Content can take a variety of forms: as well as written communication (e.g. articles, press releases, blog posts), audio and video can be used to create podcasts or animated videos — free online platforms exist to help with this.
- Using facts and figures to tell a story is the key to effective communication.
- By organising work efficiently, outsourcing intelligently and automating procedures where possible, you can concentrate on your speciality, and improve greatly the way you can communicate this to others.

**Panel discussion: Managing stress and psychosocial risks at work — putting research evidence into practice**

A key note speech, delivered by Professor Johannes Siegrist of Heinrich-Heine University, kicked off the second day of the summit. He gave a thought-provoking presentation, summarising the most up-to-date research evidence on stress and psychosocial risks at work. This was then followed by a lively and dynamic panel discussion moderated by Nancy Batens, a stress management and communication consultant, about how this evidence can be put into practice.
Key points

- Work can be good for your health, providing a source of personal growth, social identity and opportunities. However, the nature of work is undergoing significant change: increasing use of technology, more flexibility, increased job insecurity and increased pressures owing to competition, staff shortages or downsizing can all lead to increased work-related stress.

- There is significant evidence of the negative health effects of work-related stress, particularly in relation to depression and heart disease, and this needs to be communicated to businesses and organisations: the science–policy gap needs to be reduced.

- Workers need to be involved in workplace interventions to reduce stress and psychosocial risks. Participatory approaches and giving a voice to workers are very important in tackling a sensitive issue.

- Structural organisation changes are needed to change the culture of the business or organisation, and this needs to be joined up with individual-level interventions.

- Establishing the ‘business case’ for investing in stress and psychosocial risk prevention is not always easy. Evidence needs to be communicated to top management using the right language, and it can be helpful to use specific workplace situations to demonstrate benefits.

- Work-related stress and psychosocial risk factors may differ depending on gender, age, etc., and this needs to be taken into account.

The future of occupational safety and health in Europe

The keynote speech was delivered by Ole Christensen, Member of the European Parliament and rapporteur on the EU Strategic Framework on Safety and Health at Work 2014–2020. He explained that the framework includes projections of how OSH is likely to develop in Europe, as well as concrete proposals for the future, including on psychosocial risks, work-related cancer and musculoskeletal disorders. He stressed that common and ambitious standards among all Member States are very important for achieving Europe’s OSH objectives. We should not continue to focus on the regulatory burden to organisations and simplification of legislation — ambitious policies could decrease production costs for companies, and we need to consider how workers, as well as organisations, can benefit. We need to take a more, not less, ambitious approach, basing policy on well-developed and balanced information, and EU-OSHA will play a significant role in this.

Stefan Olsson of the European Commission replied, highlighting that cooperation between the Commission and the European Parliament has always been very constructive, particularly in this area. The importance of policy dossiers, such as the Strategic Framework 2014–2020, as the basis for the Commission’s work was underlined, and he focused specifically on legislation as an important driver for introducing measures at the workplace level. He also highlighted the importance of organisations such as EU-OSHA — owing to the data gathering and expertise it contributes — in implementing strategies to get concrete results on the ground. This is only likely to increase in importance in the coming years, as the challenge is to improve the implementation of legislation in practice in Member States. He concluded by emphasising that, unlike previous Commissions, this Commission is focusing on just a few important dossiers, of which OSH is one.
Christa Sedlatschek, Director of EU-OSHA, added to this, thanking both speakers for their positive feedback on the work EU-OSHA does. Such recognition is motivation for EU-OSHA and its workers for the future, particularly in times of European economic difficulties and cuts. She also noted that social dialogue is crucial to both planning and implementation of future OSH objectives, and the willingness of EU-OSHA to contribute to the Strategic Framework, with EU-OSHA specifically mentioned in its objectives.

In her closing speech, Christa Sedlatschek thanked all who contributed to the success of this campaign and to helping improve the psychosocial working environment of so many across Europe. She introduced the forthcoming campaign, Healthy Workplaces for All Ages, which will concentrate on developing sustainable working lives and raising awareness of the importance of good safety and health management at any age and of tailoring work to individual abilities. The campaign will be launched in April 2016.