Healthy Workplaces Campaign partner event — experts exchange good practice in managing dangerous substances

Exposure to dangerous substances is a major cause for concern in Europe's workplaces. But how can we raise awareness and manage the risks, and protect all workers? With its Healthy Workplaces Manage Dangerous Substances campaign in full swing, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) hosted an event for its campaign partners and other experts on 5 & 6 March in Brussels. The aim was to exchange good practices, explore the challenges posed by dangerous substances, reflect on the efforts being made across Europe and establish and strengthen networks.

Strong campaign partnership and good practice exchange — resulting from the continued efforts and commitment of official campaign partners and campaign media partners — are pivotal to the success of EU-OSHA's Healthy Workplaces Campaigns. Year on year, events such as this have proven to be informative and inspiring, raising awareness of campaign-related issues and generating new ideas and opportunities for approaching occupational safety and health (OSH). This year’s event was no different, with plenary sessions, keynote speeches, workshops and a networking session, sparking much enthusiastic discussion and being actively covered in Twitter as they happened. What's more, the event marked an important milestone for EU-OSHA: 10 years of campaign partnership.

In recognition of EU-OSHA’s longest-standing official campaign partners and most active campaign media partners in 2018, a special ceremony was held to honour their achievements and contributions to disseminating the Agency’s messages.

Opening session

The first day opened with a plenary session, moderated by Andrew Smith, head of EU-OSHA's Communication and Promotion Unit. Mr Smith began by welcoming the more than 90 participants — official campaign partners and media partners, social partners, and representatives from the European Commission.

Dr Christa Sedlatschek, EU-OSHA’s Executive Director remarked on the special nature of this good practice exchange event, coinciding not only with the 10th anniversary of the campaign partnership scheme, but also with the 25th anniversary of EU-OSHA’s foundation as an agency. She emphasised the importance of the Agency's network, and expressed her particular gratitude to the campaign partners, the European Commission, the national focal points and the Enterprise Europe Network members for their continued support. Because of this extensive network, ‘over 1,000 organisations are now involved in spreading EU-OSHA’s campaign messages across Europe’.

Turning to the current campaign on dangerous substances, Dr Sedlatschek reported on the success of its first year, which has been both ‘busy and engaging’, with over 100 campaign-related activities and several good practice exchange events at partners’ own premises being held across Europe so far. The Executive Director also emphasised her appreciation of the high-level political commitment to this particular campaign’s theme, noting that ‘taking action to limit workers’ exposure to dangerous chemicals is a key priority of the European Commission’.

These words were echoed by keynote speaker Maria Teresa Moitinho de Almeida, senior policy adviser, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, who emphasised the Commission’s support for the Agency’s
campaigns, particularly this dangerous substances campaign, which is ‘timely and relevant and in line with the Commission’s OSH remit’. She emphasised that ‘the right to a safe and healthy work environment is recognised at the highest European political level’ and, consequently, is covered by one of the 20 principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

In addition to congratulating EU-OSHA on its two important anniversaries in 2019 — 10 years of campaign partnership and 25 years of the Agency — she also highlighted the 30th anniversary of the Framework Directive and reflected on the important contribution that this has made to OSH in the EU over the years.

She provided an outline of some important actions taken by the European Commission in the area of dangerous substances, including recent amendments to the Carcinogens and Mutagens Directive, which have led to an additional 26 carcinogenic or mutagenic chemicals being covered by legislation. The impact of this is significant, affecting approximately 14 million workers across Europe. However, she made it clear that: ‘EU legislation alone is not sufficient. It must be transposed by Member States and implemented in workplaces. It must be clear, understandable and easily applicable.’ It is in this regard that EU-OSHA’s campaigns and events such as this are particularly valued by the Commission: ‘The Agency’s campaigns are one of the most relevant instruments for getting information to workplaces’.

She paid special tribute to the official campaign partners, noting that their activities are ‘perfectly aligned with the top priorities of the European Commission’ and that this occasion of 10 years of campaign partnership is ‘a very special moment in recognition of their contribution to making workplaces safer’.

The opening session ended with a particularly fitting and insightful keynote speech by Mr David Tjong, recently retired as Ideal Standard International’s Global Director for Health, Safety and Environment. Ideal Standard has been an official campaign partner since the scheme was first established and Mr Tjong’s efforts have been instrumental to its success. In keeping with the theme of the current campaign, Mr Tjong explained how Ideal Standard, a producer of ceramic bathroom and sanitary wares had identified the potential risks posed by respirable silica at its production plants and reduced worker exposure to this dangerous substance through a combination of measures, including changes to equipment, production processes and protective measures.

Good practice exchange workshops

To stimulate discussion and good practice exchange among participants, a series of workshops, devised and organised by the campaign partners themselves, were held in parallel throughout the course of the 2 days on a range of topics: ‘Effective communication in OSH’, ‘Carcinogens — multidisciplinary collaboration’, ‘Environment and occupational safety and health’ and ‘Rethinking and refinement of risk assessment’.

Each workshop consisted of a series of presentations from representatives of partners and other organisations, followed by lively exchanges among participants on the issues covered. The main outcomes of each workshop were summarised for all participants and discussed further in plenary sessions.

Communicating messages effectively is key to raising awareness of OSH and implementing good practice at the workplace level. But how can companies and OSH organisations communicate messages in a way that leads to real and sustainable changes in attitudes and behaviours? Some ways and means of doing this were explored in the workshop ‘Effective communication in OSH’, chaired by Regine Maegerlein, ZF Friedrichshafen. ‘Engage, then change’ was the key message conveyed by presenters Andrew Stephenson and Greg McLoughlin of HbD International, who shared their company’s belief that effective OSH programmes must have ‘specific and relevant content’, a clear purpose, and ‘tangible and emotive benefits’ for workers. They also argued for the need to provide workers with a ‘continual flow of relevant good reasons’ to adhere to safe work practices, to ensure that any behaviour change is sustained. These sentiments were echoed by the other presenters, who shared practical examples from their own companies of innovative OSH communication campaigns, which, most importantly, have led to demonstrable improvements in OSH.
For example, ZF Friedrichshafen invented the eye-catching “Imprudent” mannequin to illustrate common OSH errors at shop floor level and to provoke discussions. PSA Group installed on-site “safety boxes” to raise awareness on dangerous substances and provide learning opportunities. Finally, Birgit Müller of EU-OSHA demonstrated the power of social media in terms of its far reach and huge potential to engage target audiences. She shared some tips for getting the most out of this means of communication.

In the parallel workshop, ‘Carcinogens — multidisciplinary collaboration’, the importance of good communication at all levels and across all disciplines was again a strong theme. As chair Michelle Muxworthy, IOSH, reminded participants, ‘exposure to carcinogens is a reality for many’ and work-related cancer is a serious threat to workers, killing almost 750,000 people each year globally. However, the risks are often overlooked, since, as pointed out by Marian Schaapman, ETUI, the hazards — such as dust, fumes and vapours — are often far less apparent than those likely to cause workplace accidents. Furthermore, the effects are not immediate, often being apparent only after several decades. Therefore, the multidisciplinary collaboration of actors at the company level — employers, managers, workers, worker representatives, OSH experts and occupational physicians — and public health professionals, including GPs and specialists, is essential for identifying risks, reporting and gathering data on health concerns, preventing exposure and protecting workers. Other speakers reiterated the importance of a multidisciplinary approach, for instance to the development of tools aimed at evaluating risks, and highlighted the need to drive improvements through the supply chain.

Initiatives aimed at raising awareness of workplace exposure to carcinogens and promoting and facilitating the exchange of good practice are paramount. Elke Schneider, senior project manager at EU-OSHA, explained some of the Agency’s efforts in this regard, including the current campaign on dangerous substances, which has a particular focus on carcinogens, and EU-OSHA’s research into cancer risk factors in the workplace and policies and strategies that support return to work after cancer. She also emphasised the Agency’s commitment to and active involvement in the Roadmap on Carcinogens, and urged all workshop participants to use this platform to disseminate their examples of good practice in managing the risks posed by carcinogens in the workplace.

In the context of dangerous substances, protecting workers and protecting the environment go hand in hand. In one of the workshops on day 2, ‘Environment and occupational safety and health’, participants discussed strategies for managing the use and disposal of hazardous chemicals that integrate considerations of worker well-being and the environment. Ralf Giercke, President of ENSHPO, outlined the benefits of EMAS, a tool for environmental, health and safety management. This tool can be used by organisations in any sector and of any size and has had demonstrable results: 70 % of organisations have reported improvements in most environmental, health and safety parameters as a result of using the tool. Laurence Boulange, Eiffage Infrastructures, described his company’s innovative approach to protecting the public, workers and the environment through the development of software that aids in the elimination or substitution of dangerous chemicals wherever possible and in the design of finished products with the least possible impact on human health and the environment. The discussions that followed again highlighted the need to work collaboratively to translate and implement legislation into practical means of tackling the potential risks associated with working with dangerous substances.
The parallel workshop on day 2, ‘Rethinking and refinement of risk assessment’, chaired by Gyula Szabó, stimulated much thought-provoking discussion on how best to design and implement risk assessments. David Tjong put forward the case for considering the ‘human factors’, explaining that Ideal Standard’s approach to concentrating on what aspects of human performance can lead to accidents — by systematic incident investigation and analysis — and eliminating the potential for human error through amending systems and processes has resulted in improvements in OSH. At Delphi, as reported by Fernando Lopes, efforts have concentrated on involving workers in risk assessment through the implementation of an intelligent health management system that integrates OSH information processes, allowing workers to access information in ‘real time’ and connecting ‘safety alerts’ to risk assessment. The success of this approach is clear: between 2014 and 2018, there was a 50 % reduction in lost work days and a 300 % increase in the identification, communication and resolution of minor incidents and near misses. This example demonstrates the value of participatory approaches to risk assessment and participants agreed that engaging the workforce was key to creating a culture of prevention.

Campaign partner award ceremony and networking event

After a day packed with informative presentations and insightful discussion, all participants gathered at a special award ceremony to celebrate 10 years of campaign partnership. Andrew Smith, who welcomed everyone to the evening celebration, expressed how this ceremony was EU-OSHA’s ‘opportunity to thank all official campaign partners and campaign media partners for their support and commitment’, and particularly to honour the 25 official campaign partners that participated in at least five campaigns and the five campaign media partners that have been particularly active during the first year of this campaign. He also extended his gratitude to the European Commission and particularly Marianne Thyssen, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility, one of the Agency’s ‘biggest supporters’.

Kasia Jurczak, a senior member of Commissioner Thyssen’s cabinet, joined delegates to offer the Commission’s congratulations and thanks to the campaign partners for their ‘impressive contribution to the Healthy Workplaces Campaigns’, acknowledging that the awards presented at the evening’s ceremony should be seen as ‘a recognition of the Commission’s gratitude to partners’ commitment to improving and saving workers’ lives’. She also remarked on the value of tripartite working, which underpins the work of the Commission and is key to EU-OSHA’s effectiveness: working collaboratively to ensure that the views of governments, employers and workers are considered has been instrumental in improving OSH in the EU, and events such as this strengthen this tripartite model.

Before Ms Jurczak presented the 25 official campaign partners and five campaign media partners with their special awards and all campaign partners collected their certificates, Director Christa Sedlatschek introduced the first-ever Honorary Campaign Partner Award, presented to David Tjong of Ideal Standard. Mr Tjong, involved in campaign partnership since the scheme began, was one of the pioneers of the good practice exchange.
initiative, being a founding member of the official campaign partners steering committee. He has continued to support the initiative by actively promoting each campaign, taking part in events and sharing details of how his company has improved various aspects of its safety and health practice.

Reflecting on Ideal Standard’s many years of fruitful collaboration with EU-OSHA, Mr Tjong appealed to others to give their continued support, stating that the ‘win-win partnership’ had enabled the company to ‘re-enforce its commitment to a safe and healthy workplace … and its strong belief in risk assessment’.

Andrew Smith brought the ceremony to a close, congratulating all campaign partners and, once again, highlighting their extremely valuable contribution to the Agency’s work: ‘the official campaign partners and media partners, together with the national focal points and other partners, allow an agency of only 65 staff to run OSH campaigns in more than 30 countries’. An evening of networking and more informal knowledge exchange followed the ceremony.

Closing session

In this session reports from the workshops of the morning were given by Ralf Giercke of ENSHPO and Natalie Lotzmann of SAP and Dr Dietmar Elsler of EU-OSHA thanked all active participants and made them aware of an upcoming report on the economic costs of work-related diseases and accidents.

To close the event, Dr Sedlatschek reflected on a ‘very inspiring 2 days’ that perfectly illustrated the value of campaign partnership and good practice exchange, and emphasised the need to take ‘a broad approach to well-being, safety and health, and the environment’. She also looked forward to some forthcoming highlights of the current campaign:

- the European Week for Safety and Health at Work, which will be held from 21-25 October this year
- the Healthy Workplaces Summit, to be held in Bilbao on 12-13 November to mark the end of the Healthy Workplaces Manage Dangerous Substances campaign
- the 14th Healthy Workplaces Good Practice Awards Ceremony, to coincide with the campaign summit.
Dr Sedlatschek took the opportunity to highlight some of the Agency’s important work in relation to the Roadmap on Carcinogens, including its commitment to undertake a survey of exposure to cancer risk factors at work. The survey is due to begin in 2020 and should provide much-needed reliable and comparable data, representing ‘a significant step in the fight against work-related cancer’.

Preparations for the next Healthy Workplaces Campaign, which will focus on preventing work-related musculoskeletal disorders, are already under way. This campaign will run from 2020 to 2022, being the first to span 3 years. As Dr Sedlatschek explained, this longer campaign duration reflects the broad nature of the topic and the magnitude of its impact on workers, employers and society. She encouraged all participants to get involved in this next campaign, on a topic that affects everyone, even more so as the world of work changes and workers are increasingly at risk from repetitive or static work.

All that remained was for the Executive Director to pass on a final heartfelt thanks to participants. It is only with the support of its partners that EU-OSHA can successfully reach out to enterprises of all sizes and in all sectors, to make Europe’s workplaces safer, healthier and more productive, a mission that Dr Sedlatschek looked forward to celebrating and reflecting on with many partners at EU-OSHA’s special 25th anniversary event to be held in Bilbao in June.

For their organisation and active involvement in the workshops we thank the following organisations:

ZF Friedrichshafen AG, Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH), European Network of Safety and Health Professional Organisations (ENSHPO), Federation of European Ergonomics Societies (FEES).