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Healthy Workplaces
LIGHTEN THE LOAD

Summary of the Virtual Campaign Partnership Meeting

29 September 2020

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Healthy Workplaces Lighten the Load Campaign 2020-2022

Virtual campaign partnership meeting summary

Online, 29 September 2020

Ahead of the launch of the 2020-2022 campaign — Healthy Workplaces Lighten the Load — representatives of European and international enterprises and organisations joined EU-OSHA for a virtual campaign partnership meeting. They learned about the importance of the new campaign — which tackles work-related MSDs, Europe’s most common occupational health problem— and the wealth of benefits that becoming an official campaign partner brings to their organisations.

‘We all have the opportunity to be involved in something very special — the chance to make a difference to millions of workers and employers.’ That was the message from Christa Sedlatschek, Executive Director of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA), as she welcomed more than 90 participants from across Europe to the meeting.

Among the attendees were returning campaign partners and those companies and organisations considering joining the campaign for the first time. Unlike partnership meetings in the past, there were no handshakes and hugs in the surroundings of the Residence Palace in Brussels, with the COVID-19 pandemic meaning that the meeting was held online. Nevertheless, moderator Brenda O’Brien, Manager of EU-OSHA’s Brussels Liaison Office, pledged to make the online gathering as ‘lively as possible’ before introducing Dr Sedlatschek.

Last year marked a decade of official campaign partnership and the scheme continues to go from strength to strength, according to the Executive Director. The last Healthy Workplaces Campaign, on managing dangerous substances, saw 90 partners organise 275 campaign activities to promote its key messages. Reflecting on past success, Dr Sedlatschek recognised the value of campaign partnership: ‘Over the years, the Healthy Workplaces Campaigns have built a strong network of long-lasting partnerships, with each new campaign topic raising awareness about key issues on occupational safety and health, attracting new organisations and bringing many mutual benefits.’

The 2020-2022 campaign focuses on the most common ailment among workers in Europe: musculoskeletal disorders or MSDs. From backache to neck pain and problems with joints and muscles, every worker in every sector is at risk. As Dr Sedlatschek pointed out, MSDs are not simply bad news for employees, but also for businesses, on account of MSD-related sick leave, reduced productivity and early retirement, not to mention the pressure this puts on national healthcare systems and economies.

There is good news, however. MSDs can be effectively prevented and managed. The Lighten the Load campaign aims to get this central message across and put MSDs high on the EU agenda. It has the following strategic objectives:

• to raise awareness of work-related MSDs;
• to promote risk assessment and the management of MSDs;
• to demonstrate that MSDs are an issue for everyone, but can be successfully tackled;
• to improve knowledge of new and emerging risks and other developments in the area of MSDs;
• to emphasise the importance of reintegrating and retaining workers with chronic MSDs and how this can be done;
• to encourage the exchange of information and good practice among different stakeholders.
The Executive Director highlighted the essential role that campaign partners must play:

‘To succeed in achieving these objectives, we need your support. By holding seminars and workshops, distributing campaign materials and collaborating with our national focal points and media partners, you will join a network of leading public and private organisations inspiring and encouraging others to successfully manage a safe and healthy workforce.’

She gave special thanks to those organisations that have already joined the campaign and have contributed to it. These include EULAR (the European League Against Rheumatism), ENETOSH (the European Network Education and Training in Occupational Safety and Health) and FEES (the Federation of European Ergonomics Societies), along with representatives from BusinessEurope, the PSA Group and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), who joined the meeting to share their expertise and insights. She also extended her gratitude to Director Stefan Olsson, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission, for his ongoing support of the Agency’s campaigns, and Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Agnes Jongerius, also in attendance.

Dr Sedlatschek touched upon the very different work environment we now find ourselves in as a result of the global pandemic, reiterating the importance of focusing on occupational safety and health (OSH), protecting workers and adapting workplaces to minimise the spread of the virus. EU-OSHA has produced an action plan to address the associated challenges, with sector-specific advice on updating risk assessments and coping with high rates of absence. This guidance also addresses how to manage home-based teleworking, which is associated with an increased risk of developing MSDs and is one of seven key priority areas of the Lighten the Load campaign.

The opening address ended with a call for action, with Dr Sedlatschek urging partners:

‘Together let’s make everyone aware of MSDs and what can be done to prevent them, and let’s start now.’

The 2020-2022 Campaign — Healthy Workplaces Lighten the Load

What are musculoskeletal disorders?

Not everybody knows what is meant by work-related MSDs, or what the risk factors are. Lorenzo Munar, EU-OSHA’s Campaign Content Manager, was on hand to explain. Work-related MSDs are impairments of bodily structures, caused or aggravated primarily by work. Associated conditions can include backache, neck and shoulder pain, muscle wear and joint problems. According to the 2015 European Working Conditions Survey, roughly three in every five workers in the EU report MSD complaints; of these workers, around 30% suffer from chronic MSDs. Furthermore, EU-OSHA’s 2019 European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER 2019) found that three of the most frequently identified workplace risk factors were MSD related: repetitive hand or arm movements, prolonged sitting, and lifting or moving people or heavy loads. As Mr Munar told participants:

‘MSDs are the number one work-related problem — that’s what justifies running a campaign on this topic.’

Campaign messages and aims

MSDs are preventable and manageable. As with any other OSH-related issue, the general principles of prevention, as laid out in OSH legislation, apply, with risk assessment being key, that is, identifying hazards, assessing the risks, and deciding on and taking appropriate action. The campaign aims to put practical tools and advice at the disposal of employers and workers to help them do this. Mr Munar said:

‘We are aware that many companies still do not assess the risks and, sometimes, if they do, it is not in a very systematic and structured way. That’s why we need to improve risk assessment, to make sure that we don’t overlook important MSD-related risk factors.’ He illustrated his point with the following example:

‘An increasing number of people work in offices and in front of a computer, often adopting a prolonged sitting posture, which we know is related to many health problems, including MSDs. The idea is to share this knowledge with the workplaces so they can address MSDs in a better way.’

Within the framework of the campaign, under the general umbrella of ‘prevention’, there are seven priority areas: (1) facts and figures, (2) chronic conditions, (3) sedentary work, (4) worker diversity, (5) future generation of workers, (6)
psychosocial risks and (7) MSDs and home-based telework. Partners can choose which areas they would like to focus on, and a selection of material specific to these areas will be made available. A typical promotional pack will include reports and summaries, campaign info sheets and infographics, case studies, OSHwiki articles and a PowerPoint presentation.

Finally, Mr Munar outlined some key campaign dates:
- 12 October 2020 — campaign launch in Brussels
- October 2020, 2021 and 2022 — European Weeks for Safety and Health at Work
- March 2022 — Healthy Workplaces Good Practice Exchange event and Campaign Partner Ceremony
- April 2022 — Announcement of Healthy Workplaces Good Practice Awards winners
- November 2022 — Healthy Workplaces Summit and Healthy Workplaces Good Practice Awards Ceremony.

The campaign and the EU policy framework: strategy and actions to improve OSH in Europe and putting the Social Pillar into practice

The campaign team was delighted to welcome to the meeting Agnes Jongerius, MEP, and Director Stefan Olsson, European Commission, each of whom provided valuable input from their individual perspectives.

Quoting from the European Pillar of Social Rights, an initiative launched by the European Commission in 2017 to deliver new and more effective rights for citizens, Ms Jongerius emphasised that: ‘Workers have the right to high protection of their health and safety at work.’ However, as Ms Jongerius also pointed out, this is not the reality experienced by many workers and more needs to be done — and soon. She said that, although not directly associated with workers’ deaths, MSDs do affect people’s ability to move and earn an income, making this a very important issue. Ms Jongerius went on:

‘It’s important to explain what is happening — and why it’s important — and therefore I’d like to salute your work in taking this issue forward in the campaign. It needs much more attention than it has received until now.’

Mr Olsson also acknowledged the scale of the work-related MSD problem, expressing his conviction that the work of the campaign over the next two years will be ‘essential’ for so many workers and national economies. He said: ‘MSDs is a crucial issue, especially in the demographic situation, in our economic situation, and for female careers, so we need to focus on this.’ He added that employers are obliged under the OSH Framework Directive to carry out risk assessments and take preventive measures to protect workers, but that ‘this is only one piece of the puzzle’. Without promoting a culture of risk assessment and prevention, as this Healthy Workplaces Campaign aims to do, ‘legislation will mean nothing’. Mr Olsson also highlighted the particular importance of the campaign to small businesses:

‘We know that micro enterprises and SMEs [small and medium-sized enterprises] have a challenge to do the risk assessments. EU-OSHA’s work has been fantastic in increasing the numbers, but it’s still a challenge. Online risk assessment tools are essential for this — easy tools in all the languages.’

Mr Olsson thanked previous campaign partners and urged those considering joining to do so. He said: ‘You can really make a difference here. We have so much knowledge that needs to get out there, and that is what the campaign is doing. I would urge everybody who is thinking about signing up — sign up — as it makes a lot of sense for you and for all of us.’

Question and answer session

The first part of the meeting concluded with participants having the opportunity to ask questions. A representative from the European Hospital and Healthcare Employers’ Association raised the topic of planning events and the involvement of European or national social partners. Lorenzo Munar highlighted the role of the national focal points in organising events at a country level, explaining that events will be held in the frame of the seven campaign priority areas. By organising events and inviting Agency representatives, campaign partners can work together with EU-OSHA to promote the campaign.
The European Commission’s plans to involve European social partners in the shaping of its upcoming OSH strategic framework was also a topic for discussion. Mr Olsson took the opportunity to highlight the Commission’s focus on the ongoing consultation on the Social Pillar, and the importance of putting forward ideas and pledging commitment in this context.

Presentation of the partnership offer for the 2020-2022 Healthy Workplaces Campaign

Before presenting the latest campaign partnership offer, Heike Klempa, EU-OSHA Campaigns Manager, highlighted the success of the 2018-2019 campaign. Ninety partners — a mix of EU employers, workers’ federations, technology platforms, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and multinational companies — promoted the message of the Healthy Workplaces Manage Dangerous Substances campaign through more than 275 events and activities. These included conferences, meetings, training sessions, publications and good practice exchange events. The campaign was also promoted through more than 600 items online, as partners published news and information on their websites and social media channels.

Why become an official campaign partner?

Ms Klempa revealed that 60 partners have already applied to renew their partnership for the Lighten the Load campaign and, with only 100 spaces available, there are not many remaining. Companies and organisations that have already signed up include DuPont, Baxter, ENSHPO, Feica, FECC, Ceemet, Siemens, SAP, UNI Europa and SME United. By joining the campaign, organisations can raise their profiles and gain recognition for their efforts in promoting a healthy workplace. The campaign website will feature profiles of all campaign partners and a dedicated space where partners can publicise their own news and events.

These will also be promoted via EU-OSHA’s monthly newsletter, OSHmail, with its 20,000 subscribers, and through the Agency’s social media accounts, with more than 80,000 followers. Partners will be invited to all flagship campaign events and will receive a welcome pack containing publications and promotional materials, along with a subscription to a bi-monthly campaign newsletter. Ms Klempa explained:

‘The underlying principle is that you help us and get involved in the campaign, and we give you recognition for your efforts and access to a network of leading private and public organisations dedicated to promoting a sustainable working life.’

For the majority of partners, the most significant benefit is the opportunity to network and share good practice. Partners have access to EU-OSHA’s network of national focal points and other key actors in the OSH field, and the chance to take part in the Healthy Workplaces Good Practice Awards. Ms Klempa highlighted the campaign’s Good Practice Exchange initiative as a ‘win-win’ for everyone since it began in 2012. Inspired by the campaign partners’ desire to work together to achieve better safety and health in their organisations, it has gone from strength to strength.

For partners, it can lead to better OSH management and increase the visibility of their OSH activities; for EU-OSHA, it helps reinforce the campaign message and lead to OSH improvements at workplace level. It also provides a framework for collaboration with different stakeholders. A campaign partner steering group will be in place to provide knowledge and expertise for the Healthy Workplaces Campaign, act as a sounding board, provide feedback, and support sharing and learning among campaign partners.

Eligibility

There are five criteria for becoming an official campaign partner:

1. you are an international or pan-European organisation with representation and/or network members in several EU Member States;
2. you are willing and able to get substantially involved in the campaign;
3. you are willing to actively promote the strategic objectives of the campaign;
4. you are prepared to use the campaign name, slogan and logo to support the campaign;
5. you are able to report to EU-OSHA on campaign-related activities at least once a year.
How to get involved

Returning and new partners have until 20 December 2020 to renew their existing partnership or apply for partnership. Applications for new partners can be made online at healthy-workplaces.eu and the selection process will take place in January 2021. Successful organisations will be notified the following month.

Partners can contribute to the campaign by:

- distributing information and campaign material to affiliated organisations and network partners;
- encouraging members of their own networks and affiliates to carry out activities during the Healthy Workplaces Campaign and European Weeks and make contact with the relevant EU-OSHA national focal point;
- promoting and/or participating in the Healthy Workplaces Good Practice Awards;
- promoting the campaign on their own organisation’s corporate website, intranet and social media channels;
- giving visibility to the campaign at their own organisation’s flagship events and internal meetings;
- reviewing safety and health polices in the area of the campaign topic and beyond;
- developing campaign activities, such as campaign-related conferences, seminars and workshops; training for staff or network members; best practice videos or multimedia DVDs; poster or photo competitions; and quizzes.

Round-table event: motivations and expectations of Healthy Workplaces

Lighten the Load campaign partners

Representatives of social partners, civil society organisations and enterprises shared what inspired them to participate in the campaign and what they hope to get out of it. The discussion provided an interesting range of perspectives, giving insights into differing priorities and approaches.

European Trade Union Confederation — ETUC

Per Hilmersson, Deputy General Secretary, explained that the ETUC is particularly keen to focus on the issue of female workers and MSDs. Women are more likely to be affected given the type of jobs they do, for instance in the care and service sectors, exposing them to biomechanical stress, physical burdens and psychosocial risks. He added:

‘The gender dimension is very important and we really hope that this campaign will highlight this and teach us more about how to deal with it.’ The ETUC would like the campaign to facilitate awareness raising and the exchange of best practice for the prevention of MSDs at company level, with particular attention to sectors in which women are over-represented.’

A second priority area for the ETUC is MSDs and telework, as this type of work has increased significantly during the pandemic, with Mr Hilmersson expressing his belief that, for this reason, ‘this campaign is needed more than ever before’.

The Confederation would also like to use the opportunity presented by the campaign to gather information on the efficacy of national legislation and other measures, to show the need for further EU action. The ETUC believes that dedicated legislation on MSDs is required, focusing on effective prevention in the workplace. Mr Hilmersson said:

‘We hope that the forthcoming EU strategic framework on health and safety at work ...is ambitious when dealing with MSDs and that it will be used to push Member States to include MSDs in their national strategies. The EU strategy should emphasise the need for training and awareness raising among workers, as well as the key role of health and safety representatives. I hope that this campaign can be used for the European Commission and for the social partners to contribute to the forthcoming strategy.’
**BusinessEurope**

Kris De Meester, Chair of the Health and Safety Group, welcomed the opportunity for campaign partners themselves to ‘lighten the load’ — in these times of a global pandemic — by putting their energies into something positive. BusinessEurope is interested in a holistic approach to MSD prevention and management. Mr De Meester explained that, in the course of the campaign, it would be encouraging members to look at ‘enhancers’ as well as risk assessments — for instance by considering what motivates people, how people can control their work, and how they can produce positive effects and prevent negative outcomes. He said that BusinessEurope’s approach would be to look at individuals and their capacity, health preconditions, aspirations and other factors, and try to balance them with workload, work content and working conditions.

Mr De Meester emphasised that it is important to ‘underpin your actions by risk assessment, but not to limit yourself to just looking at risk factors. Also focus on how to get a motivated and engaged workforce’. He added: ‘That is what we would like to bring to the table and we hope that many campaign partners, being multinational companies or European organisations, will contribute to that broader holistic approach.’

**European League Against Rheumatism — EULAR**

According to Neil Betteridge, Strategic Advisor in Public Affairs, initiatives such as this Healthy Workplaces Campaign are an opportunity to bust myths around MSDs, myths that can disempower individuals and get in the way of effective policy-making. He gave the example of the common misconception that MSDs are only ‘minor aches and pains’. This is clearly not the case, and the impact that they have on workers and society is huge. Another myth is that MSDs affect only older people; the campaign makes clear that everybody in every sector is at risk of developing these disorders. Finally, Mr Betteridge addressed the myth that ‘there’s nothing you can do about back pain’, reinforcing a key campaign message: ‘effective prevention and management is absolutely feasible and should be what we are all working towards’.

EULAR’s strength as a campaign partner will be in its wide network of organisations spanning Europe, Mr Betteridge said. He explained that in each country EULAR has member organisations of three types — scientific societies, organisations representing health professionals in the field, such as physiotherapists and occupational therapists, and groups representing people with MSDs — and that ‘all three pillars will have a very keen and active interest in the campaign’.

He added: ‘Probably the most distinctive added value that I hope we can bring ... is what these associations representing people with the condition can offer. If our groups get in touch with national focal points and other campaign partners, if there are events being staged or messages going to the media, I think we all know that it is very important to get the perspective of the person living with the MSD.’ EULAR’s member organisations are also well connected with journalists and policy-makers, and are increasingly social media savvy. He said: ‘There’s an exciting range of ways in which our networks at national and European levels can offer that perspective to partners but also gain amplification of their existing activities. We are really raring to go and very excited and pleased to be part of this.’

**PSA Group**

Hugues Leloix, Corporate Medical Coordinator, explained that PSA Group, which comprises the brands of Peugeot, Citroën and Opel, among others, is fully committed to addressing work-related MSDs, as this is an important issue for its employees, many of whom are involved in the physical work of producing cars. He underlined the reasons why PSA Group is keen to be an active participant in this Healthy Workplaces Campaign. Communicating and promoting a proactive culture is key, with Mr Leloix saying: ‘In my view there is a lack of widely shared knowledge regarding MSDs. What is behind the figures? Maybe it’s not clear for many people. This is why we think communication, particularly among professional companies, is very important.’

Workers are not always aware that MSDs are a risk that is relevant to them, or that there are programmes and tools available to support them. A survey carried out by PSA Group found that employees not involved in prevention programmes simply believe that they are not the target of those programmes or are not even aware of the programmes. Mr Leloix said: ‘It is possible to act on MSDs. We just have to modify our beliefs and culture in our society and in our companies. Acting against MSDs means not only having the knowledge and offering the best practices — it is so
important to create the conditions so those tools and knowledge can be used. We have to make sure that those who need those tools are aware of them and they feel that they are allowed to use them.'

The company’s commitment to the campaign is also driven by the opportunity to share good practices. PSA Group invited employees to talk about any discomfort they might be feeling and offered them the support of a multidisciplinary team to enable them to address the problem and avoid further consequences. ‘We can see that it works,’ said Mr Leloix. ‘We want to … share the best practices in our company … we want to use this campaign to spread the tools worldwide.’ The company plans to hold a good practice exchange event to share its experiences in tackling MSDs in 2021, COVID-related restrictions permitting.

Question and answer session

After hearing the perspectives and insights of the panel members, meeting moderator Ms O’Brien asked a number of questions to extend the discussion further.

Including MSD prevention in workplace design was the first topic for discussion, with Mr Hilmersson of the ETUC sharing his view that, although workplace design is important, the participation of workers and safety and health representatives in MSD prevention is key. He said: ‘If companies and employers are involved, trade unions and worker representatives, health and safety representatives, then workplaces become more healthy — that’s clear. I hope the campaign can show this.’

The issues around reintegrating workers with MSDs into the workplace was also touched upon. Mr Betteridge of EULAR highlighted that there is an important balance to be struck between using generic tools and an individualistic approach. There needs to be a common goal towards ensuring the best possible fit for the worker involved. He mentioned that stigma was still a problem, with workers fearing negative consequences when they raise the issue of having an MSD: ‘This is one of the great barriers to early intervention, and it’s nearly always early intervention that brings the better result down the line.’ Finally, he highlighted that there are many mutual interests in keeping an employee in their job, and very often any adaptations needed are much less expensive than people might expect.

Of particular relevance, given that many participants were tuning into this virtual meeting from home, was a question related to striking a balance between home and office working during the pandemic.

PSA Group’s Mr Leloix shared his company’s plans to discuss remote working with social partners and trade unions and discussed a project to extend the remote working facility. He reiterated, however, the need to take into account the physical and psychosocial risks of remote working alongside the risks of working in the office. The importance of acknowledging the positive aspects of home working was highlighted by Mr De Meester of BusinessEurope, who pointed out that many people are happy about home working and the autonomy it offers. He emphasised that it is vital to consider all aspects and associated challenges in any discussion about future ways of working.

Closing

Ms O’Brien closed EU-OSHA’s first virtual campaign partnership meeting by once again thanking existing campaign partners for their continued support and passion for the Healthy Workplaces Campaigns. She expressed confidence that the stimulating presentations and discussions of the morning would convince those organisations that had been considering the partnership offer to now sign up to this important campaign. Finally, mindful of the ever-changing challenges presented by the pandemic, she reflected: ‘I hope that next year, and over the next two years, we will be able to meet in person. That would be wonderful. In the meantime, thank you all, stay safe and take care of yourselves.’