HEALTHY WORKPLACES SUMMIT 2022
Celebrating a successful campaign to prevent musculoskeletal disorders in Europe

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) is a key player in the prevention of work-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs). Its strategy for effective MSD prevention was discussed at the Healthy Workplaces Summit 2022 in Bilbao, Spain, on 14-15 November.

The summit put the spotlight on EU-OSHA’s 2020-2022 ‘Lighten the Load’ campaign that tackles work-related MSDs, Europe’s most common occupational health problem and that has been coordinated by the Agency and its European network of national focal points. Summit participants, which included top-level experts and decision-makers from across Europe, also looked ahead to the 2023-2025 campaign: ‘Safe and healthy work in the digital age’.

The two-day summit featured 40 panellists and plenty of opportunities for discussion and debate. This comprehensive roundup summarises the main messages that emerged from the event and the recommendations that flowed from the lively panel discussions.

The Healthy Workplaces Summit 2022 brought together (in-person and virtually) an international, interprofessional audience of over 400 participants on 14-15 November in Bilbao, Spain. Gathering at the city’s award-winning conference hall, Palacio Euskalduna, participants included experts and OSH professionals, researchers and policymakers, as well as focal points, campaign partners and stakeholders. Organised by EU-OSHA, the overall aim of the summit was to present the outcomes of the ‘Healthy Workplaces Lighten the Load’ campaign and promote solutions and actionable insights to tackle work-related MSDs, which are widespread and have a significant impact on individuals, employers and the wider economy. Two plenary discussions and three parallel sessions put the spotlight on evidence-based approaches to identifying, measuring, treating and preventing work-related MSDs (injuries or disorders of the muscles, nerves, tendons, joints, cartilage and spinal discs).
DAY 1

Opening session

Extending a warm welcome to all panellists and participants (both in Bilbao and online), Brenda O’Brien, conference moderator and manager of the EU-OSHA Brussels Liaison Office, set the tone for the two-day summit. It was EU-OSHA’s first big in-person gathering in Spain’s beautiful Basque Country and at the cultural hotspot Bilbao since the pandemic.

After welcoming the participants, Idoia Mendia Cueva, Second Vice President and Minister of Labour and Employment from the Basque Government, highlighted the effectiveness of proper ergonomic interventions. She also underlined the benefits of technology to minimise the risks of work-related MSDs and stressful situations in the service sector and in very small companies. ‘We are moving towards a different world where technology makes it possible to prevent lifting heavy loads or making dangerous movements that may lead to disabling injuries,’ said Cueva.

People with musculoskeletal conditions are also at higher risk to develop mental health issues. Stressing the benefits of safe and healthy workplaces that also support good mental health, Yolanda Díaz Pérez, Second Vice President and Minister of Labour and Social Economy from the Spanish Government, said: ‘Mental health at work is a major challenge for the 21st century. It is a priority of the European Commission. Spain is also committed to protecting mental health. This will be part of our actions during the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU during the second part of 2023.’

How do we lighten the load?

Work-related MSDs remain highly prevalent in Europe, despite significant efforts to prevent them, according to William Cockburn, EU-OSHA Interim Executive Director. ‘According to the statistics, MSDs are affecting more than half of the EU workforce,’ he said. ‘Despite a lot of preventive actions over the years, it seems that many of the indicators have barely changed since the last time we addressed this issue in our campaign in 2007 or indeed the first one in the year 2000.’

Introducing Nicolas Schmit, European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, and Dragoș Pîslaru, Chair of the European Parliament’s Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, Cockburn invited them both to review achievements in MSD prevention and to look into the future challenges and priorities.
Nicolas Schmit stressed that effective MSD prevention is not a one-time event. ‘It’s something you have to work constantly on,’ he said. ‘It is a question of education. You have to educate the workers, you have to educate the companies, and you have to try to install a real culture of health and safety, but especially in certain sectors where musculoskeletal disorders are the most frequent and where the most people are suffering. Certainly, construction is one. And one other sector, which brings us also to the gender dimension, is the healthcare or care sector. Many women are affected by this disorder because their occupation precisely consists of lifting loads – meaning persons. So, I think here we really have to still go on promoting the right techniques and finding the right ways to really lighten the load. And with technology this becomes possible.’

Dragoş Pîslaru also put the focus on finding the right solutions. ‘It is indeed for me and for everyone very alarming that three in every five workers in the EU report suffering from MSDs,’ he said. ‘As an economist, I would say that we are not here talking only about the rights of the workers. This is really something that we need to see from a wider economic viewpoint as well. This is something that costs society a lot as a whole. So, I would join Commissioner Schmit in saying that it is important to invest in better working conditions so that we have more adapted workspaces and an increase in the wellbeing and productivity of the workforce.’

The ‘vision zero’ goal for work-related deaths was also raised by Nicolas Schmit. ‘Maybe it’s very ambitious, but we have to really work in this direction. We have to put in place risk assessments and measures which prevent fatal accidents at the workplace. Here again, differences between Member States are huge. There are those where the number has been reduced. There are those where the numbers remain higher. We have to help those countries where the numbers remain higher. We have to help sectors where fatal accidents are more frequent.’

In a video message, Kateřina Štěpánková, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Affairs representing the Czech Presidency of the EU Council, highlighted the impetus of the ‘Lighten the Load’ campaign in her country’s efforts to educate the workforce and to promote good practices. ‘The Czech Republic took full advantage of this opportunity provided by EU-OSHA,’ she said. ‘During the campaign, we organised several seminars and information events in cooperation with various partners.’

Working in partnerships to move forward on MSDs

The dissemination of OSH information to workplaces throughout Europe is made possible by EU-OSHA’s extensive network of social partners across all Member States. As a tripartite agency, social partnerships are key for the success of EU-OSHA at national and European levels, said O’Brien as she introduced two representatives for the second panel discussion in the opening session: Ignacio Doreste, Senior Advisor at the European Trade Union Confederation, and Isaline Ossieur, Adviser at the Social Affairs Department in BusinessEurope.

As representatives of EU-OSHA’s network of social partners, they raised issues that may be acting as major barriers to maximising the intervention impact at the societal level.
Doreste put the focus on the importance of working conditions and prevention. ‘It is no wonder that the prevalence of MSDs is higher in sectors where the working conditions are worse and where the coverage of collective agreement is lower. In this regard, all actors within a company should be mobilised in a culture of prevention.’

Ossieur responded by noting the complexity of the issue. ‘We know it is a complex issue and therefore there is no easy or quick fix to address MSDs. Nevertheless, I think it’s very important not to be too pessimistic. We’re here today to celebrate the Healthy Workplaces Campaign and all that has been done over the past two years. And I think we see there is a real willingness from all partners involved to really tackle this problem as much as possible. This is very much evidenced by the results of the Good Practice Awards competition that will be dealt out after this session. I think this really showcases that there is a lot of work being done.’

**Good Practice Awards ceremony**

A highlight of the summit and a major milestone in the campaign was the Healthy Workplaces Good Practice Awards ceremony. 38 applications from 22 countries entered the European competition. Of these, eight organisations were awarded and eight were commended. The winning examples ranged from initiatives designed to prevent MSDs in a large hospital with an ageing workforce and new operating methods for preventing MSDs in a commercial laundry to the use of wearable exoskeletons to better manage manual handling at airports. All cases are described in this [booklet](#).

Professor [Ivars Vanadziņš](#), who chaired the jury noted the difficult task of selecting the winning and commended examples. He explained that the jury based its decision on criteria, which included worker participation, sustainability and transferability. For instance, the jury looked for clear examples that illustrate a holistic approach to OSH management as a result of effective employer-worker participation and commitment. Further criteria included how OSH practices were implemented and what was achieved overall.
Before applauding the winners and presenting the trophies to each of them, Nicholas Schmit noted the importance of innovation. ‘To manage or prevent major accidents or health problems in a company gives management but also the workers a real situation where there is real pride in that we have achieved a goal,’ he said. ‘I think it’s interesting to have these awards because this creates the idea of common ownership. As we all heard from the social partners and other contributions, we really need to cultivate a common health and safety culture at all levels, especially at the level of companies. So, I congratulate those who have been chosen. And I think there are thousands and even tens of thousands of companies in Europe doing a good job, and I want to congratulate them all!’

Parallel sessions

Inspections and MSDs prevention in enterprises

The first parallel session focused on the challenges and innovative solutions discovered during a Europe-wide inspection campaign of MSD prevention in enterprises. The discussion was based on the preliminary results of the Senior Labour Inspectors Committee’s (SLIC) inspection and enforcement campaign on MSDs which was carried out in close cooperation with EU-OSHA’s Healthy Workplaces campaign.

The SLIC inspection campaign also fits with the objectives of the EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2021-2027, and the results were impressive. A total of 2,621 inspections were carried out in 27 countries across the EU and Norway. Conducted by more than 1,000 specially trained labour inspectors, the campaign covered a wide variety of business sectors, including the food industry, construction, transport, hairdressers and barber shops, as well as healthcare and social care.

Representatives of national labour inspectorates presented the main findings of their national campaigns. One discovery was that a participatory approach to ergonomics is essential. Workers (or their representatives) should be invited to actively participate in identifying and assessing risks and hazards and in helping to decide on action to be taken to reduce the risk of injury.

Inspectors also reported that many workplaces implement MSD prevention strategies. These included a range of interventions – from telescopic conveyor belts that can move horizontally and vertically to footrests, hand stretching exercises and transport vehicles that comply with the ergonomic design of the driver’s seat position.

The engagement of top management is also very important. ‘When the top management says they care about workers’ health, the workers feel responsible and they want to perform work safely,’ said Karolina Główczyńska-Woelke, Head of Accidents at Work Unit at the Polish National Labour Inspectorate.

Working with chronic MSDs

The second parallel session focused on how people with chronic MSDs can remain active in the workplace. Currently, chronic MSDs are a global burden and the greatest cause of disability in working-age adults. Even though they might not be caused by work, they negatively impact people’s ability to work. MSDs may also force workers to leave the labour market.

The importance of early intervention and involving the worker, employer or supervisor and OSH professionals was discussed.
Interventions can often be as simple as avoiding repetitive movements, prolonged sitting without a break or standing for too long.

An overriding message stemming from the session is that it is a shared responsibility of all members of society to enable people with chronic MSDs to participate in healthy and sustainable work. Success hinges on a multifactored, multidisciplinary approach that involves employers/managers, workers, OSH experts and healthcare practitioners. Anthony Woolf from the Global Alliance for Musculoskeletal Health stressed the importance of such a holistic approach in which all actors are working together with a common goal of enabling people to remain in work.

Another key message is that workers do not have to be 100% fit to work. In fact, work is good for people with chronic MSDs. On the basis of EU-OSHA’s good practice reports and case studies on return-to-work, flexibility was cited as a key success factor. For instance, workers should be able to modify their daily routine and self-manage their condition. Above all, they should be supported by peers and managers.

There are also many simple and low-cost interventions to make workplaces inclusive. These include ergonomic adjustments and equipment or flexible working hours. Sarah Copsey, EU-OSHA Project Manager, stressed the importance of supporting workers with chronic MSDs to ensure work does not make their condition worse.

Physical activity was an important aspect raised during the discussion. For instance, workers should be able to perform stretching exercises. According to Lars Andersen from the National Research Centre for the Working Environment in Denmark, there are micro-exercises that can be done at any workplace. Based on 15 years of research, these types of exercises can help reduce pain in the neck, shoulder and back.

As for workplaces, there needs to be commitment from managers to support a positive health and safety culture. According to the panellists, this starts by understanding the physical and psychological impact of MSDs and encouraging and responding to the early reporting of them. Success hinges on the availability of co-design opportunities and an environment that encourages workers to report symptoms early.

Psychosocial risks and MSDs

The issue of psychosocial risks and MSDs was explored during the third parallel session chaired by Maurizio Curtarelli, Project Manager for EU-OSHA’s Prevention and Research Unit.

Speakers in this panel were invited to share insights into how psychosocial risk factors, such as excessive workloads and a lack of support and limited influence over the way the job is done, can cause or aggravate MSDs.

‘It has been widely acknowledged, and the literature confirms that musculoskeletal disorders are multifactorial. We know that individual factors matter. We know that lifestyle factors matter. We know that even our hobbies may contribute to MSDs,’ said Małgorzata Milczarek, Interim Head of EU-OSHA’s Prevention and Research Unit. ‘But the evidence is strong. Work-related factors do contribute to the development or deterioration of musculoskeletal disorders. And psychosocial risk factors that are related to MSDs, especially excessive work demands, lack of control at work and lack of social support at work, role conflict and job insecurity, violence and harassment, are also important.’

Since psychosocial stress may produce increased muscle tension and exacerbate task-related biomechanical strain, the speakers agreed on the importance of early intervention strategies. Risk assessment and risk management were raised as key priorities.

On a positive note, psychosocial risks were also identified as part of the solution. For instance, good social relationships and social support from managers and co-workers are important for prevention and return to work.

Supportive work environments can make a world of difference in the workplace. ‘Good social support from either co-workers or management can offset the negative effects of other factors like high job demands,’ added Richard Graveling, the principal ergonomist at the Institute of Occupational Medicine in Edinburgh, United Kingdom. ‘Making sure you have a good environment can actually help to reduce the risks.’
Networking event and the tree of wishes

The first day of the summit closed with informal discussions and networking over Basque cuisine and musical entertainment on the 29th floor of Bilbao’s Iberdrola Tower. Not only is it the tallest building in the Basque Country, but William Cockburn, EU-OSHA Interim Executive Director, also described it as a protagonist in Bilbao’s transformation into a modern city. The area below the tower was known as the ‘Campa de los Ingleses’. It had many uses, and the English sailors who arrived in Bilbao spent their spare time practising a sport unknown to the people of Bilbao at the time. This gave rise to Bilbao’s famous Athletic Football Club, one of the first in Spain!

Apart from the spectacular view of the city, participants also took the opportunity to reconnect with colleagues and friends, following the long period of pandemic-enforced remote work arrangements.

Another highlight was the special olive ‘wish trees’ set up for the occasion. Participants were encouraged to write or draw their wishes, hopes and dreams (either personal or OSH-related) on cards and attach them to the branches of the trees.

O’Brien read out several of those wishes, including:

‘I wish my children won’t have to fight for good working conditions when they get into the labour market’

‘I hope that occupational safety and health is not taken for granted’.

She also continued looking for 10 missing headphones during the conference.
DAY 2

EEN OSH promotion awards

William Cockburn, EU-OSHA Interim Executive Director, together with Giacomo Mattinò, Head of Unit at the European Commission’s DG for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, presented the EEN OSH Promotion Awards.

As the world’s largest support network for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the European Enterprise Network (EEN) assists businesses to innovate and grow on an international scale. In the frame of the Healthy Workplaces Campaign, the EEN OSH Award aims to raise awareness and promote OSH to SMEs. As explained by Cockburn, his agency’s collaboration with EEN boasts ambassadors who are sharing OSH knowledge in 32 countries.

‘The EEN OSH Promotion Awards is a competition to find the most innovative and effective EEN project promoting safer and healthier workplaces,’ added Mattinò. ‘The awarded projects have very specific features and they are relevant for the local context, a measurable impact, efficiency and effectiveness and the ability to be replicated.’

Together, Mattinò and Cockburn presented this year’s award to the Federazione Associazioni Scientifiche e Techniche (FAST) from Italy and the Economic Chamber of North Macedonia, which worked together to collaborate and facilitate the exchange of OSH knowledge and good practices.

Commended organisations included the Chamber of Commerce and Industry Brasov in Romania in cooperation with the National Institute of R&D for Optoelectronics Cluj-Naoca, as well as the Spanish Confederación de Empresarios de Andalucía.

OSH in the new world of work: keynote speech and panel discussion

To introduce EU-OSHA’s next campaign (2023-2025) about the impact of new digital technologies on work and workplaces and the associated occupational safety and health challenges and opportunities, a keynote speech by Adrian Todoli, Professor at the Department of Labour Law and Social Security of the University of Valencia, sparked debate about the use of algorithms.

For instance, algorithmic human resource management tools are currently used to strategically track, evaluate and manage workers. While algorithms can process lots of data in an efficient manner so that human decision-makers
can make more informed decisions, there are challenges. For instance, algorithms may not be clear to workers. This lack of transparency and the black-box character of algorithms may be stressful for workers.

‘There are a lot of discussions about algorithms taking our jobs, but actually I am more concerned about the jobs that are going to remain under an algorithm as a boss. This is something that is already happening. An algorithm decides who is hired, who gets the best schedule, who is promoted, who gets a bonus, and what is the correct intensity of the working pace. And the algorithms decide who gets fired,’ said Todoli.

During a dynamic Q&A period following all presentations, Todoli stressed the importance of regulating and programming algorithms to consider workplace safety and health.

Charlotte Grevfors Ernoult, Head of Unit in the DG for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion in the European Commission, stressed the difficulties of regulating such a fast-changing area. ‘But that doesn’t mean that we should not try,’ she said. ‘This is exactly what the Commission did last year in April by putting forward a proposal to put down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence. This proposal for regulation covers all aspects of artificial intelligence, so it’s not specific for occupational safety and health but that part is also taken up.’

To explain the proposal in more concrete terms, Grevfors Ernoult asked the audience to imagine a pyramid with four levels. From top to bottom, the layers contain the following categories: unacceptable (dangerous) algorithms, high-risk artificial intelligence (includes examples presented by Professor Todoli), limited risk and minimal risk. ‘The idea behind this proposal is to categorise the different artificial intelligence systems, and then, depending in what category they fall into, there are different actions that are triggered.’

For Nader Ahmadi, Director-General of the Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise, one of the biggest issues today is to fill the large knowledge gaps. ‘There are very few studies about how the design of algorithms impacts the work environment physically, organisationally, socially and cognitively,’ he said, stressing the importance of designing algorithms for an inclusive working life and a safe and healthy workplace for everyone.

According to Ahmadi, another important factor to consider is that algorithms affect different workers differently. While some workers become more productive and realise their potential, others may discover their own competencies are outdated and feel insufficient and anxious.

Focussing on the benefits of digital technologies, Kris De Meester, Chair of the Health and Safety Group in BusinessEurope, noted that most companies today use software and other digital tools and programs to shape and improve their OSH management system. He gave the example of EU-OSHA’s own Online interactive Risk
Assessment tools. ‘The aim is that they contribute to the bigger picture: achievement of organisational goals while respecting health and safety,’ he said, noting that respect of workplace regulations should always be safeguarded.

For Marian Schaapman, Head of Office, Working Conditions, Health and Safety Unit from the European Trade Union Institute, one of the top issues today concerns the psychosocial risk factors of platform work, which is largely managed by algorithms. ‘The constant monitoring and automated managerial techniques contribute to an increasingly hectic pace of work, a lack of trust towards the platform and pronounced power asymmetries,’ she said. ‘This example is not very positive. It’s important to think what we can do about it.’

Closing session

Following two days packed with exploring, exchanging and learning, Michael Gillen, Chairperson of the EU-OSHA Management Board, stressed the importance of bringing diverse groups together to tackle complex challenges related to OSH.

‘This Healthy Workplaces Summit has shown how we have helped lighten the load for workers across Europe,’ he said. ‘We’ve raised awareness about musculoskeletal health and shared examples of how healthy workplaces lighten the load across the European Union. I don’t need to remind you that we carried out this campaign during a global pandemic which challenged nearly every aspect of how we collaborate. That makes the success of our Lighten the Load campaign even more remarkable.’

Looking ahead to the next campaign, Gillen noted how digitalisation presents both opportunities and challenges for OSH. ‘Despite this disruption to our working lives, the effects of digitalisation on occupational safety and health are relatively uncharted,’ he said, noting the following potential benefits.

- Automation, which can allow machines to take over repetitive and unsafe tasks,
- Robotics and artificial intelligence, which can support and replace people operating in hazardous environments,
- Big data, which can enable effective monitoring systems, and
- Remote working, which can offer employees increased autonomy and flexibility.

‘I’m a beneficiary of remote working, and my work-life balance has been reclaimed somewhat over the last two-and-a-half years,’ noted Gillen. ‘But remember this. There are jobs we are doing today that were not envisioned five years ago. We cannot wait for regulation to catch up,’ he added. ‘The overarching message of our new Healthy Workplaces campaign is that digital work brings remarkable benefits, but only if designed, implemented, managed and used with a human-centred approach.’

Between 2023 and 2025, EU-OSHA will highlight how to use digital technologies safely and productively across all sectors. The new campaign will focus on five priority areas: remote and hybrid work, smart digital systems, digital platform work, advanced robotics and Artificial Intelligence (AI), and worker management through AI.

‘As always, we welcome participation from all stakeholders in addition to our traditional network of partners,’ concluded Gillen. ‘And we will reach out to the research and technical community, software and industrial designers and start-ups. Just like in promoting musculoskeletal health, we need all players around the table to make significant and lasting changes for workers in this Digital Age.’
In his closing remarks, William Cockburn, EU-OSHA Interim Executive Director, took the opportunity to thank everyone who worked to make the Lighten the Load campaign a success.

‘I would like to thank the official campaign partners, the media partners, the Enterprise Europe Network, social partners, and as I said before, the management board and the EU-OSHA staff for their involvement in the campaign,’ he said. ‘However, there is one group that I mentioned yesterday in the presence of the ministers and the Commissioner. And that’s our network of National Focal Points. I did say they are unique to this agency. We are a small agency so without that network of national authorities and the national tripartite networks, we would not be able to do the work we do and to have the impact we have.’

Social media builds up excitement

EU-OSHA successfully tapped into the power of social media to promote the summit and boost awareness and participation. Posting ahead, during and after the event built plenty of buzz. Live tweets sparked interest and created awareness and discussion.

The hashtag #EUOSHAsummit was used over 800 times during the whole month of November 2022. Summit highlights are presented in this overview.

The press conference for local and online media also had a large echo in the online and print media, including over 200 online publications. EU-OSHA media partners also attended the summit with plans to disseminate information in their networks.