

Developing a preventive OSH culture in Europe

Summary of the Agency's 2005 annual report

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ABOUT THE EUROPEAN AGENCY FOR SAFETY AND HEALTH AT WORK



The Agency helps to improve the quality of occupational safety and health (OSH) in the EU by developing, collecting, analysing and disseminating impartial information on the most pressing OSH issues.

Funded by the EU, the Agency works closely with governments, employers and workers' organisations in all 25 Member States, as well as the EFTA/EEA and candidate countries. Its network of national focal points plays a key role in drawing together and disseminating the relevant information and expertise. The Agency also has links with a growing number of international organisations beyond Europe, ensuring the EU remains at the cutting edge of OSH information and thinking.

Priorities include:

- **Supporting the EU's strategic thrusts:** mainstreaming risk prevention into all facets of workers' lives and into policy thinking is a central plank of the EU's Community strategy on health and safety at work, 2002–06. To realise this goal, the Agency is running a variety of programmes, including projects to integrate OSH into education and to identify emerging risks in 'the changing world of work'. Initiatives are also underway to help increase work participation rates and the quality of jobs on offer, for example for women and the disabled, in line with the Lisbon agenda.
- **Tackling the most costly safety and health problems:** many OSH problems have severe human and financial costs. Every two hours, for example, someone is killed in an accident at work in the EU. Moreover, Europe loses an estimated 550 million workdays per year through occupational ill health and accidents. Major health issues include musculoskeletal disorders; exposure to noise and dangerous substances, such as chemicals; and psychosocial problems, such as stress at work. The Agency is addressing these and other issues through information campaigns, good-practice initiatives and other avenues, together with social partners.
- **Targeting high-risk sectors:** these include fisheries, construction, agriculture, healthcare and education, amongst others. The Agency places particular emphasis on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which account for 65 % of the EU's workforce and have an above average incidence rate of work-related OSH problems.



2005 HIGHLIGHTS



EUROPEAN WEEK TURNS UP THE VOLUME ON NOISE AT WORK

The Agency's sixth annual European Week for Safety and Health at Work not only raised awareness of the risks of noise at work and how to combat them, but also alerted employers to their responsibilities under the new EU directive on noise, which came into effect on 15 February 2006.

Launched in April 2005, on International Noise Awareness Day, the pan-European campaign highlighted the fact that noise-induced hearing loss is one of the most commonly reported occupational health problems in the European Union, affecting an estimated one in 13 workers in a broad spectrum of industries, from manufacturing and finance to the health and entertainment sectors. As the Agency pointed out in its dedicated 'Stop that Noise!' website, and in posters and leaflets, exposure to excessive levels of noise can also exacerbate employees' stress and increase the probability of accidents, among other risks.

To promote these messages and good-practice solutions to as wide an audience as possible, the Agency's network of national focal points supported and coordinated numerous events across Europe, from training seminars to noise measurement campaigns. We also ran our annual good practice awards for innovative and practical ways to tackle noise at work.

At the closing event in Bilbao, where Vladimír Špidla, European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, gave the keynote speech, there was a special focus on the dilemma of managing noise in the entertainment industry. A report on this issue is being prepared by the Agency.

RISK OBSERVATORY IDENTIFIES EMERGING PHYSICAL RISKS

The growing prevalence of technology at the workplace is exposing employees to a range of concurrent risks, from musculoskeletal disorders (MSD) to stress, according to the first report from the Agency's newly established risk observatory.

Set up in 2004, the observatory's main role is to identify OSH trends in Europe, as well as new and emerging risks, drawing on over 100 different national and European data sources, together with the knowledge and expertise of leading OSH specialists.

In its first report, *Expert forecast on emerging physical risks related to occupational safety and health*, the observatory has pinpointed a series of physical risks that are becoming increasingly common at work. These range

from lack of physical activity in the workplace and combined exposure to MSD and psychosocial stress, to thermal discomfort impeding workers' well-being and safety behaviour and insufficient protection of high-risk groups, including migrant workers, against long-standing ergonomic risks.

Two clear themes emerge from the report, which is based on the knowledge and experience of over 60 OSH experts. First, many — but by no means all — of the risks are related to the use of computers and other new complex technologies, which often require employees to spend long periods of time immobile at their workplace or to perform complex, mentally demanding tasks, leading to stress and augmenting the chances of human errors and accidents.

The second and more pronounced theme is that many of the challenges that are emerging involve multi-factoral risks. In call centres, for instance, staff often have unergonomically designed work stations, inadequate headsets and also have to contend with high levels of background noise, little control over their jobs, conflictual relationships with customers and significant time pressures.

The full report, plus a summary factsheet, is available on the Agency's website.

HEALTHY WORKPLACE INITIATIVE TARGETS EU-10, PLUS ROMANIA AND BULGARIA

Our drive to help the 10 latest EU Member States, as well as Romania and Bulgaria, develop a preventive OSH culture moved up a gear with the launch of the healthy workplace initiative.

The initiative is designed to raise awareness in these countries of OSH essentials, such as the need to conduct risk assessments and involve the workforce, as well as to transfer 'good practice' knowledge to the EU-10, Romania and Bulgaria.

There will be an especially strong emphasis on lifting OSH standards in the EU-10's small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which account for 72 % of these countries' workforces.

Together with our focal points, we will be developing multilingual campaign materials to promote a preventive culture in their respective countries. This will include a dedicated website, posters, leaflets and advertising, coordinated by a central marketing agency in order to leverage economies of scale and ensure a consistent strategic focus.

AWARD-WINNING IMPROVEMENTS TO WEBSITE

Our website has been revamped, enabling visitors to access an unrivalled source of OSH information through a single global portal and to search the site more quickly and easily.

Re-launched in September 2005, using the latest open-source Internet technology, the multilingual site includes a number of new facilities, including the ability to customise pages to suit your individual needs and to search by sector, risk and topic. It also allows our focal points to edit content on their mirror sites without requiring specialist web skills.

These and other developments won the site an International Information Industry award for its 'innovation in content management'.

OTHER KEY DEVELOPMENTS DURING THE YEAR

Promoting the economic value of OSH: one of the most effective ways to encourage businesses to embrace OSH more fully and systematically is to provide solid empirical evidence that it can help them sharpen their competitive edge. Much of this evidence is now been made available in a new feature on our website. Entitled *Business aspects of OSH*, the feature brings together many of the most important insights into OSH and economic performance, including information on OSH and economic incentives, as well as OSH and corporate social responsibility, among other issues.

Boost for agricultural sector: to help reduce the high incidence of OSH-related problems in Europe's

agricultural sector, the Agency has produced a special 'Agriculture good practice' section on its website, providing advice on a variety of topics, such as child safety and pesticides, as well as case studies and links to other sources of information.

Brussels liaison office opens: the Agency has underlined its commitment to establishing stronger links with institutions at the heart of Europe by establishing a Brussels liaison office. As well as raising the Agency's profile within Brussels, its main role is to support and work with the Commission, European Parliament, major stakeholders such as social partners and other interested parties to ensure that OSH is taken into account in key policies and other areas.

International network expands: during the year we teamed up with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) in the USA to create a new joint OSH website (www.cdc.gov/niosh/usnetwork). The Korean Safety and Health Agency (KOSHA) also joined our network with a joint website.

85 % increase in web visits: for the second successive year, visitor numbers to our websites nearly doubled, increasing by 85 % compared to 2004, raising the total number of visits to 8 million. We also relaunched our electronic newsletter, OSHMail, which now has over 28 000 subscribers, to make it easier to navigate.

SME scheme reaches 1.5 million businesses: An independent evaluation of the Agency's funding scheme for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) revealed that the 142 projects funded by the scheme during 2001–04 reached over 1.5 million firms at a cost of less than EUR 10 per business.

LOOKING FORWARD: 2006 AND BEYOND

Some of the initiatives planned for 2006, in addition to the Agency's ongoing activities, include:

- **A regional seminar tour to promote the Agency's healthy workplace initiative:** supported by a media campaign and dedicated website, the tour will involve 36 seminars in 12 European countries, including the EU-10, Romania and Bulgaria.
- **The 2006 European Week campaign, focusing on young workers:** work will also start on the following year's campaign, which will concentrate on musculoskeletal disorders.
- **New projects dealing with high-risk sectors, including the hotel, restaurant and catering sector:** employees in the cleaning industry will also be targeted.
- **Further reports from the risk observatory:** these will address emerging chemical and biological risks. Moreover, data on absenteeism, occupational diseases and stress will be collected and analysed.
- **An independent evaluation of the Agency and its network:** the results of this study are expected to be published in 2007.





Ever since the Agency started operating in 1996, its primary goal has been to provide the information and support required to develop a preventive OSH culture in Europe. This has included:

- *establishing a global network of OSH knowledge and expertise that the Agency can draw on to address key issues;*
- *creating a comprehensive web portal to share and disseminate these insights;*
- *proactively reaching out to workplaces, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, to promote the importance of OSH, as well as providing proven practical advice to improve occupational safety and health standards throughout Europe;*
- *identifying new and emerging risks through the creation of a risk observatory.*

During 2005, we continued to build on these strengths, for example by expanding our network of partners and focal points, enhancing our award-winning website and reaping the first fruits of our new risk observatory. Our European Week for Safety and Health at Work also, yet again, produced impressive results. More significantly, the Agency started to adopt a more holistic, integrated approach to encouraging a preventive culture, reflected in our new healthy workplace initiative, focused on the EU-10, plus Romania and Bulgaria.

As the Agency enters its 10th year, we are committed to making even greater progress. In the meantime, we would like to thank our staff and partners for their support over these years and look forward to reporting further advances soon.

Hans-Horst Konkolewsky
DIRECTOR

Bertil Remaues
CHAIRPERSON





In order to encourage improvements, especially in the working environment, as regards the protection of the safety and health of workers as provided for in the Treaty and successive action programmes concerning health and safety at the workplace, the aim of the Agency shall be to provide the Community bodies, the Member States and those involved in the field with the technical, scientific and economic information of use in the field of safety and health at work.

European Agency for Safety and Health at Work
http://osha.europa.eu

NATIONAL CONTACT POINTS FOR YOUR REGION

Further information about the Agency's information projects and other initiatives can be obtained from its website: <http://osha.europa.eu>. For details about national-level projects and developments, please contact your local focal point in your country:

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