

Interview with Jukka Takala, Director of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work



Bilbao, 28th April 2008

What does 'risk assessment' mean?

Jukka Takala: Risk assessment is the key to preventing accidents and illness at work.

Risk assessment is the process of systematically evaluating the risks to workers' safety and health from workplace hazards.

Risk assessment looks at all aspects of the workplace and the work that is carried out there, considering what could cause harm, whether hazards – accident risks or longer term health risks – can be eliminated, and if not, what preventive or protective measures should be put in place.

Risk assessment enables employers to understand the action that they need to take, to eliminate or minimise the risks to their employees. It is the start of the process of safety and health management.

Why is risk assessment important?

JT: Risk assessment is the cornerstone of the European approach to occupational safety and health.

If the risk assessment process is not done well or not done at all, the necessary preventive measures are unlikely to be identified or put in place.

And accidents and illnesses are costly.

There is the human cost for workers and their families: behind the statistics are real people, each with their own story. There is the cost for organisations when things go wrong, including the cost of reduced productivity. And there are costs for governments, as accidents and illness place a burden on healthcare systems.

But proper risk assessment brings business benefits.

Organisations can cut the costs caused by accidents and illnesses, reduce the rates of sick leave and insurance claims, and reduce rates of staff turnover.



Why have you chosen risk assessment as the theme for your campaign?

JT: Data and statistics about accidents and illnesses at work show that improvements are urgently needed.

Every three-and-a-half minutes, someone in the EU dies from work-related causes. This adds up to around 167,000 deaths a year from work-related accidents and occupational disease.

Every four-and-a-half seconds, a worker in the EU is involved in an accident that forces them to stay at home for at least three working days. That adds up to over 7 million every year.

Improvements are needed in three areas particularly:

- The statistics available at Member State level indicate that a very important number of enterprises do not assess their risks. This is especially the case among SMEs, which make up the majority of enterprises.
- It is important to improve the quality of the assessments. All relevant risks should be considered, not only the obvious ones, preventive measures should be monitored, and the assessment should be revised regularly.
- Finally, there is a need for an exchange of resources (such as risk assessment tools) and experience relating to good practice.

The campaign aims to provide employers and employees with the guidance, information and resources that they need, to carry out proper risk assessments and keep the workplace safe.



Doesn't risk assessment just impose more costs on business?

JT: Risk assessment isn't just an obligation or burden. Not only does risk assessment protect workers, but there are economic benefits too.

Accidents and illness at work are costly for organisations and governments. When things go wrong at work, it affects business productivity, and places a burden on healthcare systems.

The creation of safe working conditions enables companies to cut costs arising from occupational accidents and illness. Proper risk assessment helps to reduce rates of sick leave, and insurance costs come down with fewer claims. More highly motivated workers are more productive and efficient, and staff turnover rates fall. This all helps businesses become more competitive. Good health and safety is good business, and proper risk assessment is worth investing in.

Who is responsible for risk assessment?

JT: By law employers are responsible for risk assessment. But ultimately, risk assessment concerns everyone in the workplace, not just employers and experts. Everyone has a valuable contribution to make, and everyone has an interest in preventing accidents and ill health.

The best risk assessments are based on partnership between employers and employees, with workers being closely involved and consulted throughout the process.

Why should employers trouble themselves with risk assessment?

JT: Apart from their moral responsibilities to keep workers safe, employers in the EU have a legal duty to protect their employees. The Framework Directive 89/391, which has been incorporated into national law in all of the EU Member States, places a legal obligation on employers to manage occupational safety and health in their workplaces. Some Member States have even stricter requirements for employers to protect workers.

As part of this process, employers are legally required to carry out effective risk assessments, as part of an on-going process of risk management.

Isn't it asking too much to expect businesses – especially SMEs – to go through this elaborate process?

JT: Risk assessment can be a challenge, especially for small businesses. But it need not be so. Risk assessment is not necessarily complicated, bureaucratic, or a task only for experts. A simple, step-by-step approach is often all that is needed, and many resources and examples of good practice are available, to help make the process easier.

The guiding principles that should be considered throughout the risk assessment process can be broken down into five steps:

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| Step 1 | Identifying hazards and those at risk |
| Step 2 | Evaluating and prioritising risks |
| Step 3 | Deciding on preventive action |
| Step 4 | Taking action |
| Step 5 | Monitoring and reviewing |

EU-OSHA promotes this stepwise approach, but there are other methods that work equally well, particularly for more complex risks and circumstances.

Finally, let me say that risk assessment can be carried out by the employers themselves, by employees designated by the employer, or by external assessors or services. Many businesses opt to carry out the risk assessment themselves, and the campaign helps them to do so. When assessments are carried out by experts, it is important that they have full information regarding the particular workplace to be assessed, and that they involve the workers, too. But ultimately the employer is still responsible for the assessment.

How do businesses know how to act on what the risk assessment shows?

JT: When they are deciding on a strategy to eliminate or control the risks that the risk assessment has identified, employers should bear in mind the general principles of prevention: they should avoid risk, combat risk at source, replace the dangerous by the non-dangerous or the less dangerous, adapt the work to the individual, etc.

Employers can find guidance on the control of risk in product specifications, national legislation, national standards, and information published by national authorities.

What does the campaign offer to organisations who might be interested?

JT: A wide variety of campaign materials are available on the campaign website, in 22 EU languages. These materials include awareness-raising posters and leaflets, factsheets, examples of good practice, quizzes, animations featuring the popular cartoon character Napo, a magazine providing technical information, and tips on how to organise and manage activities.

The site also provides access to risk assessment tools, for instance, checklists by sector and hazard, to help with the practical aspects of carrying out risk assessments.

How can organisations get involved in the campaign?

JT: Starting with the Risk Assessment campaign (2008-2009), we are moving from a one-year to a two-year campaign cycle for the first time. Among other things, this gives us more time to win partners who want to get actively involved in the campaign. Over the two years, many events are organised with the countries holding the EU Presidency and the focal points, usually the national occupational safety and health authorities in each Member State. A special effort is made during the European Week for Safety and Health at Work, which takes place every year in calendar week 43 (for this campaign: 20-26 October 2008 and 19-25 October 2009).

Individuals and organisations of all sizes can take part in these events, or organise their own ones. They can get involved in safety demonstrations, training events, seminars and workshops, poster competitions, partnerships between enterprises and education centres, 'good neighbour' schemes between large and small employers, hazard spotting and inspection days.

The campaign also features Good Practice Awards, which recognise companies and organisations that have made outstanding contributions in promoting risk assessment in the workplace.

Finally, it is important to underline that the Agency has put in place a number of channels and actions to give visibility to those who get involved in the campaign. There are two levels of involvement and recognition:

- Everybody who actively participates in one of the campaign activities can download a Certificate of Participation from our website. You simply need to let us know what you did or where you were active.

- The Partner Offer goes further and provides an opportunity to benefit from an extensive range of promotion in the OSH community, in the European area and in the media through the high visibility of the Healthy Workplaces Campaign. This is, however, reserved for those organisations who want to become an official partner of the campaign by getting substantially involved and multiplying their efforts through their network members. Again, check out our website if you want to know more about how to become an official campaign partner.

<http://hw.osha.europa.eu>