Stakeholder Conference: “Safer and Healthier Work at Any Age – occupational safety and health in the context of an ageing workforce”

22 September 2015, Brussels

The Stakeholder Conference presented the results of a pilot project “Safer and healthier work at any age-occupational safety and health (OSH) in the context of an ageing workforce” initiated by the European Parliament. The three-year project, delegated to the European Agency of Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) by the European Commission, began in June 2013.

The objective of the European Parliament project was to investigate ways of improving the health and safety of older people at work.

The project reviewed state of the art knowledge on ageing and work; investigated EU and Member States’ policies, strategies, and programmes addressing the challenges of an ageing workforce in the field of occupational safety and health (OSH) and policy areas that affect OSH, such as employment and social affairs, public health, and education; investigated EU and Member States policies, strategies, and programmes in relation to rehabilitation/return-to-work; and collected information on related workplace-level practices. The results of the project are aimed to assist policy development and provide examples of successful and innovative practices.

As a key milestone in the project, the Stakeholder Conference aimed to present the main results of the project and provide opportunities for an exchange of views regarding strategies and practices for improving OSH for older workers.

During the conference, recognised experts selected by EU-OSHA presented their independent opinion and commented on the findings of the project.

The sessions were organized around the project’s main topics, starting with a discussion on the state-of-the-art reviews on ‘Ageing and OSH’ and the report on ‘Ageing and Gender’, followed by a session on national policies, strategies and actions addressing the challenges of an ageing workforce, along with workplace practices. The third session discussed the findings in the analysis report on rehabilitation/return to work systems and programmes.

Representatives from the social partners had the opportunity to express their opinion, debate and validate the results of the project in three panel sessions followed by the presentations.

The conference conclusions are incorporated in the final analysis report for publication by end 2015.

Introduction to the conference and pilot project

The first part of the conference was chaired by Mr Ole Christensen, Member of the European Parliament (Committee on Employment and Social Affairs). Mr. Christensen set the context of ageing in Europe and its challenges and presented the European Parliament initiative report on the European OSH strategic framework 2014-2020. Mr Jesús Álvarez, from the European Commission, DG Employment, recalled that ageing is a priority area for the Commission, which requires coordination across various policy areas, including employment and public health, and funding, notably through the European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing, the European Social Fund, Horizon 2020 and the European Regional Development Fund. He called for the implementation of a holistic

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approach, combining prevention, workplace health promotion, rehabilitation, and reintegration schemes.

Dr Christa Sedlatschek, Director of EU-OSHA, presented the main findings of the ‘Safer and healthier work at any age’ project. After briefly discussing the challenges identified in the literature related to ageing and OSH, taking into account the gender dimension, she gave an overview of the policy responses put in place by Member States to address the challenges of an ageing workforce, and the different elements that support the successful implementation of a policy. She then presented national systems for rehabilitation and return to work and finally, shared the main findings of the review of workplace practices.

Ms Claire Dupont, project manager from Milieu Ltd (Belgium), presented the structure and methodology of the different tasks conducted by the consultants – literature reviews, research at national and workplace level, as well as lessons learnt in the course of the project.

1st Session - “Ageing, OSH & gender”

The session was chaired by Mr Jesús Álvarez from DG Employment and moderated by Ms Brenda O’Brien from EU-OSHA.

Dr Paulien Bongers, director of TNO (Netherlands), presented her expert commentary on the ‘State of the art review on ageing and OSH’ and the project’s final analysis report, which brings together the results of the five main deliverables. Along with the key concepts for OSH and ageing presented in the state-of-the-art review, such as ‘sustainable work’ and ‘work ability’. Dr Bongers referred to the development of a new vision of health, strongly related to participation in society and work, making health not an end in itself but the ability to adapt and self-manage in the face of social, physical and emotional challenges. She stressed that the conceptual framework presented in the state-of-the-art review could be strengthened by integrating this new vision of health. Dr Bongers mentioned a number of elements that could further support the key messages of the final analysis report, including a reference to the gap between highly-educated and less-educated populations in terms of life expectancy and healthy life years; a mention of the changing world of work and the challenges these changes entail for ageing workers; and an assessment of the impacts of the policies identified.

Professor Maria Albin from Lund University (Sweden) presented her expert commentary on the ‘State-of-the-art review on Ageing, Gender and OSH’ and the project’s final analysis report. Commenting on the review’s methodology and structure, Prof Albin mentioned that more emphasis should be put on psychosocial work factors, differences in disease prevalence, and dimensions of gender differences other than horizontal and vertical segregation, such as social disparities in health and access to OSH services. Regarding the final analysis report, Prof Albin stressed that health inequalities between countries and between occupational classes could be better presented, and that changes in the world of work could be discussed in more detail.

The panel was composed of Mr Georgi Stoev, BCCI/Eurochambres (Bulgaria), Ms Vanda Cruz, General Union of Workers (Portugal), and Ms Gertrud Breindl, Austrian government. Mr Stoev stressed that keeping an ageing workforce in employment is a challenge for companies, particularly in times where youth employment is an issue of concern. Ms Cruz recalled the importance of a life-course approach and prevention at all ages to ensure sustainable work. She highlighted that the geographical balance of the report, notably case studies, was questionable and excluded southern Europe. Ms Breindl stressed the importance of conducting diversity sensitive assessment at workplace level and, as a government representative, of strengthening the training of labour inspectors on OSH, ageing and gender issues to transfer good practices to companies.
2nd Session – “OSH policies, strategies, programmes, actions and workplace practices and needs”

The session was moderated by Dr Christa Sedlatschek, director of EU-OSHA.

Professor Juhani Ilmarinen from the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health presented his expert commentary on the ‘Review of policies in Europe for safer and healthier work at any age’. Setting the context of ageing in Europe, Prof Ilmarinen stressed that one of the most worrying trends is the shrinking proportion of younger workers, which is a challenge for countries and companies alike. Work affects people’s work ability after the age of 55 regardless of their health status, which means that, in order to keep older people at work longer, workplaces need to be adjusted (‘health-adjusted workplaces’). Commenting on the inventory of national policies addressing the challenges of an ageing workforce, Prof Ilmarinen raised a number of policy issues that the EU needs to address in the near future, and notably how to help Member States that are starting to address this issue to devise and implement an effective policy by learning from more ‘advanced’ Member States. He stressed the benefits of cooperation between stakeholders and the necessity of having a leadership for the cooperation to be effective. He concluded with ten recommendations, relating notably to the need to pay more attention to ageing workers and to manual work, to promote exchanges of experience between countries, and to support the well-being of workers and all its components – respect, trust, fair treatment and support.

Professor Steven Bevan from The Work Foundation (UK) presented his expert commentary on the review of ‘Practices at company level for safer and healthier work at any age’. Prof Bevan underlined that, with increasing pressure for retaining an older workforce in employment, employers need guidance. Examples of good practices in companies are therefore very important. To this end, he stressed that the report should better target employers and clearly state to which specific business problems the practices presented in the report respond, while showing the practical benefits for businesses. The case studies should therefore put more emphasis on the implementation process in companies, as well as how obstacles were resolved, as experiences of failures are as interesting for employers as successes. More details should also be provided on costs and economic benefits of interventions. Prof Bevan concluded his presentation with the concept of ‘good work’ and its components (secure employment, varied and interesting work, autonomy, fair workplace, effort-reward balance, learning, development and skill use, employee voice and strong working relationships) and the importance of taking into account the psychosocial dimension of work.

The panel was composed of Ms Rebekah Smith from Business Europe, Mr Viktor Kempa, ETUI, and Mr Jan Baten, Belgian government. Ms. Rebekah Smith indicated that the report focuses mostly on policies targeting ill-health management and that prevention throughout the life course should be better highlighted since businesses need to be convinced of the benefits of taking action early. She indicated that the European social partners are preparing a framework agreement on active ageing by the end of this year or early next year. Mr Kempa from ETUI highlighted that there is still a significant lack of implementation of OSH legislation in Europe, in particular when it comes to new and emerging risks such as nanomaterials or carcinogens. He stressed the contrast between the positive impact of OSH legislation in improving prevention and the intention to limit new legislation through REFIT initiatives. Mr. Baten pointed out the benefits of working across sectors and with social partners to create a holistic framework for ageing workers. He also recalled the challenges faced by labour inspectorates across the EU as budgets decrease while challenges, including those related to an ageing workforce, keep increasing.
3rd Session – “Rehabilitation/RTW systems and programmes”

The session was moderated by William Cockburn from EU-OSHA.

Ms Irene Kloimüller, Wert:Arbeit (Austria), presented her expert commentary on the ‘Review of policies and systems in Europe for rehabilitation and return to work’. She indicated that the report gives a good overview of return-to-work schemes in EU Member States. When commenting on the components of effective systems, she highlighted that, while the obligations of the employer are well described in the report, those placed on the employees should be more detailed as they are the other side of the coin to ensure successful return to work. She highlighted in particular the effectiveness of the ‘rehabilitation before compensation’ scheme, and the benefits of combining stricter compensation systems with the case management approach to rehabilitation. She finally called for more research and evidence on the cost-effectiveness of return-to-work systems in Europe and rehabilitation intervention (such as combining part-time work and sickness benefits).

The panel was composed of Ms Bodil Mellblom, Confederation of Swedish Enterprise; Ms Caroline Verdoot, Belgian General Federation of Labour; and Mr Jean-Michel Miller, Eurofound. Mr Miller highlighted the differences between and within countries regarding working conditions as well as between sectors. He called for more support for ageing or sick workers as studies show that they do not benefit enough from workplace adaptations. Ms Verdoot stressed that return to work should be a voluntary process on the part of the employee. It should also be a collective process, where both employers and employees have responsibility, and in which workers’ representatives play a role. She indicated that early intervention, although very important, should not prevent recovery by forcing a premature return to the workplace. Ms Mellblom stressed that return to work is not only about legal obligation but also about good management – employers want to have skilled workers back to work as soon as possible. In addition, employees also have responsibilities in the process and should be willing to undertake rehabilitation and to accept a new job if reintegration is not possible. She highlighted the importance of keeping contact with the workplace during rehabilitation and of coordination between all actors in rehabilitation process.

Closing remarks

Concluding remarks were presented by Ms Zinta Podniece from DG Employment. She recalled that 65% of respondents to the public consultation on the evaluation of the strategic framework said that the needs of older workers should be taken into account, and that following this consultation, the new strategic framework addresses demographic change. She pointed out that the study of good practices in companies was very useful and stressed the need to support micro- and small companies in addressing the ageing of the workforce. She concluded by presenting a number of areas for future action, including the exchange of practices and knowledge among countries, joint efforts at EU and national level to better protect all age groups and the promotion of healthy ageing before and after retirement.

Dr Christa Sedlatschek, director of EU-OSHA, closed the conference by recalling that the reports developed through the project will be published in January 2016. The final analysis report will be published in April 2016 for the launch of the EU-OSHA campaign, together with the release of the data visualisation tool presenting the findings of the project and the e-guide on OSH and ageing, which will provide workplaces with information and support for OSH management in the context of an ageing workforce. Both tools are currently in preparation.