



Conference on “Safer and healthier work at any age”

European Parliament, 2 December 2013

The conference took place in the context of the European Parliament’s pilot project on the health and safety of older workers. The overall objective of the project is to help inform policy developments in the area to improve knowledge on current policies, strategies, programmes, instruments and practice, and to support the sharing of experience by providing examples of successful and innovative practice as well as the views of relevant stakeholders. The EU-OSHA’s work on the project started in June 2013 and runs until the end of 2015.

The Conference was organised with a view to provide visibility to the project and allow the European Parliament to monitor its progress, as well as to present some preliminary results.

Summary

The conference was organised in four sessions.

PART 1: OPENING SESSION

Ms Edit BAUER, Member of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, gave an introduction to the Conference. She welcomed the participants on behalf of the European Parliament. She acknowledged that the project on “Safer and healthier work at any age” is timely considering the major demographic challenge that we are facing but also the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy of increasing employment of all age groups.

Ms Maria-Teresa MOITINHO, Head of Unit, European Commission, DG Employment/EMPL.B.3.Health, Safety and Hygiene at Work, gave an overview of the EU framework on health and safety at work in the context of the evaluation of the 2007-2012 European Strategy on Health and Safety at Work and, in the longer-term, the Europe 2020 strategy. She highlighted the importance of adapting occupational health services to the needs of an ageing workforce while ensuring that the burden does not shift to younger workers. She emphasized that older workers represent the greater proportion of the workforce however many cannot reach their retirement age due to health conditions.

Dr Christa SEDLATSCHKEK, Director of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA), made an introductory presentation of the project. With a view to the European demographic challenge, she explained the increasing importance of occupational safety and health and underlined the coordination across different policies. She elaborated on the overall objectives of EU-OSHA’s work to support the Parliament’s pilot project presenting the methodology and aims of the project and the expected outcomes from the Conference.

PART 2: MAIN ISSUES TO CONSIDER FOR OSH AND AN AGEING POPULATION

Ms Veronique DE BROECK from the European Network Workplace Health Promotion (ENWHP) (BE) presented the elements of a holistic approach for Workplace Health Promotion (WHP). Using demographic data she demonstrated the increasing significance of older workers to the workforce and

competitiveness of the EU. Furthermore, Ms De Broeck explained that combined efforts of employers, employees and society are key elements for achieving Workplace Health Promotion that will ensure that workers remain healthy and thus are able to work longer. After an outline of the ENWHP's activities in this regard, she stressed the need for a change in company attitude towards older workers and the need to overcome stereotypical aged-based assumptions. In particular, she explained that companies could start by assessing their current, starting position and project to the future by using a series of action plans and tools, among which an age structure analysis and a checklist to identify the need for relevant action.

Prof. Juhani ILMARINEN, from the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (FIOH) (FI), made a detailed presentation of the Work Ability concept in the context of an ageing workforce. He explained thoroughly the four core dimensions of the concept and demonstrated the Work Ability Index. Prof. Ilmarinen observed that merely focusing on increasing retirement age is a negative approach and underlined the significance of creating a new paradigm for the quality of longer working life that is well-being. A set of factors could contribute to a positive approach, such as raising awareness about ageing, creating positive ageing attitudes, better health services, creating age adjustable workplaces, investing in different age management for young and older workers. He emphasized that every country needs national programmes taking the above into consideration.

Dr Chris BALL, Chief Executive of The Age and Employment Network, Experts in Age and Employment (TAEN) (UK), offered the employees' point of view and the case for social dialogue concerning living and working longer, healthier and safer. After a brief presentation of TAEN's activities, he highlighted the two different perceptions of the value of older workers, from the Human Resources (HR) side on the one hand and from the older workers themselves on the other hand. The underlying issue is how to prevent early retirement and keep people in the workplace and able to work, while their career changes. Dr Ball stressed the need for a joined up approach covering multiple aspects of working conditions and joined up thinking that will lead to winning the worker's support. He also pointed out the correlation between living healthy and working longer and stressed that supporting exercise and fitness is a great way to engage with employees. He also argued that employers with good OSH often encourage activities targeting employee's health. He finished his presentation by giving some examples of social dialogue projects.

DrPH Birgit AUST, from the National Research Centre for the Working Environment (DK), presented the Danish National Return-to-Work (RTW) Programme, where municipalities are key players in sickness/ disability management. One of the main objectives of the programme is to determine whether it is possible to establish an early, coordinated, tailored and interdisciplinary RTW programme, within the existing legal framework in Denmark. Dr Aust gave a detailed overview of the programme and underlined the importance of an interdisciplinary, and not just multi-disciplinary, approach towards rehabilitation/return-to-work. A successful collaboration should share a labour market-oriented approach, based on continuous self-evaluation, case management and leadership support.

The audience contributed with questions and comments. One comment related to the need to take into account the increasing occurrence of precarious contracts when discussing healthier working lives at all ages and the subsequent emergence of risks related to flexible forms of work. Another participant highlighted the importance of adopting a holistic approach to health and safety at work and to improve OSH conditions for all, and not only for ageing workers. The two points were further discussed with the panel and their relevance to the project was highlighted.

PART 3: PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF THE PROJECT “SAFER AND HEALTHIER WORK AT ANY AGE”

Ms Sarah COPSEY, Project manager from EU-OSHA, gave a full overview of the project and highlighted the OSH challenges in the context of an ageing workforce. Ms Copsey reaffirmed that an efficient OSH system requires a holistic and life-cycle approach that ensures healthy young workers who will gradually become healthy older workers and, eventually, healthy retired workers. She stressed the importance of a better implementation of the OSH Framework Directive and recalled the importance of the prevention principles highlighted in the Directive. She also addressed the importance of looking closely at musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), in particular in a gender dimension. Finally, she pointed out the positive example of early ergonomics knowledge promotion and application in primary schools in Sweden.

Ms Claire DUPONT, Project manager from Milieu Ltd, presented preliminary results based on the information available at the current stage of the project. Ms Dupont highlighted that the project is at a very early stage and the results are very preliminary. However some general trends can already be highlighted. In particular, the first overview of policies and initiatives showed the scarcity of policies specifically related to the age dimension in health and safety at work and the diversity in the existing initiatives. Such result would support the need for a common framework at EU level to ensure a minimum level of awareness at government and company level.

The audience contributed with questions and comments. Many participants underlined projects and programmes that are being carried out in their organisations on similar topics, which the project should look into in order to build on existing information. As mentioned in the presentation of the preliminary results from the project, one participant reaffirmed that one of the main gaps relates to the implementation and evaluation of policies and legislation. In addition, several points were made that should be taken into account in the scope of this project:

- Health inequalities across Member States should be taken into account when designing recommendations at European level.
- The challenge of technological changes should be addressed on dual front: the ageing workforce needs to adapt to technological changes (e.g. through trainings and lifelong programmes) but technologies should also be adapted to a changing workforce (e.g. at the stage of software design).
- Sustainable working conditions can only be created if employees are involved in the process.
- The importance of the implementation of the OSH Framework directive for prevention.
- Prioritisation of the key elements.

Finally, one participant highlighted that the added value of the project will lie in the exchange of practical examples of how policies are implemented in other Member States.

PART 4: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Ms Maria-Teresa MOITINHO and Dr Christa SEDLATSCHKEK concluded on the speakers’ and participants’ interventions by affirming once again the importance of prevention in all aspects of the working life and at all ages. This can be done only if there is cooperation of actors and coordination across policy areas. The project’s focus on SMEs was once again highlighted as crucial considering their importance in the European labour market. Dr Sedlatschek drew the attention to the challenge of translating scientific research into policy. Finally, Ms Moitinho mentioned that the findings from the on-going evaluation of the Health and Safety Directives will be presented at the concluding conference of this project in June 2015.

Following all speakers’ and audience contributions, **Ms Edit BAUER**, Member of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, thanked all participants and reaffirmed the commitment and interest of the European Parliament to the project.