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Mainstreaming OSH into business management
Summary of an Agency report

Organisations deal with occupational safety and health (OSH) in different ways: some have little expertise in OSH and simply react to occupational accidents, work-related diseases and absenteeism as they arise, while others strive to manage OSH more systematically, and even proactively, by mainstreaming OSH into the organisation's overall management. This report aims to provide evidence and information on how OSH can be incorporated into general business management, thereby achieving safer and healthier working environments and better general organisational performance.

This report comprises three main parts, each with a different specific focus: a literature review, an overview of related policies and examples of good practice.

Literature review

The review provides an overview of evidence from the literature on how OSH can be most effectively managed in an organisation, and to what extent it should be integrated into an organisation's overall management and business structure.

The literature review focuses first of all on issues relating to the incorporation of OSH into management. The difference between traditional and systematic OSH management is discussed, as well as the application and effectiveness of OSH management systems. Attention is also paid to the way OSH can be linked to quality management and occupational health programmes (e.g. workplace health promotion). As organisations may adopt multiple management systems and/or management system standards at the same time (with regard to quality, environment and OSH), the need to integrate the management systems might emerge. Hence, the issue of 'integrated management systems' (IMS) is also examined.

There is an overall consensus in the research that the management of OSH should be seen as a part of the overall management structure and not as a separate business process. It is believed that the more OSH becomes linked to the core activities of an organisation, the better OSH performance will be in times of organisational change (due, for example, to economic problems, mergers, downsizing or rapid technological innovation). Yet one possible problem related to a full integration is that OSH may receive lower priority compared to other issues: in many cases, matters perceived as urgent are likely to be treated first, and production issues are, on balance, usually much more pressing. Some experts therefore stress the importance of considering OSH as a 'political agenda' that has to be promoted, as it sometimes competes against other agendas (such as production).

Achieving positive results in OSH takes much more than installing an OSH management system that is well integrated with other existing management programmes and systems. Organisations also need to address cultural and political aspects of the workplace, a subject that is discussed in the second part of the literature review.

The results from the literature review confirm that:

- There is a great deal of research on, and interest in, the topics of managing OSH and incorporating OSH into the overall management and business processes.
- Research into the effectiveness of OSH management is still in its infancy and has to deal with several methodological difficulties.
- Descriptions and examples of OSH management systems show that these systems focus mainly on safety (prevention of accidents) and not on the prevention of other work-related negative health effects.
- There appear to be few OSH management system practices focusing on organisational risks and psychosocial health effects (e.g. violence and conflict at the workplace, problems of shiftwork or long working hours, etc.).
- In general, non-standard employment (temporary and part-time employment, telework, etc.) and employment in small and medium-sized enterprises can be regarded as two important fields which present major challenges to the management of OSH.
- Another challenge for research is to further investigate the effectiveness and quality of OSH management strategies/processes and how these match with the requirements of the Framework Directive. [1]

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[1]   Council Directive 89/391/EEC of 12 June 1989 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work.

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Policy overview

The formulation, implementation and promotion of an integrated, proactive approach towards OSH management is supported by policies and practices established at international, European and national levels. These policies and practices, aimed at promoting and supporting the incorporation of OSH issues into management, are also presented in the report. It discusses strategies, legal provisions, standards, guidelines, programmes and campaigns, initiated and undertaken by different stakeholders such as international organisations, EU bodies, governments, employer and employee associations, labour inspectorates, insurance institutions, etc.

Policies related to OSH management include mandatory as well as voluntary measures. The legal framework of managing OSH in a systematic way and implementing OSH management systems has been established in the European Union by the Framework Directive. The Directive defines the basic goals of OSH management and the measures necessary to achieve these goals. The implementation of legislation is supported by various voluntary initiatives directed at OSH improvement. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) plays an important role in promoting the application and implementation of voluntary OSH management systems. The ILO approach is supported by several national practices, including national guidelines and promotional programmes.

The examples of successful actions in different EU countries described in the report confirm that:

- Developing and establishing policies for OSH management requires cooperation between different actors, including governments, insurance institutions, employers' organisations and trade unions. This cooperation is a key success factor.
- Different incentives (including the provision of free seminars, tools and training) can be used to increase motivation on the part of organisations to develop their OSH management.
- Sustainability, which has to be actively promoted, is one of the main factors influencing the long-term impact of these policies.
- Further development of these policies and practices is needed to ensure a better integration of all OSH-related issues within overall management and business processes.

Case studies

Many organisations are interested in making systematic and ongoing efforts to improve OSH conditions. Some organisations move beyond merely obeying the regulations and undertake activities aimed at incorporating the OSH culture into the overall corporate culture. In these organisations, OSH management is usually seen as an integral part of management as a whole. The case studies presented in the report include examples and good practice advice on how OSH can be incorporated into general management and business processes. It has a selection of 20 cases and snapshots from 12 EU countries.

The cases show that among many other positive effects, improvements in OSH management can result in:

- The improvement of workers' motivation as well as an enhanced risk assessment process and measurement of OSH performance.
- An improvement of the working conditions and well-being of the workers and, consequently, a decrease in occupational accident rates, number of days lost due to accidents and work-related diseases and related costs.

Many examples in the report feature organisations that strive continuously to improve working conditions and their workers' safety and health. This is not only for moral reasons but also because they believe that the creation of a safe and healthy working environment leads to the limitation of losses and improvements in productivity and competitiveness. Efficient OSH management is believed to be closely related to strategic activities aimed at enhancing the organisation's overall performance.

How to get the report

The full report is available in English on the Agency's website at; http://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/reports/TE3009247ENC/view where it can be downloaded free of charge.

This factsheet is available in all EU languages at: http://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/factsheets

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