



Prevention of Work-related Accidents: a different strategy in a changing world of work?

European Conference and Closing Event of the European Week for Safety and Health at Work 2001

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Introduction

The focus of the European Week for Safety and Health at Work 2001 was the prevention of work-related accidents. Each year about 5 500 EU employees are killed at work, and many more are injured – figures that remain unacceptably high. Most of these accidents could be prevented and action to tackle this problem is essential if we are to reduce the human and financial toll.

During October 2001, a wide range of European Week activities took place in the EU Member States. These culminated in a closing event, jointly organised by the European Agency and the Belgian Presidency of the EU, which took place in the European Parliament in Brussels on 22-23 November 2001. The conference aimed to promote the Week's success in raising awareness of the need to cut the number of accidents at work and to highlight the major policy challenges involved in preventing accidents in a changing world of work. It also provided an opportunity for decision makers, experts and others working in the field of occupational safety and health to share and exchange their knowledge and experience in this field.

This Forum publication is based on speeches and interventions made during the conference, and also on five workshops that preceded it.

A The changing approach to health and safety

Based on a speech by Laurette Onkelinx, Belgian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Employment and Equal Opportunities

Work is traditionally perceived as being beneficial to health. Yet this may not always be the case. Together with unemployment, accidents at work constitute the hidden face of employment, industrialisation and economic development. Sadly, it is often at the time of a tragedy such as the explosion at AZF in Toulouse at the end of 2001 that they become most apparent.

Even in our 'post-industrial' societies, accidents cause serious harm not only to workers but also to the performance of our economies.

The progress that has been made in terms of prevention seems often to be somewhat less than was originally expected. Furthermore, a perceived reduction in the accident rate within a sector may only be the result of an overall decline within the sector itself.

The existence of emerging risks may go some way to explaining why the results have not necessarily been as far-reaching as desired. The changing nature of risks makes an evolving prevention policy necessary too.

Prevention is typically approached from a technical point of view. However, another approach based more on systems is possible, and Laurette Onkelinx, the Belgian Minister responsible for Equal Opportunities has been developing such an approach within her ministerial department.

The approach relies on the training of key-players: improving risk analysis methods; promoting working in different disciplines; facilitating communication between key-players, etc.

A link has also been established between stress – and other psychological pressures – and accidents at work. In view of this, Ms Onkelinx mobilised the key-players to launch a campaign of concrete action against stress.

A debate was launched in Belgium, relating to the coordination of Community Initiatives on 'health at work' with those on 'equal opportunities'. For example, although the gender dimension in OSH has to some extent been recognised, policy is still largely made on the implicit assumption that the average worker is male.

On 16 November 2001, a seminar took place that presented an analysis of an EU survey carried out by the European Trade Union Technical Bureau for Health and Safety (TUTB) and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). The seminar highlighted the need for a greater integration of the gender dimension into OSH and particularly with regard to the



© European Parliament. 2001 Good practice award winners.

Good Practice Award Scheme

As part of the European Week for Safety and Health 2001, the Agency ran its second annual Good Practice Award Scheme. The aim of the scheme is to acknowledge and motivate good practice activities and to stimulate the sharing of innovative and practical solutions to prevent work-related accidents.

Member States nominated workplace examples of effective good practices from all over Europe. They covered many different types of organisations, including small businesses, the public and private sectors, as well as trade unions working in partnership with employers, and national health and safety institutions.

Seventeen companies received awards at a ceremony which formed part of the closing event of the European Week, held in November 2001 in the European Parliament in Brussels.

The award-winning good practices included:

- an action plan devised by a Spanish engine components manufacturer that resulted in a 70% cut in accidents from slips, trips and falls;
- a safety awareness campaign targeted at Belgium's fishing fleet; and
- a successful 10-year partnership programme between employers and unions at a UK chemicals firm.

indicators used. The EU could do much in this respect, e.g. through exchanges of experience.

Violence in the workplace is also an emerging risk, whether actual violence or simply the threat of it. Teachers and carers – traditionally at low-risk – have increasingly to deal with violence.

In light of this, a Parliamentary Bill has been introduced in Belgium aiming at compelling employers to adopt a proactive approach in terms of combating violence in the workplace. The employers would receive technical assistance from the appropriate authorities to accomplish this.

Ultimately, the fact that the results in terms of reducing accident risk have not always lived up to expectations is all the more reason to keep accident prevention one of our top priorities.

Some points of discussion:

- Prevention is typically approached from a technical point of view. Would a more system-based approach be appropriate and how could it be implemented?

- The EU could do much to integrate the gender dimension into OSH, especially with regard to indicators.
- Is policy still made on the basis of the male worker?
- Violence in the workplace is an emerging risk. Even traditionally low-risk workers have increasingly to deal with violence

B Health and Safety at Work: a priority for the European Union

Based on speeches by:

- *Anna Diamantopoulou, EU Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs*
- *Odile Quintin, Director General, DG EMPL, European Commission*

In 2001, the Commission was planning to present a new Community Strategy in 2002 on safety and health at work, early in 2002. The new strategy (2002-2007) would highlight the EU's commitment to achieving the highest OSH standards in the workplace. Its key aims would be to:

- Protect workers from risk and injury and to ensure their right to a safe working environment;
- Avoid social dumping and prevent a race to the bottom in terms of OSH standards.

Businesses should compete on the basis of added value from skills and enterprise, and not on the basis of low safety standards. Injuries and accidents at work are costly in physical, financial and emotional terms.

Accidents at work kill around 5 500 people every year. In 1998, 4.7 million work accidents resulted in absences of more than three days. One can extrapolate that, in this way, 500 million days are lost each year.

Lawsuits and compensation payouts for injuries can be crippling for companies too. Economies spend up to 4% of GNP on work-related injury and disability benefits each year.

Well-designed OSH policies and practices are key to avoiding this tragic waste.

OSH is closely linked to image and reputation, and is seen by consumers as one of the most important dimensions of socially responsible behaviour, more than human rights, job security and environmental protection. OSH is good business sense and it features in the new Commission Green Paper on Corporate Social Responsibility

A safe and healthy working environment is also central to the 'Lisbon Strategy'. The Lisbon Strategy proposed two key themes for the transition to a knowledge-based economy:

- Social policy is an *investment* in human capital and social cohesion, and is necessary for *sustainable development*.
- Europe must endeavour not only to *create jobs* but also to ensure that those that are created are *quality jobs*.

The Stockholm Spring Council in 2001 outlined the concept of 'quality of work.' The concept was explored in greater depth by a Commission communication adopted in June 2001. This document put forward a strategy based on the idea that 'quality of work' depends on a careful balance between job creation and adequate social protection. This strategy cannot be separated from the subject of social quality in general. The concept of 'quality' was a major innovation within the Commission's proposals on Guidelines for Employment for 2002. The drafting of a new employment strategy is so important because quality of employment depends so much on health and safety.

The latest figures published by Eurostat showed that workers between 18 and 24 years had a 40% higher risk than average of having an accident at work. In contrast, the risk among the oldest workers rose to 160% the average for 55-64 year olds and exponentially for those of 65 years or older – reaching 340% the average. As these age groups are the ones that will experience the highest rate of growth in the near future, success in improving the working conditions for these age categories is critical.

Attention should also be paid to combating the exclusion of socially vulnerable groups, and to reinserting disabled workers – particularly those whose disabilities are the result of accidents at work or occupational diseases.

Contractual relationships also often have important repercussions on the health and safety of workers:

- Temporary and part-time workers have more work-related accidents;
- Employees of more recently set-up companies are more at risk than the workers of companies that have been around for some time.

Therefore new prevention methods must be developed in line with the constantly changing circumstances in the workplace. However, this should not imply a reduction of vigilance with regard to the more classical risks.

Prevention strategies must also take the gender dimension into account. Women and men are not equally distributed among the sectors. Risks to 'reproductive' health should also be taken into account. In addition, traditional accident reporting and recognition methods put women at a disadvantage and need to be reviewed. New 'psychosocial' risks must be dealt with.

For all of these things, we need policies that are themselves of *quality*. In the first instance, this means working out the right mix of existing measures. As one of the pillars of Social Europe, health and safety should be an example of this approach, as the instruments that relate to it are many and varied and come into play in a complementary manner. These would be important elements in the new Community strategy. The legislation must be modern, user-friendly and accessible to non-experts. The Framework Directive adopted in 1989 already promoted a dynamic approach, obliging employers to continually carry out prior risk evaluations and putting in place the appropriate measures. This legislation should be used as the basis for better legislation. The new Community strategy should also be supported by suitable national strategies.

However, the promotion of occupational safety is also part of a wider strategy aiming at the creation of quality jobs.

Some points of discussion:

- Businesses should reflect the views of consumers and investors to compete on the basis of added-value from high safety and health standards and working conditions and not on the basis of just meeting minimum safety standards (corporate social responsibility);
- Quality of work depends on a careful balance between job creation and adequate social protection, and has a close relationship with health and safety;
- The number of older workers is growing fast. Our ability to fully utilise the human capital of the future will largely depend on our success in improving the working conditions, in terms of OSH, for these workers;
- Traditional ways of reporting and recognising accidents are biased against women and need to be reviewed.

C The future EU strategy for the prevention of work-related accidents

Based on a round table discussion, with contributions from the following:

- Bertil Remaeus, Deputy Director-General, Swedish Work-Environment Authority
- Marc Heselmans, Director-General, Safety Directorate, Ministry for Employment, Belgium



- *Carlos Maria Font Blasco, Director-General of the Dirección General de la Inspección de Trabajo y Seguridad Social, Spanish Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs*
- *Manuel Perez Alvarez, Member of the European Parliament Committee for Employment and Social Affairs*
- *José Ramón Biosca de Sagastuy, Health and Safety Unit, DG Employment and Social Affairs*
- *Wilfried Beirnaert, Economic and Social Committee*
- *Marc Sapir, Representative of the ETUC*
- *Thérèse de Liedekerke, Representative of UNICE*

During the Round Table, different speakers spoke about the forthcoming EU strategy for the prevention of work-related accidents. A selection of the main points of their contributions is included below:

Bertil Remaeus of the Swedish Work-Environment Authority believes that the high accident rate is too readily accepted and that incentives must form a part of any future strategy. Emerging risks he feels will be dealt with most effectively through a combination of regulation and voluntary measures.

According to **Marc Heselmans**, of the Belgian Ministry for Employment, the most important thing is to have 'concrete' regulations, as abstract ones are harder to fulfil. He believes that the onus should be on the employer to prove compliance, in contrast with the current system where the authorities have to prove non-compliance.

The new strategy to be adopted during the Spanish Presidency of the EU will propose a series of guidelines. The emphasis is on the consolidation of existing directives.

Carlos Maria Font Blasco, from the Spanish Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs say this is the approach favoured by national, regional and local authorities. He joins the Swedish representative Mr Remaeus in stressing the need for employer incentives, particularly financial incentives.

MEP **Manuel Perez Alvarez** is of the opinion that the global strategy should concentrate on the implementation of a non-regulatory framework. This could be done by setting concrete targets, like the Lisbon Strategy. Penalising companies he says does not work on its own and should be combined with a system of incentives.

José Ramón Biosca de Sagastuy of DG EMPL of the European Commission agrees that the existing legislation is adequate. However, implementation of it needs to be monitored and non-compliance should be penalised. The Community strategy must be accompanied by national strategies to be effective. Encouraging good practice is more useful than regulation. Experiments with incentive systems in Nordic countries have shown positive results.

Wilfried Bernaert of the Economic and Social Committee refers to a Commission opinion, which concludes that a balance between legislative and non-legislative measures is needed, which he says makes an open method of coordination necessary. He welcomes the inclusion of safety and health in the 2001 Employment Guidelines and says that the ESC is considering calling for Member States to set quantitative objectives. Member States should also be made responsible for the implementation of legislation.

Marc Sapir of ETUC would like to know whether the strategy will lead to a Community Action Programme in the field, as there have been no such action programmes in 10 years. A progression from 'strategies' to concrete programmes is necessary in his view. The transfer of activities to sub-contractors and the non-declaration of work-related accidents are the hidden face of 'Zero accident' policies developed in recent years.

Thérèse de Liedekerke of UNICE thinks that trends must be taken into consideration. The accident rate remains high but progress is being made and the rate is going down. Much depends on changing behaviour. UNICE believes that assisting companies (SMEs in particular) to implement the legislation is the way forward. Producing new legislation and amendments can cause confusion and besides new risks cannot be adequately dealt with by legislation alone.

Some points of discussion:

- Incentives for employers must form part of any future strategy;
- The best way forward is a balanced approach comprising legislative and non-legislative measures;
- Companies need help to implement existing legislation. Introducing amendments and new legislation only causes confusion.

Workshops

1 *New concepts in the prevention of work-related accidents in the changing world of work*

Globalisation is resulting in many changes to the working environment. Certainly the main feature of these recent changes is the speed at which they are taking place. Change has always been a part of our lives and has undeniably contributed to our societal development and the improvement of our living conditions. However, the speed and the extent of these changes, and the resulting uncertainties, are today considered threatening. We feel that we no longer have time to stop and evaluate changing forms of organisation and new methods and technologies. Time has always been an important element of our risk analyses, which can be described as 'retrospective knowledge transformed into prospective actions'.

Therefore it is right to wonder whether our strategies to prevent work-related accidents are still adequate, and whether new concepts are necessary or have already emerged.

The complexity of modern management systems means that politicians have a major role to play in determining the socially acceptable level of risks. It is up to them to determine new prevention models, taking into account social and economic, cultural and ethical considerations.

Considering the growing importance of corporate social responsibility, guidelines would be more useful than the traditional mandatory prescriptive regulations. Social business values adopted on a voluntary basis – and therefore reflecting the full participation of the business community – guarantee respect for the individual and are a valuable accompaniment to regulations.

Uncertainty and the need for greater expertise

Recent changes such as restructuring, downsizing, privatisation of large companies, new contractual relationships (e.g. subcontracting and temporary work), and telework, etc. have added to the complexity of the working environment. In addition, decentralisation and the diversification of decision-making levels and key-players means that risk management is more and more dispersed.

There is a lack of scientific certainty about the possible effects of the introduction of new technologies, new working methods, and new products etc. on the environment and on the health of present and future generations. Both elements require a new risk prevention approach involving new coordination structures and greater expertise.

Experts reckon that, given a lack of time, this expertise should be based on an intuitive and heuristic approach. Diversification means that new approaches should be holistic and integrated, in order to assure the participation of everyone involved in the working system.

From safety prevention to safety promotion

Work, private life, and occupational, environmental and public health risks, etc. have grown over the years into many different disciplines, becoming separate fields of interest and expertise. Consultation and collaboration between the fields is not widespread.

We no longer consider these subjects to be entirely separate. We feel that health, safety, and the environment are closely linked, whether at work, at home or at school etc. Consequently, experts consider that new accident prevention strategies should be oriented towards safety promotion, thereby widening the scope of safety consideration to every aspect of our lives.

Measures taken by employers can have a considerable impact on the lives of their employees. Similarly, the personal decisions of employees can influence their behaviour and commitment at work. New relations should therefore be defined between employers and employees on the one hand, and between industry and civil society on the other.

The best way to a better health and safety attitude is a common approach.

Text based on a report of the workshop by Rik Op De Beeck, Head of Research and Consultancy Department, PREVENT, Belgium. The keynote speaker was Jean-Claude André, Scientific Director, INRS, France.

Some points of discussion:

- It is felt that there is no longer time to stop and evaluate changing forms of organisation and new methods and technologies;
- Social business values adopted on a voluntary basis – and therefore reflecting the full participation of the business community – guarantee respect for the individual and are a valuable accompaniment to regulations;
- New accident prevention strategies should be oriented towards safety promotion, thereby widening the scope of safety consideration to every aspect of our lives.

2 From prevention of occupational accidents to safety promotion: the impact of new contractual relationships

The changing world of work requires a proactive approach to safety

Among the major trends in the changing world of work, the following can be recognised:

- New contractual relationships: e.g. telework, temporary work and sub-contracting;
- Growing use of ICT;
- Globalisation of work.

OSH policies must keep up with these changes.

Traditional prevention models often deal with a number of specific risks, and are no longer sufficient for dealing with new and emerging risks. The management of these risks focuses on corrective actions as opposed to prevention. What is needed for new risks is a firm integration of OSH management into the core business processes of companies. A shift is needed towards a process of proactive OSH management that addresses the early stages of business processes. The safety promotion approach relates particularly to the design of work systems, both in terms of the organisation of work and technological developments, and in terms of human behaviour and culture.

SMEs need supportive structures, practical tools and methodologies

Business processes and health and safety are not managed in the same way in small and medium-sized enterprises. Successful approaches for large companies might not work for smaller ones, e.g. safety promotion. There are often poor conditions for organisational and technological developments in smaller companies. Small companies often have an inadequate internal infrastructure for safety and health management. In order to encourage safety promotion in SMEs, good supportive external structures and a supportive business environment are needed, as well as simple and practical tools and methodologies.

Inherently safer technological solutions

There exists great potential for using technological developments and innovation processes to promote safety and health. In safety promotion, inherently safer technological options are implemented.

Safety promotion starts with education and attitude building

Safety promotion requires positive attitudes. The integration of safety promotion is closely linked to attitudes and behaviour. This should be addressed as early as possible and it is essential that safety promotion ideas be integrated throughout our education systems.

Safety promotion goes beyond compliance to legislation

While *accident prevention* can be a legal obligation, *safety promotion* is closely linked to innovation within the initial processes. Safety promotion cannot be enforced by legislation.

Safety promotion and accident prevention complement one another

We need to add elements of good practice to what is legally required. Best practice examples are becoming more important, since legislation can only provide a general framework.

Benchmarking with regard to safety performance

Most companies compare their own safety performance with that of their competitors. For safety promotion, however, we should encourage inter-sectorial and societal benchmarking. Benchmarking allows us not only to compare statistics but also to look for best practice examples. Different tools are needed to measure positive safety actions.

Safety is a human and societal value

A positive risk management culture needs to be developed. Risk management is an integral part of the enterprise and must be dealt with. Safety should be integrated into the early stages of the business process, i.e. during the design phase.

Developing a safety culture is advantageous for companies: They can improve their safety performance, improve the involvement and motivation of the workforce, improve their corporate social responsibility, and probably also save costs.

Text based on a report of the workshop by Richard Wynne, Director, Work Research Centre, Ireland. The keynote speaker was Geraard Zwetsloot, TNO, The Netherlands.

Some points of discussion:

- Successful approaches for large companies might not work for smaller ones;
- Safety promotion cannot be enforced by legislation;
- There exists great potential for using technological developments and innovation processes to promote safety and health.

3 Relevance of gender issues in risk assessment and prevention

'Workload' concerns paid work and 'socially productive' unpaid work. The distribution of the workload for men and women is unequal and pressure from unpaid work is strongest for women. More women do unpaid work and therefore the total workload for women is more than is recognised. The unpaid work women do differs from men's in that it is relatively urgent, e.g. carers and childminders.

While the division of labour depends on cultural aspects, the 'hierarchical principle' goes across cultures. Even in societies where women work, their work is considered inferior to men's. In cultures with where both men and women work, segregation occurs in the labour market: 55% of women work in female-dominated work places.

The gender dimension of the work environment

While men are more often the victims of serious accidents, women suffer longer from diseases or disorders caused by work. Men can be killed whereas in general women suffer from work. This can lead to gender bias when the workload is evaluated, since women often carry a lesser burden than men but for longer. Men receive more training than women at work, affecting their ability to work safely.

The issue of invisibility

The decision-making process is governed by men. The diseases women suffer from are often invisible. This

invisibility problem is also related to research issues. Often, women are not taken into account in research, as high-risk areas are targeted. The focus is often economically determined, and priority is given to the most costly (i.e. male) activities.

Gender issues are not included in research, e.g. menstrual cycles. Male-oriented research forms the basis for preventive action and is inadequate for women.

Women worked in factories during the World War II, owing to a lack of men and machines were adapted for practical reasons. Now too, working conditions that form an obstacle to mixed employment need to be examined. Both men and women should have access to a safe and healthy working environment.

Marginal employment

During a recession, people accept less favourable conditions than they would normally, e.g. part-time work. Yet, such working arrangements can be detrimental to health. Part-time workers often do not have the same level of protection as full-time workers. There can be a lack of career possibilities and this can affect the individual's health.

It is more frequent for women that their wages do not reflect their performance. In typically female work, 'female' qualities are considered implicit and not mentioned in job descriptions, and therefore not considered part of the workload. This type of work has a low level of prevention. Jobs resembling 'housework' are perhaps assumed to be 'safe'.

More women are employed in smaller organisations, which tend to focus less on stress.

What to take into account in the future

Gender policy is considered a human resources issue; health and safety is not. OSH policy should approach gender issues more systematically. Coherence between equal opportunities and OSH policy should be aimed at, e.g. in the prevention of musculoskeletal disorders and the declaration of occupational diseases, etc.

Traditional indicators for work accidents and occupational diseases do not permit a suitable approach to gender issues, and new ones are needed. OSH research should include a greater analysis of the interaction with life outside work. Workers' own experiences should be valued.

Text based on a report of the workshop by Kristina Kjaer Helgstrand, Researcher, National Institute for Occupational Health, Denmark. The keynote speaker was Laurent Vogel, Researcher, European Trade Union Technical Bureau for Health and Safety.

Some points of discussion:

- Traditional indicators for work accidents and occupational diseases do not permit a suitable approach to gender issues;
- During a recession, people accept less favourable conditions than they would normally;
- Men receive more training than women at work.

4 Ageing of the workforce and prevention of work-related accidents

The population is ageing and this leads to demographic changes in the world of work. When thinking about accident prevention, the effects of various occupational exposures as well as ageing must be taken into account, e.g. the new working environment.

The discussion regarding the ageing workforce is often a negative one, based on the 'ageing deficit model'. Emphasis is put on loss of ability, owing to accidents or health problems, which seems to increase with age. However, there is no clear statistic or scientific proof that this happens. A more positive approach is necessary. Older people do not lose ability. Abilities change with age and in fact often improve.

Today's labour market is confronted with an ageing workforce and companies have to deal with this. If they only look at the negative side – i.e. reduced possibilities – companies see a need to redesign the workplace and to adjust the organisation of work. The economic situation does not always allow for this and so, during recession, it seems to be appropriate in economical terms to remove older people from the workplace. However, being unemployed or without a career has an effect on people's health and socio-economic situation.

It is necessary to look at work and age in a different way than in terms of an old working population. People begin working at a young age. Maybe intervention is necessary at that age, to avoid age-related problems. Promoting a holistic approach to prevention through work design and work organisation is necessary to ensure a sustainable workforce.

The organisation of work should be adjusted to individual abilities so that younger workers are not exposed to risks that have a negative effect on health either. Older workers are able to continue working without increased risks to their health and safety. Work systems and working processes should be adapted to be more human-friendly so that people can work in a human and health-friendly way throughout the whole of their careers. One of the important elements for making this possible is to make lifelong learning possible. Adaptation and coordination of the work content, work organisation, work time, the socio-economic situation must be recognised. Sufficient attention for training possibilities, part-time work, and other elements of the position (support and training of younger employees) is necessary.

However, this calls for an integrated labour policy to combat age discrimination in employment that includes working-time aspects, economic and social relations, and flexibility issues. OSH experts cannot resolve this problem on their own. A discussion and a dialogue between the different groups in society (OSH experts, employers' and employees' representatives, and policy-makers dealing with economic, OSH, and social affairs) is needed. These new concepts for an integrated labour policy should not be focused on single aspects but on work design, working time, co-operation and social relations, health promotion, performance regulation and qualification, etc. with the aim of integrating employees for as long as possible. All this will make clear that there is a need to redesign the boundary between work and retirement, so that an active life is possible for everyone in the healthiest way possible.

Text based on a report of the workshop by Kari Lindstrom, Finnish Institute for Occupational Health, Finland. The keynote speaker was Karl Kuhn, Head of Unit, Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Germany.

Some points of discussion:

- There is no clear statistic or scientific proof that loss of ability increases with age;
- Promoting a holistic approach to prevention through work design and work organisation is necessary to ensure a sustainable workforce;
- The organisation of work should be adjusted to individual abilities.

5 Exposure to violence as a risk factor at work

What is violence?

There are four different dimensions. The first two concern the effects. Violence at work can have physical effects, i.e. employees can be subjected to physical violence. On the other hand, violence need not be physical. Verbal aggression, bullying, mobbing, etc. have psychological effects. The last two dimensions refer to the source. Violence can originate from inside the organisation or from external sources, such as customers and visitors. However, the target for this risk factor is always the employee. Therefore the prevention strategies that need to be identified should target the employee and should address the different dimensions of violence at work.

Information, statistics and surveys

The number of reported physical attacks at work is increasing throughout Europe. These are mostly related to external factors. Since bullying and harassment are usually related to relationships between people in organisations, there is little data available. The increasing number of reported incidents of violence at work should be seen in the context of increasing societal violence, e.g. road rage and domestic violence. This means that many authorities have an interest in the topic of violence and its psychosocial effects.

Who is at risk?

Three categories of workers are exposed to violence as a risk factor. The first is where the work of the employee involves looking after valuables, e.g. cash or goods in shops or banks etc. The second category is where the employee holds a position of power or authority, such as teachers, police officers, and social workers. The third category is where there is a risk of confrontation with the public, e.g. hospitals and airports etc.

Legislation

With regard to legislation, Member States have general OSH regulations concerning violence at work. Some Member States have gone further and have specific legislation. Sweden and the Netherlands have specific regulations addressing violence at work. In Italy there are specific regulations on the psychosocial effects of work. In Belgium a bill is being discussed that deals with harassment, bullying and violence. Labour inspectors are generally ill-equipped to deal with matters surrounding violence at work or psychosocial risks.

Levels of awareness

The level of awareness varies among sectors and among organisations of different sizes. It is usually the employees who are most aware, since they are the targets. Some Member States have had campaigns relating to violence at work. In Sweden there has been a large campaign in the retail sector. Other Member States have dealt with hospital services and public transport. In some Member States there has been industrial action in relation to violence at work. Workers have gone on strike for more severe prevention measures because of the increasing number of attacks.

Prevention

Different prevention strategies are needed to address violence at work:

- Design of the work environment;
- Technical measures;
- Work organisation;
- Behaviour training for employees;
- Follow up measures.

Text based on a report of the workshop by Karen Clayton, Health and Safety Executive, United Kingdom. The keynote speaker was Annika Hultin, Swedish Work Environment Authority, Sweden.

Some points of discussion:

- The increasing number of reported incidents of violence at work should be seen in the context of increasing societal violence, e.g. road rage and domestic violence;
- It is usually the employees who are most aware, since they are the targets;
- Labour inspectors are generally ill-equipped to deal with matters surrounding violence at work or psychosocial risks.

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Further information:

The conference proceedings together with additional reports and working papers on the changing world of work and OSH are available on the Agency website at: <http://agency.osha.eu.int>. For accident prevention information visit <http://osha.eu.int/ew2002/>. For information on the changing world of work visit <http://europe.osha.eu.int/topics#change>.

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