

Dear Director,

Dear participants,

I am very pleased to welcome all of you to the Healthy Workplaces Summit on ‘Working Together for Risk Prevention’ for 2012–2013. Because of my very tight schedule, I am sorry to say that I cannot take part in this summit, but I am happy to have this chance to welcome you via this video message.

Worker health and safety is one of the leading policy areas, as both theory and practice have shown that making health and safety at work a priority is important and even beneficial for businesses. It lowers costs and increases productivity, employees feel better and their performance improves; it reduces staff turnover, and the number of accidents at work; it strengthens a company’s position in the eyes of suppliers and partners; it results in better understanding and risk management in the workplace, and enhances reputations and reliability for investors, customers and the society at large.

I am therefore confident of the vital role of the current Healthy Workplaces campaign, as it provides straightforward and practical cooperation guidelines, it urges company directors and top managements to work towards reducing risks, and it encourages employees, their representatives and other stakeholders to cooperate with their managers.

On this note, I would like to mention the priorities of the Lithuanian Presidency in the field of work safety and workers’ health. These priorities serve as a common direction for moving forward, and during our Presidency we aim to promote the protection of workers across all areas.

One of the pieces of legislation on which we place particular focus during our Presidency is the proposal to pass a Directive concerning the posting of workers. We are aware that it is often posted workers working in a country other than their permanent place of employment who are faced with working conditions which may fail to meet the requirements. This proposal is aimed at better ensuring working conditions for posted workers. We put a lot of effort into reaching an agreement in the EPSCO Council that met on 15 October. However,

because of diverging opinions among the Member States no agreement was reached on our common proposal. We are now examining what other steps could be taken.

Another important proposal concerning the rights of migrant workers is for a Directive on enforcement of rights of migrant workers. The proposal is aimed at improving the exercise of the rights of migrant workers, by making more information available on existing rights and remedies, providing a legal remedy for contesting breaches of migrant workers' rights and providing the necessary assistance to them. We believe that in the very near future, we will succeed in reaching an agreement on this proposal within the Council and start negotiations with the European Parliament in December.

The quality of the protection for workers affects other social policy areas also, thus effective implementation of health and safety at work must lay solid foundations for development.

By a safe workplace we refer not only to premises and equipment that are technically safe, but also to a working culture that values safety. We should realise that we are responsible for our own safety and that of our colleagues. The systematic improvement of health and safety at work requirements – with the final objective of eliminating the risk of injuries and accidents to the maximum extent possible – is one of the keystones to creating quality jobs, increasing the competitiveness and productivity of companies and ensuring cohesion of social protection.

Risk assessment is the cornerstone of the prevention of accidents at work. It is essential that companies are aware of the dangers encountered in their operations, the risks posed by such dangers and the protective and preventive measures needed to eliminate them or to reduce risks to an acceptable level. In Lithuania, the workers most susceptible to injury are the inexperienced, with little training and poor instructions. Employees in their first year of employment are three to five times more likely to be injured than those with more than five years' work experience. It is essential, therefore, that we have training for employees and employers, more professional qualifications and information on health and safety issues (such as risk factors in operations, their identification and consequences).

Further progress is needed to create a safe and healthy work environment – starting at kindergarten level and continuing up through school – to provide education programmes on risk issues for all school levels. Health and safety at work management and risk prevention efforts should be combined with efforts to increase understanding, knowledge,

capacities, attitude and the behaviour of students and employees, i.e. lecturers, technical, administrative and supporting personnel in the field of health and safety at work. We must support efforts to spread examples and means of good practices at university level and to exchange ideas and specific tools.

Cooperation between social partners, at company level in particular, is extremely important for improving worker health and safety. For this reason, we pay a lot of attention to social dialogue, which can improve the situation of health and safety at work. The main purpose of participating in social dialogue is to exchange information, to balance interests and formulate socio-economic policy that reflects the opinions and interests of all stakeholders.

Conditions in workplaces may undergo rapid change depending on new technologies and innovations, and this leads to new challenges. To ensure that employees are duly protected, a regular review of the standards governing health and safety is required. This involves investigating accidents, or complaints made by employees and the ensuing health problems.

In order to ensure health and safety at work at company level, it is necessary to identify and eliminate risks, provide for and implement internal checks on health and safety at work, draw up and adopt preventive measures in the field of accidents and occupational health and to train employees. Attention to working culture, improving and ensuring health and safety at work conditions all mean that a company can avoid more serious consequences and financial losses while making the business more successful and productive.

WORK has always been, is, and will be, the main source of improving human welfare. A HUMAN BEING is the major originator of material values. A COMPANY is not only one's working place, but also an economic cell of major relevance, and its functioning spills over into non-industrial fields, such as cultural, scientific, artistic potential, as well as development and in many cases political and international power.

The coordination of health and safety at work policies at EU level, e.g. to ensure minimum standards in this field, should contribute to strengthening worker health and safety, contribute to keeping the employed in the labour market for longer and allow transparent competitiveness.

In the field of health and safety at work, Lithuania expects that a new Community strategy on health and safety at work for 2014-2020 will be adopted in the very near future. We are confident that its adoption will positively affect the EU-wide health protection of workers, as it deals with ensuring work quality and productivity and contributes to increasing economic growth and employment.

Of course, everyone present here today is a specialist and I am sure that this meeting, and especially the planned work groups, will contribute to the creation of good practices and of ways to better reach target groups through publicity campaigns and to maintain close cooperation between all interested parties.

Thank you for your attention and I wish you all the best in your pursuit of constructive discussions.