

## **Investing in Occupational Safety and Health – how benefits beat the costs**

17 September 2014

Opening words by Andrew Smith

Ladies and gentlemen

I am delighted to have this opportunity to say a few words on behalf of the Director of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, Dr Christa Sedlatschek at the start of today's conference.

Christa has unfortunately not been able to travel to Amsterdam today, but is keenly interested in the topic of this conference and is looking forward to learning of the fruits of our discussions.

We congratulate our Dutch focal point colleagues in TNO and the Dutch Ministry for Social Affairs and Employment on their initiative in organising and hosting this conference. At a European level, today's conference 'investing in occupational safety and health – how benefits beat the costs' could not be more timely as a new Commission, Parliament and Council president have just been installed and are setting about their tasks. But from the participants' list it's clear that it's a hugely relevant topic for the OSH Community in member states right across the European Union. Gathered here today we have more than 100 OSH colleagues from some 24 different countries representing all stakeholder groups. It's a good

example of the Agency's network in action with national partners using the network to share knowledge and experience for the benefit of Europe.

The extent to which organisations allocate their resources towards occupational safety and health is driven by a combination of legal, financial, and moral factors. The focus for today is on financial factors by means of a business case.

However, that everyone has a fundamental right to safe and healthy working conditions is a compelling argument and it's one that my organisation, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, believes in completely and uses regularly in our public rhetoric. It's also not a statement that any reasonable person will challenge. But plenty of reasonable and intelligent people are questioning the validity of the EU's current legislative approach to OSH.

So if the debate isn't about human rights what is it about? Well, all too often it's presented partly as fatalistic – 'accidents will happen' – and partly in economic or pseudo-economic terms. OSH is considered to be red tape. It's seen as an economic burden on business. A burden that in these straitened times businesses cannot afford. The costs of compliance with safety and health legislation particularly for small businesses are thought to be just too high.

What tends to be missing from these arguments are actual numbers. But say something often enough and loud enough, it can become difficult to dislodge from public perception.

So for those of us committed to making Europe's workplaces safer, healthier and more productive, our discourse needs to

be more nuanced. For quite a while now, it's not been enough to make the moral and ethical arguments (although these remain essential), our discourse also needs to include the economic argument for OSH based on solid research methodologies, empirical evidence and real-life experience.

Fortunately, as we are about to hear from today's and tomorrow's distinguished speakers, that body of evidence already exists and is growing day-by-day. On behalf of the Agency and the conference organisers I'd like to take this opportunity to thank them for the work they've put into preparing their interventions. As we'll see, the business case is already a convincing one and there are a number of projects under way and being planned by EU-OSHA and others that should strengthen it even further in the coming years.

It's also an argument that is increasingly voiced by the actual business community itself. At last month's World Congress on Safety and Health at Work, the International Organisation of Employers ran a symposium entitled 'OSH and CSR leadership as drivers for successful businesses'. Speakers from world-leading companies such as Heineken, BT and BAE Systems spoke convincingly about 'Evidence that OSH and CSR leadership enhances business performance'; about 'The business case for mental health programmes to build employee resilience' and; about the importance of 'Diversity and skills for youth - key elements for business sustainability'

In a similar vein, at EU-OSHA, as part of our Healthy Workplaces Campaigns we invite European organisations to

become campaign partners and we are always impressed by the number of multinational companies who join up and commit their time, energy and resources to promote OSH not only in their own companies but also increasingly to companies in their supply chains and through initiatives such as benchmarking workshops with fellow campaign partners.

Today's conference is going to enrich the discourse around OSH at just the right moment. In the coming weeks the European Parliament, Council, Economic and Social Committee and Committee of the Regions will begin to debate the Commission's much anticipated Communication on a strategic framework for safety and health at work from 2014-2020 that was published in June of this year.

The communication sets out three major strategic challenges:

- To improve implementation of existing health and safety rules, in particular by enhancing the capacity of micro and small enterprises to put in place effective risk prevention strategies;
- To improve the prevention of work-related diseases by tackling new and emerging risks without neglecting existing risks;
- To take account of the ageing of the EU's workforce.

Reading the communication, it's not difficult to see the relevance of making the business case for OSH in meeting all three of these challenges.

And in case, we might still be in any doubt about it the document also sets out five actions to be carried out by national and European statistics experts - one of which is to

examine, and I quote, ‘the options to improve information on costs and benefits in the area’. And to do that before 2016.

The debate over the new strategic framework is one that the Agency will follow closely and you can rest assured that we (or rather Brenda) will make sure that it’s a debate that’s informed by today’s discussions.

That EU strategic framework will also provide the frame for the Agency’s own multiannual strategic programme 2014-2020. Fortunately, we’ve anticipated many of the requests that it makes of us.

In the area of the business case for OSH, as you’ll hear tomorrow from my colleagues Xabi Irastorza and Dietmar Elsler, we’ve recently published a report on the different methodologies in use around the world to calculate the costs of non-OSH at a societal level and are now working towards establishing a robust European estimate.

At a national and sectoral level, we’ve been looking at how economic incentives can be used to promote OSH. And at an enterprise level, we’ll be publishing next week a collection of case-studies of cost-benefit analyses of interventions in small and medium-sized enterprises. There’s a summary of this report in your packs, together with summaries of our costs of non-OSH and economic incentives reports. And on that piece of blatant product placement, I think I should draw this speech to a close.

But not without saying that one of the innovations at this conference that I particularly welcome is that we have a number of communications professionals participating.

The OSH community is a broad church and that's not just because communications people like myself have been allowed in. Tripartism has long been a feature of the European OSH model and the discussion and cooperation between employers, workers and governments have been the cornerstone of our success in making Europe one of the safest places to work in the world. But in terms of communication, we can sometimes have a tendency to keep ourselves very busy communicating with each other and not enough with communicating with the rest of the world.

While we're far from being a special interest group, we are also not yet mainstream and still have our work cut out to get our message across, to defend what's been achieved and to tackle the challenges ahead.

To do that effectively we need to identify and know our audiences, adapt our messages accordingly and select the right communication channels and tools to reach them. That's something that this conference can really help us with.

Today and tomorrow, all of us have an opportunity to think, discuss and agree how we should act now and in the future.

So, on behalf of EU-OSHA and its director Christa Sedlatschek, I can assure you that we are looking forward to your discussions and your concrete proposals for action.

Thank you for listening and have a very good conference.