
French Presidency Forum International Travail Santé, 3 November 2008

Speech in workshop on Age and working conditions

Introduction

It is clear that ensuring and improving workers' health and safety is a major objective of the European Union, as well as a commitment by employers. There is a wealth of EU legislation and other strategies providing for protection of workers in the field of health and safety at work, with many obligations for employers, as defined at the national level.

BUSINESSEUROPE fully shares the assertion that national and EU policies should help to create working environments and health and safety at work, which allow workers to remain active on the labour market until they reach old age. There are of course measures in individual companies, according to the sector, national situation and culture and the specific company. These can help a great deal in allowing older workers to remain active on the labour market. It is normal that different measures are taken according to the sector, national situation and individual companies, particularly since the risks and the perceptions of these risks are different in many cases.

1. For employers, a rigid distinction should not be made in the field of health and safety at work, working conditions, other employment aspects, between older workers and others.

Legislation and other employer responsibilities apply to all workers, young or old, in different sectors and different types of jobs. It is important not to generalise between young and old or age in general, as work is so different in many cases. Other employer responsibilities may be through social partner agreements, sectoral agreements or measures taken by individual companies.

2. In the large majority of cases work is beneficial for people's health

This is particularly in comparison to long-term unemployment, which can have a very negative impact on people's health. Work is in general a positive experience.

3. Health and safety at work should not be confused with purely health issues.

The health of the population and workers specifically can of course affect working life, in both directions – health problems outside work affecting the ability of a worker to complete tasks at work, and health and safety issues at work having an effect on personal life. This is, however, a very different area, which does not foresee direct

obligations on employers in the same way as health and safety at work. Obligations are also apparent for public authorities and social systems.

4. The topic of age and working conditions has a much larger scope than purely health and safety at work. Therefore some broader remarks are necessary:

- i. Employers believe strongly that Europe needs to optimise its labour force, in particular to deal with issues such as demographic change, the ageing population and the resulting impact on the sustainability of public finances. This is a key issue for employers, in terms of ensuring that the necessary labour force is active on the labour market, particularly to increase jobs and growth in the EU. Older workers must also be given the opportunity to provide their skills and knowledge on the labour market, which is of great value to employers.
- ii. In this context it is important for European business that the number of older workers active in the labour market increases, for example through measures to cut early retirement, reform pensions and adapt social systems.
- iii. Encouragement is needed at EU level in this field, however many measures are to be taken at national level, by member state governments, for example to achieve the targets set at EU level for employment of older workers.

5. Social partners at European and national level also have a role to play, particularly being those actors that have the mandate to negotiate directly between workers and employers, often in a constructive manner.

In this way, active inclusion of all groups in the labour market is a key issue for social partners. At European level we have just started negotiations on an Autonomous Framework Agreement on Inclusive Labour Markets. Such an agreement is a commitment by social partners, agreed jointly, which has to be implemented by national social partners – both worker and business organisations. Therefore there is an obvious willingness and will be a certain obligation at national level to deal with such issues. The negotiations will not aim to tackle specific groups, such as the ageing population, but rather to tackle inclusion in the labour market in general, for all.

Conclusion

Of course it is important that work is sustainable and attractive for older workers. This must, however, be balanced with an individual responsibility to ensure that skills and competences are adapted to today's labour market.