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POLISH PRESIDENCY CONFERENCE: STRENGTHENING OSH KNOWLEDGE AND INNOVATION AS A DRIVER OF EU SMART GROWTH 7 NOVEMBER 2011, WARSAW

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“BUSINESS EXPECTATIONS REGARDING PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS AND TOOLS SUPPORTING EMPLOYERS IN OSH, ESPECIALLY IN SMES”

1. Employer approach to health and safety at work

- In general companies have a good track record on health and safety at work.
- Employers' interest in occupational safety and health (OSH) goes beyond their legal obligations. It is due to a real commitment to protecting workers' health and safety and the importance of OSH for productivity.
- That is why the business case for further improvement of health and safety at work should be promoted, in terms of reduction of costs, reduction of staff turnover and increased productivity. This will encourage companies to take further measures and further improve their track record.
- The basis for companies taking action in the area of OSH is a commitment to prevention policies, based on effective assessment of risks.
- Risk assessment is not an objective in itself, rather an instrument to achieve the goal of protecting workers' health and safety. It is not a one-off but rather a continuous exercise. Sensible risk management is not about creating a totally risk-free society. It is not about generating paperwork. It is about practical measures, gathering and evaluating information to prevent harm to workers; avoiding loss of profit; and ensuring business continuity.
- Ensuring improvements in the area of OSH requires not only action by employers, others have a role.
- Firstly, the constructive engagement of workers is important, as the other side of the coin to the legal employer obligation to inform workers of health and safety aspects at the workplace.
- National governments and EU policy makers also have a key role.
- Also there is a broader aspect - promoting changes in behaviour. This is a key element of the current EU health and safety strategy. It is essential that a preventive culture exists at the workplace, but society in general also needs to be encouraged to value health and safety and risk prevention. This starts in the education system and continues throughout the working life.

2. Business expectations from EU OSH policy

- Business expects a modern and effective policy framework on health and safety.
- EU policy on OSH should be in line with the EU2020 Jobs and Growth Strategy, supporting, not hampering the competitiveness of European industry.
- Health and safety at work is one of the most developed EU policy areas, including numerous directives protecting workers from key risks at the workplace. This raft of EU legislation provides adequate protection for workers.
- Business expects the EU to focus on ensuring the effectiveness of this legislation.
- Good implementation is in the interest of all actors in the field of occupational health and safety.
- Policy must be designed in such a way that it meets its objectives and can be effectively implemented by companies, especially SMEs.
- Companies must be able to clearly understand their obligations and the procedures they need to undertake to fulfil them. This must be possible in a cost-effective and simple way.
- Simplification of legislation should not be an objective in itself, rather a means to ensuring simpler and better compliance for companies on the ground. This ultimately means better health and safety protection for workers. This includes reduction of administrative burdens, but not only. It is as much about returning to the original objectives of the legislation and assessing whether there is a better way of achieving these.
- Taking the example of possible commission proposals on ergonomics:
 - This has been labeled a simplification initiative. Employers agree on the need to simplify the two existing directives on manual handling of loads and visual display units. However, a broad directive on ergonomics which brings additional obligations, would not lead to simplification on the ground.
 - In any case, broad legislation may not actually help to achieve better MSD prevention, as the factors causing such problems are multiple and therefore difficult to assess and define. Although there can be a direct link between work activities and musculoskeletal disorders, the root of the problem may also be in an individual's private life.
 - Also, it is likely to increase costs and burdens for employers rather than reduce them. The impact assessment conducted on behalf of the Commission states that the cost of such legislation would be €3.7bn, with SMEs bearing 90% of the costs.
 - Increasing costs so dramatically for companies in the current economic climate would be irresponsible and jeopardise the recovery.

3. Practical solutions and tools supporting employers

- This is where the focus of the EU should be.
- Work at EU level is useful, for example the development of guides by the Advisory Committee on Safety and Health, as well as provision of information by the EU Health and Safety Agency. The Online Risk Assessment (OiRA) tool is a good example.
- Importantly, such products are developed with the support of employers, workers and governments.
- However, work needs to be done to make sure that the information and guides provided are really relevant to employers, including SMEs, as well as workers, and really help implementation of OSH policy.
- It is also important to work on improving the accessibility of the information and guides, to ensure that they reach the target group. This is also the role of social partners and governments.

4. Conclusion

- Promoting the potential benefits for OSH measures at company level, in terms of productivity and competitiveness is crucial.
- EU and national OSH policies need to be proportionate, fit for purpose, and able to be implemented by companies.
- We need to work together to ensure practical tools are supported and promoted, so that they can be taken-up by companies and workers.

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