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ETUC CONFERENCE - COMMUNITY STRATEGY ON HEALTH AND SAFETY AT WORK 12 DECEMBER 2011 PRIORITIES FOR A NEW STRATEGY 2013-2020

REBEKAH SMITH, SENIOR ADVISER, BUSINESSEUROPE

1. General approach to health and safety

- Employers have a legal obligation to protect the health and safety of their workers.
- However, this is not their only motivation. It is due to a real commitment to protecting workers' health and safety and the importance of OSH for competitiveness and productivity.
- Improvements are always possible. A major incentive can be provided by highlighting the business case, e.g. reduction of costs, reduction of staff turnover and increased productivity. This will encourage companies to take further measures and further improve their track record.
- Also assistance, tools and guidelines can help, particularly in the area of risk assessment. The Online Risk Assessment tool (OiRA) being developed by the EU Agency for Health and Safety is a good example.

Risk assessment is at the core of health and safety policy – this is the basis of prevention. This is the approach favoured by employers.

- 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 exercise but rather a continuous one.
- 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, but also about avoiding loss of profit and ensuring business continuity.

It is also important to look beyond the workplace.

- A preventive approach has to be based on 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.



A word about better regulation

- This is about improving regulation. This is as much in the interests of workers as companies, to ensure that the objectives of improving health and safety are met.
- This is not about reducing the protection for workers, but about making sure that the measures are actually effective.
- Companies need to be able to clearly understand their obligations and the procedures they need to undertake. This must be possible in a cost-effective way.
- Simplification of legislation should not be an objective in itself, rather a means to ensuring simpler and better compliance for all companies on the ground.
- 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.
- 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.

The role of workers, the importance of social dialogue

- Social dialogue has an important role to play at European, national, sectoral and individual company level. This can help in finding solutions which are tailored to both sides of industry, through a constructive dialogue
- BUSINESSEUROPE and ETUC collaborate to assist their respective members in developing their social dialogue structures.
- 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.

2. Community Strategy on Health and Safety at work

- The development of further EU health and safety policy should be seen in the light of the current economic climate. BUSINESSEUROPE has expressed the need for the EU in this context to prioritise its work on measures which will enhance growth and employment. This has also been expressed by the commission. Further EU policy should assist rather than hamper this.
- BUSINESSEUROPE supports the overall objective of the current Community Strategy – taking action to reduce the number of accidents at the workplace. However, we need to move away from this narrow focus on meeting specific targets and calculation of figures. What is important is what action has been taken and is still necessary to meet the overall objective of improving health and safety at work.
- Work towards a modern and effective legislative framework should continue. We are not there yet. The work on assessment and where necessary simplification of legislation should continue, in line with comments already made.
- Improving ways of disseminating and making use of practical guides. These are often developed in a tripartite way, through the expert working parties of the Advisory Committee on Safety and Health. They are a useful tool in strengthening implementation, providing guidance for companies to comply with legislation. However, the Commission should reflect more on how such guides are disseminated, to ensure that they reach the intended recipients, in particular SMEs.



Practical guides should also be written in an easy and understandable language to improve accessibility.

Future EU health and safety policy

- In general there should be a more strategic approach, based on a limited number of priorities with a clear focus on the core aspects of health and safety at work. We support the prioritisation regarding future EU OSH policy as set out in the European Commission's work programme for 2012, likely to serve as the basis for the future communication on OSH. The work programme highlights three pillars of work - a) enhancing occupational health and safety (OSH) governance at EU level, in particular as regards the establishment of national OSH strategies and the coordination of Member States' policies b) improving implementation of the EU legal framework c) promoting health and safety at the workplace, by supporting the Member States' efforts through European campaigns and awareness raising initiatives.
- We hope that the European Commission will build on the current strategy based on these three pillars. The evaluation of the current strategy must be undertaken before moving ahead. Has the approach taken had a real impact on health and safety at work, what has been achieved, what initiatives have not been completed?
- The European Commission should take a stronger role in encouraging the development of national strategies and in monitoring the content, quality and implementation of them. Also, social partners at national level should be involved in the preparation, implementation and follow-up of such strategies.
- There should be more promotion at EU level of a preventive culture, as the basis for improvements in health and safety at work. As part of this, more work should be done to ensure better integration of OSH into education systems.

Conclusion:

The next campaign of the European Health and Safety Agency, "working together for risk prevention" will be useful to further promote the preventive approach to OSH. It is based on two elements - worker involvement and leadership at company level on OSH. This will be an opportunity to showcase good company examples. This is where the focus should be – highlighting good practices to allow mutual learning. This is the best way to encourage further action by employers and improvements in the area of health and safety at work.