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Small companies, big challenges – exploring next steps for safety and health in micro and small enterprises

On 19 June, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) hosts a high-level conference in Brussels to explore the way forward in improving occupational safety and health (OSH) in Europe's small businesses. The event builds on the findings of EU-OSHA's project examining OSH in micro and small enterprises (MSEs) and coincides with the publication of the project's final analysis report, which details the main factors influencing OSH in MSEs and provides recommendations for good practice and support for policy development.

This project has enabled a better understanding of how health and safety standards are perceived in MSEs and what actions by authorities and other stakeholders are needed to improve compliance.

The conference welcomes many key EU, national and international stakeholders

and stimulates dialogue on how to coordinate actions and implement the recommendations of the project at EU and national levels. The project's aim is to foster the development of more efficient, evidence-based policies and interventions that enable MSEs to improve OSH. The final report provides a wide-ranging analysis of 'what works, for whom and under what circumstances', taking account of issues such as forms of governance and regulation, enforcement, socio-economic contexts, advisory services, education, collective agreements and the involvement of social partners.

Marianne Thyssen, European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility emphasises that: *'Protection of health and safety at work is one of the key principles of our European Pillar of Social Rights and I have made it a priority to improve the situation in micro and small enterprises. Even though micro and small enterprises employ about a half of Europe's workforce and are fundamental to economic growth, workers in these enterprises are very often poorly protected against injury and illness, and many such businesses struggle to survive. This project has enabled a better understanding of how health and safety standards are perceived in these enterprises and what actions by authorities and other stakeholders are needed to improve compliance.'*

One of the main recommendations is to engage all key stakeholders, including regulatory actors, trade unions and employers' organisations, and ensure that their efforts are orchestrated to maximise efficiency in reaching out to MSEs and developing solutions that are applicable, sustainable and transferable. The report also identifies that strong national systems for OSH regulation and inspection are crucial, and so is integration of OSH into sectoral education and supply chain arrangements favouring OSH in MSEs.

Christa Sedlatschek, Director of EU-OSHA, explains: *'It is of the highest importance that all stakeholders work together to send a consistent message and to help MSEs address OSH challenges. EU-OSHA's tripartite nature means it is ideally placed to contribute. The OiRA online interactive risk assessment tool is a great example of this contribution, as it engages different stakeholders at the EU and national levels. EU-OSHA also develops many other tools and information materials as part of its Healthy Workplaces Campaigns, which specifically target small businesses.'*

Good practice examples

A wide-range of other good practice examples aimed at improving OSH in MSEs has been identified across Europe. It includes more 'traditional' solutions such as sector-specific risk assessment checklists developed by social partners in Sweden. Tailored to the needs of small businesses in more than 60 sectors, the online tools are free to use, and make it easy for companies to meet regulatory demands.

There are also examples based on face-to-face support which was identified as particularly important for MSEs when it comes to raising awareness of OSH and bringing about improvements. In Denmark, employers' associations and trade unions worked together to create BAMBUS, a freely available OSH advisory service specifically for the MSE-dominated construction sector, through which

companies can meet with OSH consultants and access information and advice. In Estonia, the availability of good-quality OSH advice in the agricultural sector was enhanced by a comprehensive training programme – developed by the Ministry of Rural Affairs in collaboration with the Rural Development Foundation – for agriculture advisors, aimed specifically at improving their OSH knowledge.

Although improving OSH can be challenging for MSEs, the project provides strong evidence that MSEs are more likely to adopt programmes that are perceived as relevant and affordable, and also that a cohesive approach in which all stakeholders disseminate the same, clear messages is more likely to convince small businesses that improving OSH is both feasible and practical. However, there is still a substantial share of MSEs that are vulnerable, poorly resourced, and out of reach of existing support and regulatory inspections.

The conference, through presentations of findings, interactive roundtables and panel discussions, consolidates the project's work and provides expert insights into what actions should be taken to put these findings into practice and develop solutions that would help the most vulnerable MSEs.

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