

Community strategy 2007-2012 on health and safety at work

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PURPOSE: to present a Community strategy 2007-2012 on health and safety at work with a view to improving quality and productivity.

BACKGROUND: for both economic and human reasons, health and safety at work deserve to be given a prominent place on the Community's policy agenda. The commitment to increase employment and productivity through greater competitiveness, which is central to the Lisbon strategy, requires an additional effort from all those involved to improve the EU's performance in the field of occupational health and safety. Occupational health and safety plays a vital role in increasing the competitiveness and productivity of enterprises and contributing to the sustainability of social protection systems because it results in reduced costs for occupational accidents, incidents and diseases and enhances worker motivation. Occupational accidents and diseases represent an enormous financial burden for public and private social protection systems and require an integrated, coordinated and strategic response, as well as cooperation between the main parties involved in the European Union with regard to the development of Community and national policies.

CONTENT: this communication proposes a strategy for promoting health and safety at work in the European Union from 2007 to 2012. Health and safety at work is now one of the most important and most highly developed aspects of EU policy on employment and social affairs. Thanks to the adoption and application in recent decades of a large body of Community laws, it has been possible to improve working conditions in the EU Member States and make considerable progress in reducing the incidence of work-related accidents and illnesses. With a view to relaunching the policy on health and safety at work, the European Commission defined a new Community strategy in 2002 for the period 2002-2006.

The Community strategy 2002-2006 has seen a significant fall in the rate of accidents at work. The new strategy for 2007-2012 proposes to step up our ambition and to aim for a 25 % reduction in the total incidence rate of accidents at work by 2012 in EU-27 by improving health and safety protection for workers and as one major contribution to the success of the Growth and Jobs Strategy.

The main objectives of the 2007-2012 Community strategy are as follows: an ongoing, sustainable and uniform reduction in accidents at work and occupational illnesses continues to be the prime objective of the Community strategy for the period 2007-2012. In the Commission's view, the overall objective during this period should be to reduce by 25% the total incidence rate of accidents at work per 100 000 workers in the EU 27. In order to achieve this ambitious goal, the following main instruments are proposed:

- guarantee the proper implementation of EU legislation;
- support SMEs in the implementation of the legislation in force;
- adapt the legal framework to changes in the workplace and simplify it, particularly in view of SMEs;
- promote the development and implementation of national strategies;
- encourage changes in the behaviour of workers and encourage their employers to adopt health-focused approaches;
- finalise the methods for identifying and evaluating new potential risks;
- improve the tracking of progress;
- promote health and safety at international level.

The strategy sets out national strategies which cover four areas in particular:

- 1) Improving the preventive effectiveness of health surveillance;
- 2) Taking action to promote the rehabilitation and reintegration of workers;
- 3) Dealing with social and demographic change;
- 4) Strengthening policy coherence.

Other measures include:

Promoting changes in behaviour: legislation can bring about changes in behavioural patterns. A strategy aimed at promoting a preventive culture must address all parts of society and go beyond the workplace and the working population. It should help create a general culture that values health and risk

prevention.

Integrating health and safety into education and training programmes: special attention should also be paid to the training of young entrepreneurs in occupational health and safety management and to training for workers to make them aware of the risks in the company and how to prevent and combat them. This is particularly important for SMEs and migrant workers. The Member States are called on to make wider use of the possibility offered by the European Social Fund and other Community funds of developing training projects in the field of health and safety at work for employers and workers.

Improving health and promoting awareness within companies: the Commission encourages the Member States to make provision in their national strategies for specific initiatives enabling enterprises, in particular SMEs, to be given technical assistance and advice concerning the promotion of workers' health. The social partners are invited to draw up initiatives in the context of the sectoral social dialogue and to ensure that workers' representatives are given a greater coordinating role in the systematic management of occupational risks.

Identification of new risks: the European Agency is called upon to encourage national health and safety research institutes to set joint priorities, exchange results and include occupational health and safety requirements in research programmes. The Risk Observatory of the European Agency should enhance risk anticipation to include risks associated with new technologies, biological hazards, complex human-machine

interfaces and the impact of demographic trends. The Commission encourages Member States and the social partners to promote the practical, rapid implementation of the results of basic research by making simple preventive instruments available to enterprises and in particular to SMEs.

Promotion of mental health at the workplace: at the present time, problems associated with poor mental health constitute the fourth most frequent cause of incapacity for work. The WHO estimates that depression will be the main cause of incapacity by 2020. The workplace can be an appropriate place in which to prevent psychological problems and promote better mental health. The Commission encourages Member States to incorporate into their national strategies specific initiatives aimed at preventing mental health problems and promoting mental health more effectively, in combination with Community initiatives on the subject, including the employment of persons with a mental disability.

Assessment of progress made: it is necessary to develop new instruments to measure the progress achieved and the efforts made by all the players at both national and European level, in order to ensure that adequate follow-up is given to the implementation of this strategy. The Commission will develop, in cooperation with the Advisory Committee on Safety, Hygiene and Health Protection at Work, a common system for the collection and exchange of information on the content of national strategies, the assessment of the implementation of the set objectives and the effectiveness of national prevention structures and the efforts deployed. It will promote the development of qualitative indicators to enhance the data provided by European statistics and opinion surveys on health and safety at work.

Promotion of health and safety at international level: in an increasingly globalised economy, it is in the EU's interest to raise labour standards throughout the world by taking multilateral action in cooperation with the competent international bodies, and bilateral action in its relations with third countries. It must also help the candidate countries prepare for implementation of the acquis.

To conclude, the Commission, acting in cooperation with the other parties involved, will give details and the exact schedule of specific measures to be undertaken at Community level in the Social Agenda scoreboard; these will complement the measures which the Member States promise to implement. The Commission aims with this Communication to encourage all the parties involved to make a concerted effort to reduce the high cost of occupational accidents and diseases and to make well-being at work a tangible reality for European citizens, one concrete step in developing the Citizens' Agenda adopted on May 10, 2005.