



Standardization, Testing and Certification – Practical Experiences from the perspective of OSH institutions

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Using safe products at the workplace is an effective means of preventing occupational accidents and disease. It is because of this that European internal market directives contain, in particular, essential safety requirements which have to be observed when designing and manufacturing products. The requirements are then supplemented by harmonized European standards.

Europe's OSH institutions play an important part in the preparation of those standards. They have in-depth knowledge of accident and disease incidence at the workplace as well as the knowledge they have gained in their testing and certification activities. For more than 20 years, employees of European OSH institutions have been contributing that experience to the European standardization process. Allow me to give you a few figures from the German federation of institutions for statutory accident insurance and prevention (HVBG) which underline this point.

In 2004, the 19 testing and certification bodies in the HVBG's "BG-PRÜFZERT" testing and certification network issued over 3,500 certificates. These institutions test and assess virtually all of the products which are used at the workplace – from plant and machinery to tools through to all types of personal protective equipment. As a result, they possess a solid knowledge of all aspects related to safe design of technical work equipment. In addition, the employees of the BGs' technical inspection services gain considerable insight during their inspections and when analyzing occupational accidents. Finally, there are the BGs' research institutes, which work on the front line of safety technology. There is close interaction between the testing and certification, consulting for industry, research and standardization activities performed by the BG institutions, creating shared benefits – a scenario which I am sure is reflected in similar institutions elsewhere in Europe.

It has always been the BGs' declared objective, in the interests of occupational safety and health, to make the knowledge they have amassed in their various fields of activity available for standardizers to draw on, and to play an active role in European and, increasingly, international standardization. There are currently some 220 BG experts working in around 570 national, 360 European and approximately 80 international standards bodies. In the past ten years, they have been involved in the preparation of almost 1,000 standards, of which 260 were at the national level, 480 at the European and around 210 at the international level.

Although the standards are not binding, there are two factors which make them particularly important for manufacturers but also for testing and certification bodies and for market surveillance. First, they specify the values which are considered adequately safe based on the current state of the art and they suggest technical solutions for achieving those safety levels. Second, when manufacturers apply harmonized European standards, they benefit from the concept known as "presumption of conformity", i.e. it is thus presumed that their product meets the essential requirements set out in the relevant European directive.

With respect to the testing and certification bodies' work, it should also be pointed out

that standards often include specifications for test set-ups and procedures as well as the measuring methods to be used. It is practically inconceivable for laboratories which test, for example, personal protective equipment to work without the test apparatus described in harmonized European standards.

Of course, European directives written in accordance with the "New Approach" make it possible, in principle, to design and manufacture products without applying harmonized European standards. However, it has proved useful to consider OSH aspects at an early stage of the development process in order to prevent defects, particularly when it comes to the sort of cutting-edge products for which harmonized European standards do not (yet) exist. The close cooperation between the OSH sphere and manufacturers in this area can be seen in examples such as laser scanners for scanning safety zones and the development of devices providing protection against falls from a height, to name but a few. In such cases, the specialist knowledge of the experts from the BGs' testing and research institutions compensates for the lack of pertinent standards.

However, cases in which the manufacturer decides not to apply harmonized European standards are more the exception than the rule. In a survey which BG-PRÜFZERT carried out among its customers, only 3% of the respondents said that they *rarely* or *never* applied such standards. A whole 46% stated that they *usually* and 51% that they *always* used harmonized European standards as their basis when developing products.

In this connection, it is also worth noting that, even though a CE mark has been introduced (the true meaning of which is not well-known in practice), national certification marks continue to play a significant role. Obviously, it is beneficial both to the manufacturer and the consumer if there is a visible indication that a competent, independent body has checked and confirmed that the product conforms to the relevant requirements set out in the pertinent directive. To meet this need, the BGs' testing and certification bodies conduct type examinations (followed by periodic checks) and grant approval for a BG-PRÜFZERT or GS mark to be affixed to the product. The former is BG-PRÜFZERT's own mark, the latter a national German safety mark. Both are extremely well-known and enjoy an excellent reputation in Germany and beyond. A striking 70% of the 3,500 certificates issued by the BGs' testing and certification bodies in 2004 resulted from voluntary tests.

Market globalization has led to calls for standards to be internationalized. It is quite legitimate and understandable that industry should make such demands. In the interests of simplified global trade, a scenario of the type which brought about the considerable simplification of trade within the European internal market as a result of the "New Approach" would also be desirable at the global level. Those involved in standardization have already reacted to these calls and given international standards priority over European and national standards. This trend has far-reaching consequences for occupational safety and health.

It should be noted that international standards can only be fully effective if they are incorporated into the European body of standards without any amendments. For this to happen, they must be able to supplement the essential requirements in the relevant European directives. Thus, it would not be expedient to make changes deemed necessary at the European level before adopting such standards as European standards. The "Global Relevance" concept which has been discussed recently does not offer a solution either, in my opinion, since it permits different solutions in different regions on the basis of the same standard. Rather than having a harmonizing effect, this actually consoli-

dates existing differences. My plea would be for us to take the rockier path and attempt to develop standards at the international level which are of a nature that enables them to be incorporated into the European body of standards.

What consequences will this have for occupational safety and health in Europe?

Over the past 20 years, our standardization activities have been concentrated on European standards. Now that priority is to be given to international standards, we must shift that focus and bring our European OSH positions to bear more at the international level. I am very aware that doing that in an organisation in which the interests of various economic regions collide is no easy task. I am also aware that the financial and human resources required are disproportionately greater at the international level than at the European level. So the question is what concrete action we as European OSH institutions can take to support this process – an important one for us – in an effective manner.

In Germany, the bodies responsible at the HVGB have recently taken the steps necessary to be able to provide financial support for involvement in international standardization too in the future. However, we have to use our resources sparingly. Only in exceptional cases is it justifiable to have several experts from different OSH institutions on the same international standards committee. Instead, what is required is consultation and reciprocal communication of information between OSH stakeholders both at the national and European levels.

I believe that exchanging opinions and agreeing positions with OSH experts from other EU member states is necessary, beneficial and possible in the field of standardization. A valuable step in this direction has been taken by creating the EUROSHNET communications platform. As we have learnt during this conference, EUROSHNET offers a very simple method of exchanged and consultation with fellow OSH experts in the other countries within the European Economic Area. And we have seen that there are already numerous cases in which EUROSHNET has helped to develop a transnational OSH position and bring it to bear on the standardization process.

This, incidentally, is also in the interest of the other stakeholders in the field of standardization. Having a common European standpoint on OSH can help avoid individual countries having to go it alone and the ensuing lengthy safeguard clause procedures in Brussels. I can only ask you to strive within your area of responsibility to ensure that those OSH experts involved in standardization actively agree their standpoints with their European colleagues via EUROSHNET. Only on this basis will we have a chance in the long run to bring our interests to bear effectively on international standardization activities and to make our contribution to the grand goal of ensuring that products are manufactured in accordance with the same standards all over the world.

Allow me to end my presentation with a picture of a fantastic bridge structure: the Millau Viaduct in France, which was opened for traffic last December. As a civil engineer and bridge builder, I take particular pleasure in the masterful work of the engineers and the architect, Norman Foster.

Bridges circumvent obstacles, they connect things, they bring people together... I feel this is a fitting image for our goal of creating closer ties between OSH players in Europe.