



Occupational safety and health – Cooperation in an enlarged Europe

(1st Panel discussion, 20 October 2005, 16:00–17:30)

Chair

Marie-Chantal BLANDIN, Eurogip, France

Participants

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The participants in this round table were speakers in the two previous sessions of the conference: “Enlarged Europe – Existing structures for cooperation” and “Enlarged Europe – First experiences and expectations from new member states”.

The Chairperson conducted the discussion around two major questions.

1 – How to work better in an enlarged Europe?

a) *Question to the “new” member states:*

Which is the field (legislation, standardization, testing and certification, market surveillance or research) where cooperation must first and foremost be reinforced and what do the new member states expect to get from cooperation?

Most participants agreed that all areas are important, but some of them stressed that research should be considered a priority, because it is the basis for other areas.

Needs were identified in the following fields:

- Legislation - it is a good tool to reach a high level of safety but it must also be seen in the context of industry costs: Europe must be competitive on global markets.
- Information – good practice guides are needed, especially for the 60% small/medium enterprises (SMEs).
- Testing and certification services – notified bodies carrying out the assessments need to continue their efforts to harmonize their approaches.
- Use of equipment – safety by design is important, but equipment must be used in a safe way, too.
- Training - a harmonized system for the certification of competence is needed (harmonized content and quality of training, certificates recognized at international level). For instance, crane drivers' training in different countries is very different. This is being worked on by a European group; conclusions are expected in 2006.

b) Question to the "old" EU countries :

What do we have to do to improve this cooperation between "new" and "old" EU countries ?

Many networks do exist for specialists, but these networks need to be interconnected and the information made accessible to SMEs and people in the field, with a priority being given to implementation guidance. We really need codes of practice. Take chemical data sheets as an example: these have arisen through cooperation between stakeholders and have simplified chemical risk assessment significantly. Recommendation for use (RFU) sheets are similar. RFUs are useful: they go to standardization committees to improve standards and market surveillance authorities use them to identify areas of concern. We need to facilitate such processes even if we cannot achieve full harmonisation. We must simplify things so that SMEs can use the information.

Some of the existing networks do function, e.g. the Coordination of Notified Bodies, national, European and international standards organizations, but OSH links to the various networks may be problematic. Working together to maintain OSH levels is important. OSH institutes also have a role to play as Notified Bodies. Some participants recommended to extend the networks to all stakeholders, whereas others were of the opinion that the various groups should first identify their interests and get organized to support them, then discuss issues with other groups.

ISO/IEC and similar work is now growing in importance through the drive to globalisation. We must ensure that OSH does not get forgotten. Considering the time and costs involved, information systems such as Euroshnet have an important role to play in this area. Some countries, including some of the "old" member states, are significantly under-represented in that network and that should be improved.

With the single market, people and companies move between countries. Cultural differences exist between countries (e.g. in the understanding of what is "reasonable risk"). How should the resulting occupational risks be reduced? For the past two years, DG Employment has been mainstreaming OSH at work in other areas.

There is a need to cooperate on research to minimize expenses. There should be no competition on research and no duplication of research. However, obtaining EU funding is very complicated and time-consuming. FP6 was very bad in this respect. There is a plea for simpler mechanisms in FP7 in order to address the real needs of standardization, which means real measurements in laboratories. An OSH research budget is needed in FP7.

2 – What form could cooperation take? Network of networks? How can cooperation be made more effective, what will it look like in the future?

Some participants thought that the European Agency had a coordination role to play, that there should be an exchange between network leaders and that interfaces should be identified. Others argued that transfer of knowledge happens

mainly through people who are personally involved in more than one network, and insisted on the importance of direct contacts, which boost willingness to participate. It was however mentioned that cooperation needs to be institutionalized to ensure its durability.

Some participants were of the opinion that networks should be global, that there should be no European closed circuits if we want to export the European New Approach to other regions of the world and influence ISO in the long run. Such a policy would be in favour of the European industry which would not have to produce separately for Europe and the rest of the world. Different views were also expressed: open up networks worldwide for read only access and restrict the ability of non-European participants to contribute material. However, the strength of a network is to allow interaction between real experts. This needs careful management.

For research, it was proposed to use the "European Technology Platform on OHS", which is supported by the Commission (DG Enterprise, DG Environment, DG Employment) and will influence FP7. Information on that Platform has been prepared on a strategic extensive research agenda with a long time frame (up to 20 years). The group is more safety oriented than health oriented, but input from the health and safety community is welcome.

The international nature of research was stressed, and it was said that world networks are needed to maximize the quality and use of results. The infrastructure needed to set up research is also very costly, so cooperation is a necessity.

On information sharing, there is an existing exercise at the University of Illinois, "Geolibrary.com": access to a free database on OSH is open to anyone and input documents are screened for quality.

International databases on accident statistics and occupational diseases are needed, and this should be addressed.

OSH experts should look beyond their field of activity and increase the general public awareness of OSH, pass their knowledge on.

Conclusion

The need for a closer cooperation has been made quite clear since we have learnt that there are a number of previously unknown networks (European Technology Platform on OSH for example). And a lot of ideas for progress have been proposed, e.g.

- the creation of a specific OSH research budget in the European Framework Programme;
- regular meetings of the persons responsible for a network;
- larger accessibility to Euroshnet.

The next Euroshnet Steering Committee will discuss these issues. Another concept has emerged from the discussion: cooperation is important, but it is not an objective in itself; it is only a way towards the ultimate objective, i.e. improving the working conditions of workers.