

Vulnerable workers: The key-role of the EU-OSHA

by Maria Giovannone and Michele Tiraboschi

Working life in Europe has been changing rapidly in response to business demands and new technology. General trends include an increase in the number of small businesses, changes in management methods and organisation of work, increased use of contractors and temporary staff, changes in working hours and increased ability to work away from a fixed workplace or from home. All these issues have implications for occupational safety and health (OSH). They affect the type and nature of risks present in the workplace as well as how these risks are to be managed. These conditions can contribute to the incidence of musculoskeletal disorders, stress, mobbing, job insecurity, high fatal accident rates which are the most prevalent work-related ill health problems in Europe, although traditional risks also remain on the agenda.

All these problems are increased by the changes in the composition of the workforce (with a high percentage of young people, women, older workers and immigrants), the new forms of work organisation, the use of information and communication technology (telework) and the high recourse to non standard/atypical labour relationships and precarious employment. This fragmented work represents problems which are absolutely new and diverse with respect to the traditional ones and determine certain factors of risks which we have only now begun to realistically evaluate.

These workers are usually associated with scarce

decisional autonomy, marginal professional assignments, high work loading (or very low) combined with some characteristics of work (dangerousness, inconvenient working hours, high physical or mental loading and routine activity), weak social support on the part of workers on open-ended contracts, scarce trade union participation, lack of negotiation power, assignment of the dangerous and arduous tasks, marginalisation inside the enterprise, and lower levels of legal protection in relation to the employers responsibility should be added. International studies point out that the exposure to precarious work characterised by instability, lack of protection, insecurity and economic vulnerability can produce negative effects on the worker. Job-insecurity in fact is associated with significant adverse effects on worker safety, health and mental-wellbeing.

These problems affect the management of occupational safety and health and the approaches authorities, national governments and enterprises themselves need to take to effectively support OSH. According to the principles stated by EU directives, many European countries have already adopted new legislative patterns to face the peculiar OSH problems for the so called 'vulnerable workers'. Vulnerable workers are those workers who by reason of their personal characteristics and conditions of life are most likely to suffer a derogation from the standard of decent work. This likelihood is

greatest when vulnerable workers are engaged in precarious work.

However, in many cases, one serious area of neglect seems to be the failure to focus on the legislative specific obligations of employers to safeguard the health and wellbeing of atypical workers and the necessity to adopt new approaches in identifying, analysing and correcting organizational weaknesses, not only through the legislative patterns, but also identifying good practices and developing a risk assessment approach.

The European Commission has launched a new five-year strategy for Safety and Health at work which aims at cutting by a quarter work-related accidents across the EU. It has set an ambitious overall objective: to reduce by 25% the total incidence rate of accidents at work per 100 000 workers in the EU 27 for the period 2007-2012.

In order to achieve this goal, the following main instruments are proposed: a) guarantee the proper implementation of EU legislation; b) support SMEs in the implementation of the legislation in force; c) adapt the legal framework to changes in the workplace and simplify it, particularly in view of SMEs; d) promote the development and implementation of national strategies; e) encourage changes in the behaviour of workers and encourage their employers to adopt health-focused approaches; e) finalise the methods for identifying and evaluating new potential risks; f) improve the tracking of progress; g) promote health and safety at international level.

In this general framework workers, employers and social partners need to be made aware of the risks that they face and how to manage them. Information is one of the most important steps for employers or workers to address safety and health issues effectively.

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) aims to be the central provider of that information, at European level and ensures that it is relevant to every user, regardless of size of enterprise or sector of activity and is one of the key-actors of this strategy. Set up in 1996 by the European Union and located in Bilbao, Spain, EU-OSHA is the main EU reference point for safety and health at work. Furthermore its role has been recently emphasized by the new strategy itself.

Its central role is to contribute to the improvement of working life in the European Union, first of all working with governments, employers and workers to promote a risk prevention culture and analysing

new scientific research and statistics on workplace risks.

On the other hand it also aims to anticipate and identify new and emerging risks and to disseminate good practices with a wide range of audiences, such as social partners-employers' federations and trade unions, giving a deep contribution to awareness-raising.

At the same time OSHA influences the evolution of the European regulatory framework, since the Agency reviews the extent to which health and safety aspects have been incorporated into Member States' policies. On the basis of this information the Commission will consider whether or not to present a proposal for a recommendation.

Each topic related to health and safety at work is concerned by the Agency studies and publications, but a special focus is reserved to the interaction between the changing world of work, the evolution of new forms of work and non standard contractual relationships and the so called 'new risks'.

In this context the Agency also examines the specific challenges in terms of health and safety posed by the more extensive integration of women, immigrant workers and younger and older workers into the labour market, collecting best practices to manage their 'vulnerability' and to improve and correct the risk assessment process within the European enterprises, enhancing risk anticipation to include risks associated with new technologies, biological hazards, and complex human-machine interfaces.

Starting from this background our newsletter aims to collect and present a blended selection of reports and other publications by the European Agency for safety and health at work, with the hope that it will help to pinpoint and monitor trends and new risks and identify measures and best practices which are essential for a more effective protection.

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