

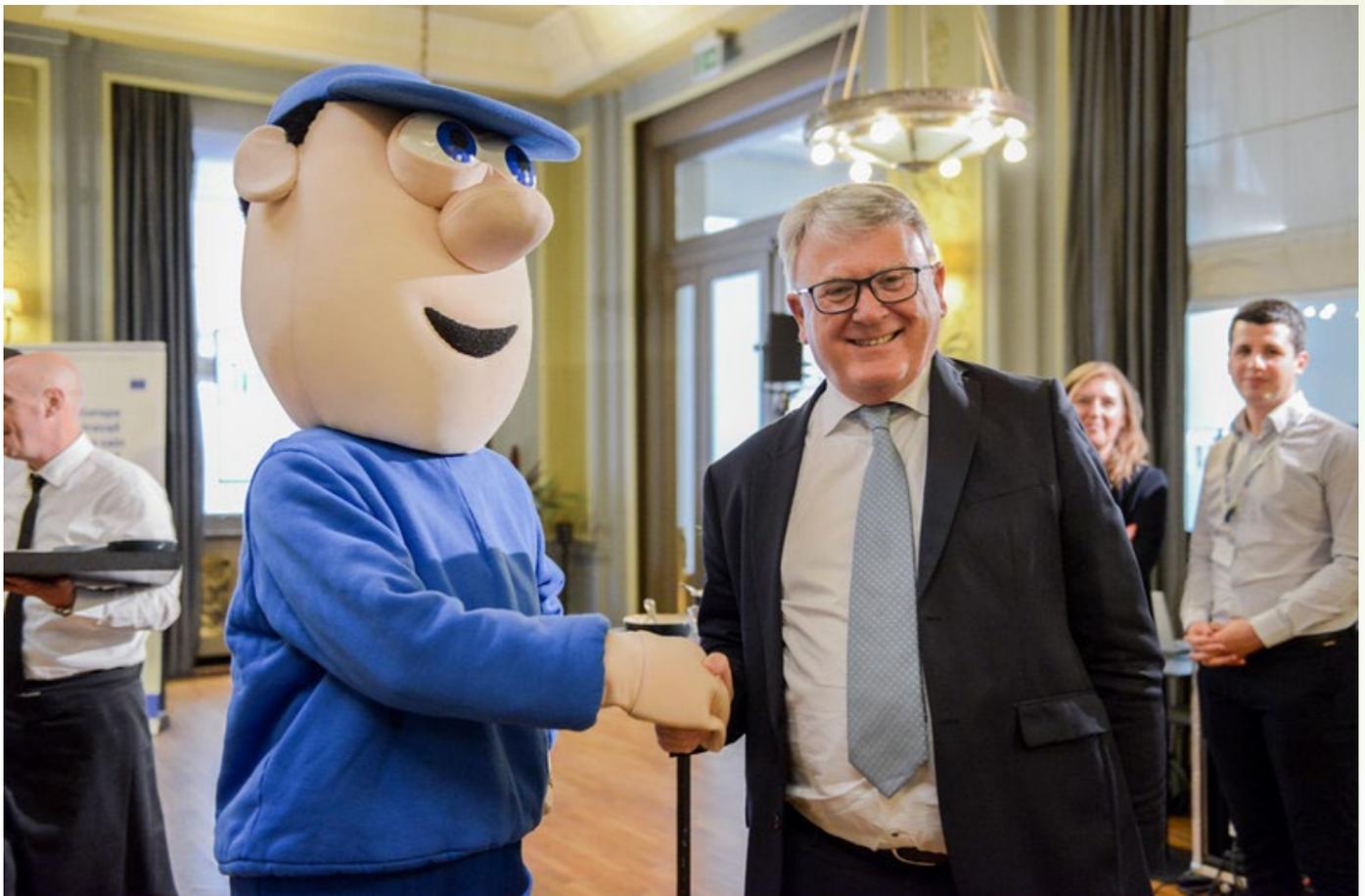


Exchange of good practices in occupational safety and health throws spotlight on telework and MSDs

Official campaign partners and representatives from the European Commission and European Parliament attended the Healthy Workplaces Campaign Partner Good Practice Exchange event on 13-14 June in Brussels. They shared expertise and broad experience through inspiring and dynamic discussions about occupational safety and health (OSH).

The conference included two plenary sessions and four workshops on the following topics: **mental health and MSDs** and lessons learned from the pandemic; removing the **barriers to OSH in education and training**; **digitalisation and OSH**; and **inclusion of OSH in sustainability strategies**.

Participants drew inspiration from a wide range of OSH-related topics covered during plenary talks that included presentations and discussions, interactive workshops and keynote speeches. A highlight of the event was the campaign partner ceremony, honoured by the presence of **Nicolas Schmit**, European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights.



'My congratulations to all those engaged in the campaign', said Commissioner Schmit. 'We all know safety and health at work is a constant, permanent engagement and work. Europe needs to show leadership in health and safety. I would like to thank EU-OSHA for the work they are doing. It helps workers, it helps employers, it helps companies and citizens. Thank you very much for your commitment. We can only improve workplaces together.'

The Commissioner also noted the importance of better and healthier workplaces. *'It is possible to change workplaces for the better. For the better of people, for the better of companies and even for better communities',* he said. *'It is a dangerous load when people are suffering from too much workload.'*

Opening session

Brenda O'Brien, manager of the EU-OSHA Brussels Liaison Office, set the stage for the two-day conference. She extended a warm welcome to all participants and panellists, particularly the official campaign partners and representatives from the European Commission and the European Parliament.



For **Marianne Vind**, a Danish trade unionist and Member of the European Parliament since 2019, this was an opportunity to reflect on the EU legislature's support of the new strategic framework on health and safety at work post-2020. *'I am extremely proud that it was adopted by a majority',* she said. *'It's a catalogue of ambitious priorities to improve health and safety over the next seven years. It addresses new*

and old challenges.’ Drawing on her experience as a trade unionist, Vind also stressed there is no better way to implement OSH rules than to include all partners – workers and employers – in the implementation phase.

Vind also noted the importance of keeping OSH high on everyone’s agenda. *‘The work we do today for health and safety can help determine our future work. Your input can make workplaces safer and better by providing solutions.’*

The importance of collaboration, communication and implementation was echoed by **Stefan Olsson**, Director for Working Conditions and Social Dialogue at the European Commission (Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion). *‘I deal with a number of issues in my directorate, but OSH is special in the sense that it has a direct connection to real action on the ground. It also has a special feature: it depends on the people like you and on the workflow. If regulations are not implemented, they are not worth anything. And you are the people who make that work.’*

Describing EU-OSHA as an interactive agency that *‘has been making things happen on the ground’*, Olsson also stressed the importance of events like this conference. *‘It’s about sharing your experience and learning from each other, and there are some very impressive names here. You are all extremely knowledgeable... It’s the commitment of people like you that is the whole basis. I wish to extend a big thank you from us at the EU level for the work you are doing.’*

EU-OSHA counts more than 100 official campaign partners. *‘This diverse group includes companies and business associations, trade unions, professional societies and civil society organisations’*, said **William Cockburn**, Interim Executive Director of EU-OSHA, in his opening remarks. *‘Over the past two years, our partners have organised over 280 campaign activities.’*

This long list of activities includes a webinar organised by the International Safety & Health Construction Coordinators Organisation. There was also a whole week of action by Bridgestone to educate their staff on ergonomics and MSDs in the workplace. Activities were also organised by the European Federation for Welding, Joining and Cutting and car producer Stellantis to raise awareness about ergonomics and stress management among older steelworkers.

On the side of EU-OSHA, Cockburn highlighted a series of activities such as the European Weeks in 2020 and 2021, as well as the Good Practice Awards in April 2022. Various tools and resources on musculoskeletal health were also launched, and six virtual information sessions were held on issues such as sedentary work, telework, and future generations. EU-OSHA’s website is also packed with material and resources, including ergonomic factsheets, company checklists and tips to protect workers’ backs.

‘We are very pleased that our Lighten the Load campaign has not just been well communicated, it has proved useful’, said Cockburn. *‘So, what do you all think? Survey results show that you, our official partners have found the campaign to be effective at raising awareness of its key messages and at sharing best practices.’*

Healthy culture drives healthy business, according to **Patricia O’Callaghan**, the global health promotion lead at SAP. She spoke about her company’s decision to partner with EU-OSHA’s Healthy Workplaces campaign Lighten the Load. *‘The campaign has a fabulous theme and name. We fell in love with it as soon as we heard about it. For us, it really brings the link between physical tension and mental wellbeing. We talk about helping people through challenging times when mostly we are trying to help people find new ways to “lighten the load” of daily stresses. Throughout these two years, we’ve organised a lot of little*

campaigns, larger campaigns, pop-up campaigns, and we've held practical events and webinars, group sessions, one-to-one consultations and activity challenges.'

Among the winners of the 2022 European Good Practice Awards, SAP rolled out a toolkit for its employees – all 100,000 of them. O'Callaghan highlighted the toolkit as a good practice. *'It's a very simple concept'*, she said. *'But for a company with over 100,000 employees, you can imagine that a lot of information gets lost - there's email overload! So, we came up with this comprehensive knowledge database for physical health and safety. It contains lots of information.'*

The results are encouraging. *'The safety toolkit has been a success. We've had over 2,000 people participate in trainings and one-to-one ergonomic consultations. And the feedback has been wonderful.'*

O'Callaghan also quoted SAP CEO Christian Klein, who has stressed the importance of balancing the protection of employee health and wellbeing with maintaining performance and productivity for the business. *'As we need head, hand, and heart to deliver on our promises, we need to stay healthy, safe and balanced in body and mind.'*



Workshops

The conference included a series of workshops aimed at contributing to the overall discussion and to present examples of best practice and experiences. Each of the four workshops included presentations from representatives of partners and other organisations, followed by a lively exchange and question and answer session from the audience.

Workshop 1: Mental health and MSDs: Lessons learned from the pandemic

The first workshop focused on mental health and MSDs during the COVID pandemic. Taking a look beyond the mechanical perspective on MSDs (like repetitive strain disorders), the focus was on the interaction between mental wellbeing and musculoskeletal symptoms. As moderator, SAP Chief Medical Officer **Natalie Lotzmann** invited panellists and audience to reflect on what they have observed with regard to mental health and MSDs.



Marian Schaapman, Head of the Health & Safety and Working Conditions Unit at the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), noted that MSDs are not only the result of repetitive or forceful movements and awkward and static postures, but can be caused or made worse by the mental stress of an overwhelming workload, unsupportive management and feelings of isolation – as was the case during the pandemic.

David Tjong, EU-OSHA honorary campaign partner, spoke about prevention of work-related MSDs at labour-intensive sectors, such as the factory floor at Ideal Standard. *‘When I joined the company in 2002, about 30% of accident incidents were related to ergonomic issues. We used the ergonomic improving process to prevent MSDs.’* This is defined as the improvement of employee performance and wellbeing in relation to the job, equipment and the environment.

A similar experience was shared by **Carina Strömberg**, senior human resources expert at Toyota Material Handling Europe, which manufactures forklift trucks. *‘I heard today that when the pandemic struck Europe, we all went home. That is not true. I had a lot of factory workers to take care of. We couldn’t send them home.’* As an official campaign partner, Strömberg noted that Toyota created a taskforce to

incorporate the OSH measures both locally and centrally. For instance, they formed the CORONA Response Team and held trainings for managers about how to ensure regular contact with staff.

For **Martin Grosshans**, SAP's lead of the psychiatric and psychological counselling, and return to work programme, COVID-19 brought unprecedented changes, and there was an urgent call for more attention to be given to employee mental health. For instance, a third of SAP employees rated their stress higher than their satisfaction at the start of the pandemic. Mental health issues like depression, anxiety and loneliness, were also higher in 2021 compared to 2019 (before the pandemic). *'What we learned is that leaders need better support in caring for their people because the pandemic was new and not all tools were fit to address this situation. And employees needed support to cope with their mental health issues and to set up their workplace at home in the best way possible... We didn't start from scratch. We had a lot of programmes already running, but we sensed from surveys that the demand was higher during the pandemic. So, we had to bundle, expand and experiment. And what came out was the two campaigns fighting MSDs on one side and mental health issues on the other.'*

Workshop 2: Removing the barriers for OSH in education and training

The importance of education and training in removing the barriers to OSH was discussed during the second workshop. Experienced ergonomist and professor at Óbuda University **Gyula Szabó** moderated this session which focused on the training of OSH professionals and how this varies greatly from country to country. Representing the Federation of European Ergonomics Societies (FEES), he stressed the importance of lifelong learning programmes to form OSH professionals who are always up to date.



'Competency is not something you can obtain once. The world is changing, and we have emerging new risks and solutions, so we need to learn and update our knowledge', he said. 'We need to integrate OSH to every level of education – from primary school to university and higher education.'

Turning to MSDs, **Reinhard Obermaier**, president of the International Safety and Health Construction Co-ordinators Organisation (ISHCCO), noted the level of knowledge, skills and

responsibility that is required from the different levels within the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). Technicians, for instance, need to be aware of changes in requirements, while managers need to understand the methods of risk control and the differences between the monitoring systems.

On that note, **Ulrike Bollmann**, coordinator of the European Network Education and Training in Occupational Safety and Health (ENETOSH), stressed the need for common educational and professional standards in order to coordinate OSH across industries and geographical borders. *'The quest for standardisation faces many challenges such as increasing complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity',* said Bollmann. *'And this means traditional approaches to risk management and safety are no longer sufficient*

and require rethinking.’ In addition to this, **George Scroubelos**, chairman of the European Health, Safety and Environment Committee (EHSEC) of the European Federation of Maintenance Societies (EFNMS), noted the importance of creating a culture of OSH. *‘We need to embed this culture of prevention and preparedness. We need leaders and supporters, and we need involvement – this means we have to understand as society the real value of OSH. And we have to combat complacency and indifferences.’*

Workshop 3: Digitalisation and OSH

The third workshop delved into the topic of digitalisation and OSH. While the introduction of new technologies and digital processes (automation and cobot safety, worker skills, psychosocial and other new risks) creates huge opportunities for OSH professionals, it also requires new skills to face this shift towards (digitalised) smart and safer working environments, according to **Jose-Javier Larrañeta Ibañez**, from the European Technology Platform on Industrial Safety (ETPIS/PESI). As moderator of this workshop, he stressed the importance of including safety and OSH issues by design in the digitalisation process as it evolves towards Industry 5.0 where the human factor is the central axis. *‘To create a smart and safe working environment, it needs to be human-centric, sustainable and resilient.’*

Digital transformation involves every aspect of a business – people, processes, and customers – according to **Susana Romero**, consultancy manager at CATIMA, PESI Advisory Board for Safety Culture, Health & Wellbeing, secretary at AEPSAL, the Spanish OSH professionals association. *‘It is not a choice but a challenge’*, she said. Adding to this, **Hansjörg Hagels**, head of Occupational Safety Germany at Boehringer Ingelheim, noted the importance of using the latest technology, like virtual reality, to conduct safety trainings. *‘We established a virtual reality training based on a commercially available VR software system.’* For **Andresa Hernandez**, vice president of Occupational Safety at Siemens AG, VR made it possible to come together during the pandemic and bring colleagues as close as possible without the health risks. *‘With smart safety glasses we were able to interact with workers and connect in 3D to transfer knowledge in a more efficient way.’*

Workshop 4: Sustainability strategies – inclusion of OSH

In addition to digitalisation, it is just as important to include OSH in sustainability strategies. In this context, the European Commission aims to ensure coherence between health and safety at work and a business environment that can sustain growth, job creation, wellbeing and innovation. The fourth workshop highlighted the importance of sustainability and prevention in OSH. Moderating the session, **Ralf Giercke**, president of the European Network of Safety and Health Professional Organisation (ENSHPO), stressed the involvement of civil society, the private sector, business, and other stakeholders to achieve the sustainable development goals. *‘With sustainability we take not only care of the health and safety for all workers now, but for all workers in the future as well.’*

Building on Giercke’s introductory remarks, **Carina Strömberg**, senior human resources expert at Toyota Material Handling Europe, noted her company’s 2031 Sustainability Roadmap which includes measures to prevent MSDs. *‘In 2014, we installed new software to enable corporate reporting and consolidation of health and safety data. We wanted to have facts on sick leave, lost days and more. Now we are seeing that this is not enough. We are now working with another system provider so we can measure closer the wellbeing of our people.’*

In terms of sustainable development, the key is to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This is how it was described by **Victor Santos**, head of Health and Safety for Europe at Stellantis. *‘There is a duality between health promotion and sustainable development. Why? Because if you treat them in a separate way, it will have unintended social and environmental consequences.’*

Looking to the future, EU-OSHA’s project manager **Annick Starren** presented a foresight study on the Circular Economy that looks at the challenges and opportunities that will arise as part of the transition to sustainability. Changes towards Circularity will lead to changes in work practices, and hence to changes in working conditions. She noted the importance of early anticipation of new or emerging OSH risks in relation to jobs before they appear. *‘If jobs are to be truly sustainable, we need to make sure that they benefit the environment as well as workers’ safety and health. We need to ensure that what is good for the environment is good for workers too.’*



Closing session

So many topics related to occupational safety and health were covered during the conference – from musculoskeletal and mental health, especially in times of COVID, to removing barriers to education and training, digitalisation, and sustainability strategies.

In his closing remarks, **William Cockburn**, Interim Executive Director of EU-OSHA, thanked the speakers and participants. *'Thank you so much for joining us these past two days. We look forward to continuing to hear about your progress in the Lighten the Load campaign this summer and seeing many of you participate in the European Week events and the Healthy Workplaces summit this autumn.'*

EU-OSHA's Lighten the Load campaign is not over yet. Cockburn highlighted a series of activities scheduled until the end of the year.

- Until the end of August, EU-OSHA will focus on **preventing** musculoskeletal disorders in **[future generations](#)**. *It is never too early to start preventing injuries in children and youths – the workers of tomorrow.*
- From September to November, the campaign will focus on **psychosocial risks**. *We all know the risks now and the links between them and musculoskeletal health.*
- In October, the **[European Week for Safety and Health at Work](#)** will feature hundreds of awareness-raising events across the EU and beyond. *This year will include film screenings, social media events, conferences, exhibitions, competitions, and training sessions.*
- The Lighten the Load campaign's closing event – the **[Healthy Workplaces Summit](#)** – will be held on 14-15 November in Bilbao, home to EU-OSHA.

'We are also busy preparing the next Healthy Workplaces campaign - Safe and Healthy Work in the Digital Age, which we will launch in October 2023', said Cockburn.