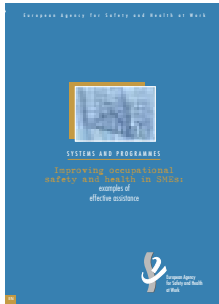




Improving occupational safety and health in SMEs: examples of effective assistance

Summary of an Agency report



Introduction

SMEs are important contributors to European competitiveness, with most new jobs in Europe being created by micro-enterprises with up to six employees. However, they also face particular difficulties including effective management of safety and health and Member States have set up measures to assist entrepreneurship (1). The Agency has carried out several important projects to improve occupational safety

and health in SMEs, including special funding schemes of good safety and health practice in SMEs initiated by the European Parliament and the European Commission (2). As part of these efforts the Agency has also made a study of practical examples of successful occupational safety and health assistance services to SMEs. Different types of schemes or assistance programmes from the Member States were analysed in order to:

- present a number of examples of prevention programmes for SMEs;
- identify success criteria and provide transferable information that other organisations can use or adapt to their situation.

Three reasons for targeting programmes at SMEs

- Micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises are socially and economically important, representing 99 % of all enterprises in the EU.
- They employ 66 % of Europe's workforce.
- Their situation with respect to health and safety is less favourable than that of larger enterprises.

The 18 examples of good practice in assistance to SMEs described in the report differ both as regards the players implementing them and the target aimed at or the means employed. The cases have been grouped under three categories: actions carried out at national level, regional level and sector level. The initiatives are aimed at different target groups, support enterprises in campaigning as well as carrying out risk assessments, or provide guidance for specific occupations or expert assistance. They also address a wide range of risk factors.

CASE STUDIES

Actions taken at national level

- OSH assistance to SMEs (Austria)
- Risk management for SMEs (Finland)
- Agreement on objectives and prevention contracts (France)
- Work positive: prioritising organisational stress (Ireland)
- Campaign in the ceramic industry (Portugal)
- Good neighbour scheme (United Kingdom)

Actions taken at regional level

- Risk management for SMEs (Belgium)
- Development of OSH service tailored to SMEs (Denmark)
- Inter-enterprise safety coordinator (France)
- Consultancy network for SMEs (Germany)
- Integrated approach for spreading safety culture (Italy)
- Safety and support for business (United Kingdom)

Actions taken at sector level

- Alliance for work safety in the dry-cleaning industry (Germany)
- Technical assistance in the printing sector (Greece)
- Evaluation and prevention of risks in the construction sector (Luxembourg)
- Branch codes for skilled trades (Netherlands)
- Workload assessment instrument in the retail sector (Netherlands)
- Strategic plan in the agricultural sector in Navarra (Spain)

Evaluation of the effectiveness

Taking appropriate measures: neither too complex nor too expensive

OSH improvements can be initiated in SMEs if they are inexpensive in time and resources, easy to access and with very tangible contents.

Making it practical and relevant

In order to interest enterprises in the programme, the supporting tools should be suitable and meet their expectations, taking into account the needs and resources of the enterprise. Performing a feasibility study or preliminary enquiry is an essential stage for the future success of the action. Tools must also be practical and easy to use.

Keeping the cost down

The cost of the action undoubtedly has a major influence on the degree of participation: initiatives proposing a consultancy service for SMEs, either free of charge or for a moderate sum, have been very successful.

Supporting risk assessment activities

Nearly all the cases described in this report include support to help SMEs make an initial evaluation of risks. This is because the managers of these firms are not necessarily acquainted with the legislation nor with how to prevent risks in practice and often have limited time and means, especially human resources, to perform this evaluation.

The most effective actions in this area are those that have been supported by training and/or consulting in the workplace.

Involving trade unions and employer associations

Involving trade unions and employer associations in the project is often a way to reach SMEs, even though in some cases a large proportion of these firms are not their members. These organisations have networks and practical knowledge of the sector and their visible involvement can add credibility to the project. Trade unions can represent workers in the sector, and provide assistance with getting employers to consult their workforce.

Targeting sectors



(1) Report by the European Commission's Observatory of European SMEs 2002 available at http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/enterprise_policy/analysis/doc/execsum_2002_en.pdf

(2) For more information about the schemes see <http://agency.osha.eu.int/sme/>

A sector level action: strategic plan in the agricultural sector in Navarra (Spain)

The goal of this plan was to foster the inclusion of preventive management in small farms. Farmers participated in training programmes that enabled them to perform the risk assessment on their premises, and also to bring their vehicles to be inspected. UAGN, a trade association that took part in the project, subsequently decided to hire a prevention expert to promote its own programmes and is considering obtaining grants to adapt all farming equipment in Navarra. The plan has generated human resources and a favourable opinion towards prevention and positive effects can be expected over the long term.

Actions implemented in a specific sector or activity proved to be particularly successful. This can be explained fairly easily: the risks inherent to a sector can be clearly identified, the enterprises targeted are easier to reach, in particular via the trade federations, people in the same sector 'speak the same language' and the action appears more relevant to the enterprises. Such initiatives are therefore more focused, more meaningful and better targeted.

Reaching SMEs

Those **actions that have reached the greatest number of enterprises are those carried out at the level of a very specific sector, or related to a specific risk.** However, this should not conceal the general reality: actions intended for SMEs generally reach only a rather small percentage of the enterprises.

In addition, it is difficult to get in touch with SMEs and even more so to convince them to take part in this type of action. Too often, occupational risk prevention does not seem to be a priority for action for these small under-resourced organisations. It should therefore be stressed that these programmes need a systematic evaluation in order to be able to measure and improve the effect on the SMEs targeted. Few data are available concerning the rate of participation by SMEs in the various actions taken in the 15 Member States.



A regional level action: the integrated approach for spreading a safety culture (Italy)

The objective of this regional initiative (province of Lucca) was to tackle fatal accidents, making employee training and information a top priority. The programme encouraged the development of a work safety culture in SMEs through the creation of a new position: safety training/information officer at each company. During four months, eight training sessions were given to 115 trainees and 3 000 educational sets were distributed to businesses. Due to the success of the scheme, the regional initiative programme is going to be extended and educational material for workers produced.

Assessing the effectiveness of schemes



A national level action: OSH assistance to SMEs (Austria)

An SME-specific preventive service based on legal requirements and offered free to SMEs was launched in 1999. In 2001, out of the 288 851 SMEs, 24 000 production units adopted the proposed approach and 146 000 hours of counselling were provided. Since the start of the programme, 70 % of the SMEs indicated that their expectations regarding assistance had been fulfilled.

Growing awareness by the employers of the importance of risk prevention and their decision to include it in the management of the enterprise are a key to success: once the 'need' has been made apparent, the enterprise will voluntarily develop prevention either by itself or by using outside help. Although the results are only directly visible in very few cases, positive effects can then be expected, if not in the short term, at least in the medium term.

General conclusions

It is difficult to reach SMEs and even more difficult to get them to act. However, it is not impossible. For a scheme to be successful, it should:

- **focus on a particular sector or risk;**
- **be appropriate: neither too complicated nor too expensive;**
- **have the involvement of different partners (employers, employer associations, workers, trade unions) in its planning and implementation;**
- **measure its adequacy by:**
 - **assessing the needs before the action,**
 - **carrying out a systematic evaluation of its effects afterwards;**
- **offer support for free or at a minimal cost;**
- **help to create a sustainable OSH prevention culture in SMEs;**
- **combine active interventions with practical documentation and tools.**

How to get the report

The full report is available in English on the Agency's web site at <http://agency.osha.eu.int/publications/reports/> where it can be downloaded free of charge.

The printed report entitled *Improving occupational safety and health in SMEs: examples of effective assistance*, European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2003, ISBN 92-9191-043-0, can be ordered from the Office for Official Publications of the European Communities in Luxembourg (<http://eur-op.eu.int>) or from its sales agents. The price is 25 EUR (excluding VAT).

This fact sheet is available in all EU languages at: http://agency.osha.eu.int/publications/factsheets/index_en.htm