

Getting the Safety and Health Message Across in an Enlarged Social Europe



The flag of the European Union

As the European Union (EU) geared up for enlargement on May 1 (on this date, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia joined the EU), the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work took on the daunting task of adding nine languages to the interface of its corporate website (<http://agency.osha.eu.int>).

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work was set up by the EU to help meet the information needs in the field of occupational safety and health (OSH). Based in Bilbao, Spain, the agency aims to improve the lives of people at work by stimulating the flow of technical, scientific, and economic information between all those involved in OSH issues.

One of this agency's main roles is to organize the flow of information on OSH throughout the EU, enabling workers, employers, and authorities to have access to state-of-the-art knowledge, especially examples of "good practice" solutions to the main safety and health problems.

As well as producing a wide variety of publications, from research reports to practical fact sheets, the agency has established a network of more than 30 partners (focal points) in Europe and worldwide, which over the past two years has grown to include all acceding countries. This network is linked electronically via the agency's family of websites, providing the world's most comprehensive source of OSH information.

"Raising the standards of safety and health at work is a key element of Europe's unique Social Model," says Hans-Horst Konkolewsky, director of the agency. "The accession countries have already transposed the EU's comprehensive safety and health directives into national legislation. The main challenge now is to ensure that these legal standards are converted into real improvements in working conditions. The agency is looking forward to supporting this process through our multilingual online information system and other initiatives in cooperation with our partners in the accession countries to develop

Key Facts About Safety and Health and Physical Risks and Working Conditions in the Accession Countries

According to the most recent figures from the International Labour Organisation (2002):

- The incidence rate of work-related fatalities in the accession countries (not including Cyprus) is almost three times higher than in the EU-15 (9.6 per 100,000 persons in employment compared with 3.4 per 100,000 in the EU-15).
- The work-related absence rate (over a three-day period) is also approximately three times higher for accession countries (not including Cyprus) than for the EU-15.

According to recent European research (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2003):

- 40% of accession and candidate countries' (ACC) workers believe their health and safety are at risk due to work, compared with only 27% in the EU-15.
- Workers in the ACC report significantly higher exposure

to various physical risk factors such as dangerous substances/fumes and noise.

- A higher proportion of these workers (41%) reports suffering from fatigue as a result of their work compared with their counterparts in the EU-15 (23%).
- Workers in the ACC work longer hours, the average time being 44.4 hours per week compared with the EU-15 average of 38.2.
- 38% of ACC workers work more than 45 hours per week compared with only 21% in the EU-15.
- Unsocial working hours (such as night work or shift work) are more prevalent in the ACC.
- The self-reported accident rates in the ACC for a number of other health problems mirror those of the EU-15 including stress (28%), backache (34% ACC; 33% EU-15), and muscular pains in neck and shoulder (23%). However, better information is available on physical risk at the workplace in the ACC than in the EU-15.



Below are the individual flags of the now 25-member European Union, with the country listed below.

1. Belgium 2. Czech Republic 3. Denmark 4. Germany 5. Estonia 6. Greece
 7. Spain 8. France 9. Ireland 10. Italy 11. Cyprus 12. Latvia
 13. Lithuania 14. Luxembourg 15. Hungary 16. Malta 17. Netherlands 18. Austria
 19. Poland 20. Portugal 21. Slovenia 22. Slovakia 23. Finland 24. Sweden 25. United Kingdom

safe, healthy, and productive workplaces across an enlarged Europe.”

Over the coming weeks, Mr. Konkolewsky is visiting all 10 of the accession countries to meet government representatives and leading members of the agency’s national information networks.

Among the information activities of the agency and its

focal points in 2004 are: A Europe-wide information campaign targeting the construction sector; the provision of good safety and health practice in the agriculture sector; a study of the effectiveness of economic incentives to encourage improvements in safety and health; and preparation for an information campaign in 2005 on noise at work. ■