

WHAT NEXT FOR OSH? EU-OSHA SYMPOSIUM EXPLORES NEW STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

One week after the European Commission launched the EU Strategic Framework for Health and Safety at Work 2021-2027, EU-OSHA hosted an international symposium to discuss the new Framework's vision, and how the Agency will help to implement it. From the Euskalduna Conference Centre on the banks of the river Nervión in Bilbao, **EU-OSHA's Executive Director Dr Christa Sedlatschek** welcomed the virtual participants, who included representatives from the European Commission, the European Parliament, business, trade unions and academia. The event was also one of reflection as Dr Sedlatschek prepares to leave the Agency in September after 10 years at EU-OSHA.



Opening session



After greeting the participants and the online audience, Dr Sedlatschek opened the discussion by outlining the key priorities of the Framework:

- **anticipating and managing change** (in the context of green, digital and demographic transitions);
- **improving prevention of work-related accidents and diseases** (towards a 'Vision Zero' approach to work-related deaths); and
- **increasing preparedness to respond to crises** like the COVID-19 pandemic in future.

The audience heard that the success of the Framework will depend on its implementation at all levels — from EU, national and sectoral levels down to individual companies and organisations. That is where EU-OSHA's work will lie. Dr Sedlatschek said: *'Facilitating action, cooperation and exchange is at the core of the Agency's work, and it is only possible thanks to our team of highly dedicated and passionate staff, our invaluable network of focal points and our trusted social partners as well as our many other partners in the EU occupational safety and health (OSH) network.'*

Keynote speech

EU-OSHA was delighted to host **Sir Michael Marmot, Director of the International Institute for Society and Health and Professor of Epidemiology and Public Health**. Sir Michael has led research on health inequalities for more than 40 years and is the author of *Build back fairer*, a landmark report investigating how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected health inequalities in England. He presented statistics showing deepening health inequalities in the United Kingdom over the last decade — and explained that the data *'are entirely consistent with what we see across European countries.'*²¹



Sir Michael said that the major health problem facing the United Kingdom and most European countries is the fact that the health improvements that have taken place in recent years have been unequally distributed, and, in some cases, the health of the poorest people has actually worsened. A fair distribution of health and well-being should be at the heart of government policy, he said. The professor's recommendations for a fairer and healthier society — applicable to any nation — include:

- creating fair employment and good work for all;
- creating and developing healthy and sustainable places and communities; and
- strengthening the role and impact of ill health prevention.

Sir Michael explained that existing health, social and economic inequalities in the United Kingdom meant that it was ill prepared when COVID-19 reached its shores. The pandemic deepened these inequalities: low-income workers were most likely to be employed in sectors that shut down, while more skilled professionals could do their jobs from home. Supermarket workers, refuse collectors and other low-paid workers kept society functioning while facing a higher risk of virus exposure. Sir Michael said that the COVID-19 mortality rate was particularly high among care workers — those helping the most vulnerable people in the community. Many of these care staff work in the gig economy and do not earn the UK living wage.

Sir Michael said that now was the time to rethink the nature of work and where work fits into society. As he put it: *'Is work going to be a vehicle for some people to get enormously rich and for others to earn a little bit while doing absolutely vital roles, or is work going to be something that's meaningful to everybody, as well as safe and free from hazard? We have big questions to address if we want to build back fairer.'*

In conversation with Commissioner Schmit

The following session saw **Mr Nicolas Schmit, EU Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights**, elaborate on the priorities of the new Framework and the importance of effective implementation during a conversation with Dr Sedlatschek. Commissioner Schmit, who launched the Framework in Brussels on 28 June, said that **digitalisation** is rapidly changing the world of work, including working conditions — and not always for the better. Mr Schmit referred to platform workers, highlighting the need to provide protection for all of them, independently of their status. He said: *'Platform workers are very often not protected by our OSH rules because they are considered self-employed, which I personally consider not appropriate. Our rules in terms of health and safety should apply to everybody; employed, self-employed and entrepreneurs.'*

Such new forms of work can be associated with job uncertainty — a psychosocial risk that can contribute to mental health problems, which currently affect around 84 million people in the EU, according to the Commissioner. Furthermore, as teleworking increases, not all Member States have regulations in place that address 'the right to disconnect'. Mr Schmit said: *'Why should some workers in Europe have this right and not others? We really have to work on that.'* The Commissioner said that the Framework aims to address these changes to the way we work to ensure that everybody is protected — all of the time.



Prevention — the second priority of the Framework and one of the main topics of the symposium — is ‘*absolutely key*’, said the Commissioner. He went on to state that everyone should consider occupational safety and health an essential part of their working life and underlined the importance of progressing towards the ‘Vision Zero’ goal on serious accidents at work and continuing to reduce worker exposure to dangerous substances, such as asbestos. Following the COVID-19 pandemic we must also increase **preparedness** for future crises, he said, by giving companies the tools and guidance required to protect lives and manage risks. Commissioner Schmit summed up by saying: ‘*We know now how to react and how to be better prepared. Nobody knows if we will face a similar situation again.*’

Dr Sedlatschek said that the Framework’s commitment to improving the application and enforcement of existing EU occupational safety and health laws would be crucial in putting pressure on companies to comply, and asked how this might be achieved. For the Commissioner, it is about (i) awareness — from employers to apprentices, (ii) having the right control mechanisms in place across the Member States and (iii) ensuring that the authorities have the appropriate resources, adapted to their needs, to enable them to do their jobs. Mr Schmit said: ‘*We all know the cost, not only the human cost — this cannot be evaluated — but also the cost to the economy in terms of productivity if you do not implement the rules correctly.*’

Panel discussion



Next came an opportunity for six invited guests from different OSH backgrounds to give their views on the Framework and respond to questions from the online audience. **Brenda O’Brien, Manager of EU-OSHA’s Brussels Liaison Office**, acted as moderator for the wide-ranging debate.

Digitalisation and the right to disconnect

The digital transition, one of the most significant changes to work in recent years, presents ‘huge OSH opportunities’ as well as challenges, according to **Rebekah Smith from BusinessEurope**. ‘*The important thing for employers is to deal with the challenges that arise but also grasp the opportunities for less dangerous work and more automated work*’, she said. With this in mind, BusinessEurope is a signatory to the European Social Partners Framework Agreement on Digitalisation. This agreement, which supports the successful integration of digital technologies in the workplace, now has to be implemented by its members and trade unions across Europe, Ms Smith added.

Mateja Ribič, representing the Slovenian EU Council Presidency, stressed the importance of the right to disconnect, particularly for home-based workers who feel pressure to be available to their employers from morning to night. Ms Ribič said: *'I think "we need to include this right in the legislation of all Member States. If we look at Slovenian legislation, we don't have this right yet, but we do already have some conversations with social partners about how to include it in our legislation.'*

Prevention and preparedness

Prevention has been a 'golden rule' of OSH since the establishment of the Framework Directive and remains a fundamental part of the new Strategic Framework, said **Theresa Moitinho from the Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion**. Key to this will be the promotion of the Vision Zero approach to work-related deaths and the need to assess the cause of each death and injury in the workplace. Ms Moitinho said: *'We also need to deploy actions to raise awareness and promote this prevention culture among everybody.'*

On the topic of preparedness, the third pillar of the new Framework, Rebekah Smith from BusinessEurope said that there were lessons to be learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. The employers' organisation would like to see a much better interaction between public health policies and workplace health and safety policies. She argued: *'It makes no sense to ensure that workers are protected from this kind of virus if they are not protected outside as well.'*

Psychosocial risks — is new legislation required?

The discussion saw a strong focus on mental health and psychosocial risks in the workplace. **Marian Schaapman from the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI)** said that good regulation was required to achieve the key objectives of the Strategic Framework, and that legislation to tackle psychosocial risks should be standard across all Member States, as *'some countries have nothing'*. **Member of the European Parliament Marianne Vind** said that the pandemic had made mental health a priority more than ever. She said: *'It's time to present a Directive on mental health in workplaces — a Directive that takes stress seriously and requires workplaces to develop strategies to tackle it. I see no better place to start this journey than with the new Strategic Framework.'* By contrast, Rebekah Smith from BusinessEurope said it was the group's view that the existing Framework Directive on Health and Safety at Work covers such risks, and that new legislation could result in an unhelpful *'patchwork of processes'* for employers to follow. Instead, she said that BusinessEurope would like to see more guidance on how to apply the Framework Directive in the area of psychosocial risks.

Implementing the Strategic Framework

Mateja Ribič said that all Member States should update their national and legal frameworks in consultation with social partners, including employers and trade unions, to address all OSH risks and opportunities related to the green and digital transitions. *'This is very important, because this is the only way that we can make our jobs and our*

workplaces safer, healthier and even more productive. Theresa Moitinho agreed, saying that national OSH strategies should be updated in light of the new Strategic Framework, and that *'decisive action'* is required with regard to raising awareness, effective enforcement and supporting all relevant actors. The tripartite approach is fundamental to the successful implementation of the Framework, she added.

There was also agreement on the need for increased support and resources for labour inspectorates, a theme touched upon earlier by Commissioner Schmit. Ms Ribič said that better training was needed for labour inspectors and that improvement was required in the exchange of information and good practice between the labour inspectorate and other authorities. Member States should also focus on the use of digital tools to make labour inspection more efficient by both preventing and detecting legislation breaches, she added.

William Cockburn, Head of EU-OSHA's Prevention and Research Unit, concluded that the Agency's work would ensure a solid evidence base for guiding policy and monitoring progress and that its tools and guidance for capacity building would assist the Framework's implementation. This includes EU-OSHA's foresight exercises and OSH overviews, together with more than 250 OiRA (Online Interactive Risk Assessment) tools already published. He said: *'I'm confident that the long-term planning we have in place will be excellent support, and we very much look forward to the stocktaking OSH summit that the Commission has planned for 2023.'*

Questions from the audience

The online audience engaged strongly with the debate, with questions received from people watching in Luxembourg, Ireland, Germany and Spain, among other countries like United States and Brazil. One viewer said that introducing OSH education in schools should be part of the Strategic Framework. Ms Vind felt that this was *'a very good idea'*, while Mr Cockburn said that EU-OSHA is already undertaking work in this field. He said: *'We have been collaborating for a long time now with the European Network for Education and Training on OSH — organising events and making the most of the material we produce, for example our Napo videos, which are language-free, and lend themselves very well to raising awareness in schools.'*

Another viewer asked if strengthened prevention measures were required to protect vulnerable groups such as migrant workers. Rebekah Smith of BusinessEurope agreed that some groups in society need targeted support. She said: *'One of the very basic issues that is arising in health and safety is that they (migrant workers) simply may not speak the language of the country they are living in, so they don't necessarily understand the information that they are receiving. Tools and help for particular groups is really important.'*

Before the panellists signed off, they each took the opportunity to thank Dr Sedlatschek for her huge contribution to improving OSH in Europe, before she leaves the Agency in September. Ms Ribič praised the Executive Director's *'dedication and smart leadership'*, while Ms Moitinho recognised the *'outstanding work'* that she has done over the

years. Ms Schaapman said: *'Thank you for the cooperation and the many conversations we have had. It has been a great pleasure working with you and we wish you all the best.'*

Closing session

As the symposium drew to a close, the participants agreed that it had been a very stimulating debate, getting to the heart of the key topics covered by the Strategic Framework, and providing a springboard for further discussions. Ms Schaapman from ETUI said: *'Many thanks to EU-OSHA for organising this event — it has been really, really interesting, it has been a great exchange, and I hope it will be the start of many more exchanges.'* Commissioner Schmit praised EU-OSHA for *'choosing the right topic'* for the symposium. He said: *'Yes, prevention is key now more than ever. Thank you for organising this conference at a really timely moment.'*

Tributes

The symposium was the last event of its kind to be hosted by Dr Sedlatschek and, just before finishing, there were some farewell words from **Renārs Lūsis, chair of the EU-OSHA Management Board.**

Mr Lūsis said that, during Dr Sedlatschek's 10 years at the Agency, she had been effective in building capacity and experience and had shown great ability to adapt and respond to challenges. He singled out the success of the Healthy Workplace Campaigns, which he said had *'inspired so many companies around the world — making a real change for so many workers'*. On a more personal note, Mr Lūsis described the Executive Director as easy to talk to, fair and supportive towards colleagues. *'You have been a very human director'*, he said. *'You will be greatly missed by Bilbao, by EU-OSHA staff, by the Management Board, and I'm sure by the Commission too. The most sincere thanks for everything you have done during your mandate.'*

Mr Lūsis' words were echoed in the final comments of Commissioner Schmit, who said that Dr Sedlatschek had the *'human touch'* and had shown a *'special kind of leadership'*. He concluded: *'It will be quite difficult to fill your shoes. You leave an organisation that is strong and well organised. You leave an organisation that is ready for new challenges.'*



Final remarks from the Executive Director

Dr Sedlatschek, who will step down on 16 September, said that she had been very touched by everyone's kind words. In her closing address, she outlined how EU-OSHA will perform its crucial role in supporting the implementation of the Framework, before reflecting on her decade at EU-OSHA. She told the audience: *'I am confident that EU-OSHA will excel in its vital role in supporting the implementation of the new Strategic Framework, just as it did with the previous one.'*

Dr Sedlatschek said that the Agency will:

- **identify OSH priorities through its foresight studies and enterprise surveys**, and feed into the strategies of the next 7 years;
- **produce guidance and tools to assist micro and small enterprises with risk assessment**, helping them to put the Framework into practice; and
- **address working conditions associated with digital platforms** through a dedicated OSH overview and Healthy Workplaces Campaign, with a focus on psychosocial and ergonomic risks.

The Executive Director said that the Agency's achievements during her term — from its first foresight project to the development of the [OIRA tools](#) and a series of highly successful [Healthy Workplace Campaigns](#) — would not have been possible without the support of its loyal network of national focal points, government, worker and employer representatives, campaign partners, and many others. Since 2011, EU-OSHA has also increased the scope and size of its Europe-wide survey, [ESENER](#), and signed up to the [Roadmap on Carcinogens](#), described by Dr Sedlatschek as a *'very significant milestone'*. And when the COVID-19 pandemic swept the globe last year, Agency staff responded swiftly and effectively to help companies protect their workers.

Dr Sedlatschek closed by saying: *'The successes — the knowledge we have gathered, the tools we have produced, the campaigns we have led, the relationships we have fostered — are the foundation for future successes. We have the tools in place to support the delivery of the new Framework, and we are ready for the challenges of the future — whatever form they may take.'*