



## The Use of Occupational Safety and Health Management Systems in the Member States of the European Union

### Summary of an Agency report



Occupational safety and health (OSH) management systems are widely recognised as essential components in creating healthier and safer working environments but what is the most effective approach? The International Labour Organization has published *Guidelines on OSH Management Systems* (ILO-OSH 2001) which encourage their integration with other management systems and state that OSH should be an integral part of business management (1).

But currently, there is not a standardised, universally agreed system.

Different organisations use different models, a reflection of the growing complexity and diversity of working processes and conditions. In many cases, however, these systems are incomplete. Some companies, for example, focus on accident prevention but overlook work-related illnesses, while others have clear objectives and strategies but lack the communication channels to integrate OSH good practice into the daily working environment.

Prepared by Mr Helmut Hägele, ISG, Germany, the Agency report sets out the five key building blocks of an ideal OSH management system and examines how 11 companies across the EU measure up to these. All of these businesses have either introduced or improved their OSH management systems. Their experiences - in setting objectives, designing a system and implementing it - shed valuable light on the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches and what is required to create an effective, integrated system. Collectively, they point to good practice and highlight the importance of innovative thinking in today's working environment.

#### Five elements of an ideal OSH management system

##### 1. Initiation - OSH input

Essential inputs include:

- management commitment and resources, including the organisational structures to support the development and integration of an OSH programme;
- compliance with legal and regulatory requirements;
- accountability, responsibility and authority;
- employee participation, either directly by individual employees or indirectly via representative bodies, such as a safety committee.

##### 2. Formulation and implementation - OSH process

Principal requirements for formulating an OSH system are:

- OSH goals;
- performance measures ;
- baseline evaluation and hazard/risk assessment;
- system planning and development;
- OSH management manual and procedures.

To implement the system, the following elements are needed:

- training, especially technical expertise and personnel qualifications;
- a hazard control system, including emergency plans, to reduce or eliminate occupational hazards;
- preventive and corrective systems to protect staff in the event of a problem occurring;
- procuring goods and services that conform to the organisation's safety standards.

##### 3. Effects - OSH output

Measures of the effectiveness of an OSH system need to be quantifiable and practical. There are various options available:

- success in hitting OSH goals;
- illness and injury rates, possibly benchmarked against enterprises in the same sector;
- general health and well-being of the workforce;
- changes in the organisation's efficiency, measured, for example, by improved productivity;
- overall performance of the organisation.

##### 4. Evaluation - OSH feedback

- A communication system to draft, update and disseminate OSH-related information across the organisation;
- an evaluation system for auditing OSH standards, investigating and analysing the root causes of incidents, and providing health and medical surveillance.

##### 5. Continual improvement and integration - open system elements

- Processes to ensure continuous improvement, including regular evaluations and procedures for learning from any incidents;
- regular management reviews in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the OSH system and ensure that it complies with regulatory and legal requirements;
- integration of the OSH management system into all facets of the business.

#### Different 'styles' of OSH management

The report's authors identify four possible OSH management systems:

1. *Traditional design and engineering*: OSH specialists or supervisors set the requirements, with little or no employee involvement, and focus on controlling hazards at the physical source of the risk.
2. *Unsafe act minimisers*: A top-down approach designed to encourage staff to minimise risks.
3. *Adaptive hazard managers*: The emphasis is on minimising hazards 'at source' but with the involvement of employees and management.
4. *Sophisticated behavioural*: A strong focus on staff safety, underpinned by a high level of employee involvement. OSH priorities are closely aligned to management and business objectives.

(1) <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/safework/managmnt/download/promo.pdf>

## An analysis of 11 companies across the EU

Most of the 11 companies' studied in the report had made improvements to existing OSH management systems (OSHMS), often to reduce accident rates and other problems, but several introduced systems for the first time in order to comply with new OSH legislation. Below is a summary of how these businesses handled these changes, their success and the relative strengths and weaknesses of the different approaches used.

### Case study - Sermelux

Sermelux has undertaken four main steps in its quest to achieve its zero accident goal. First, it carried out a detailed analysis of the risks. Second, it conducts regular training, handled by two external consultants who also coordinate all its OSH activities and ensure the company complies with the relevant regulations. Third, there are individuals with clearly defined OSH responsibilities. But this does not mean that OSH is their responsibility alone. All employees are asked to join in the programme and to feel free to submit ideas. Any initiatives that are introduced are then communicated in a clear and easy to understand manner. Finally, all risks are immediately acted upon as soon as they become apparent in any part of the company's operations. Collectively, these developments have enabled the firm to reduce both its accident and sickness rates.

### Reasons for introducing an OSHMS

The overriding objective in all companies was to improve the safety and health of employees but within this goal there were various sub-themes:

- promote employer responsibility;
- improve the participation of employees and their representatives;
- motivate top management and employees;
- improve the quality of the products and services, plus the working environment;
- reduce operational costs;
- exploit potential synergies with other management systems, such as ISO 9000;
- increase organisational transparency.

### Formulating and implementing an OSHMS

All the businesses chose OSH management systems that could be linked directly to other management functions. Agfa-Gevaert in Belgium, for instance, tied its system into ISO9002, while the Luxembourg building and civil engineering firm Sermelux made its OSHMS part of its corporate philosophy, with detailed instructions on how it should relate to a healthy and even aesthetically attractive environment. The German mining company, MIBRAG, also placed occupational safety and health at the heart of its business, giving it the same priority as other corporate goals.

Employees were consulted about implementing the systems but very few companies turned to outside consultants for advice. One of the most striking findings is that, although the new systems were viewed positively, implementing them was often a long and difficult process.

### Impacts of OSHMS

Few organisations had quantifiable objectives and those that did tended to adopt a zero-accident strategy. Interestingly, businesses that set concrete, measurable targets reduced their accident rates. Agfa-Gevaert, MIBRAG and the Austrian Berglandmilch dairy company were three examples. Many of the organisations also claimed that employee motivation and productivity had increased since the introduction of the new OSHMS, although this was not empirically quantified.

### Strengths and weaknesses of the systems used

The OSH management systems used by the companies focused predominantly on accident prevention, rather than work-related health. Most also made occupational safety and health an executive duty, an apparent necessity for success. Generally, all the companies had strong OSH management systems.

Weaknesses mainly occurred in communicating OSH principles and practices down the line and in having inappropriately qualified staff performing certain OSH functions. This was particularly the case in organisations where employee participation was voluntary, which also tended to lead to low staff involvement. High start-up costs were another problem. In some instances, the structural rigidity of the systems also constrained daily work routines.

There was a general consensus among the businesses studied that innovative management strategies were superior to traditional approaches and offered a number of key benefits including:

- the facility to systematically analyse hazards, risks and incidents;
- greater awareness of hazards and risks;
- improved transparency of internal processes;
- better communication among employees;
- stronger employee motivation and identification with the company;
- a more integrated view of the working environment;
- enhanced OSH performance measures.

The main key to success, the report concludes, is to plan the implementation of any OSH management system carefully and take the company's specific conditions into account.

### Case study - MIBRAG



MIBRAG has an innovative and employee oriented OSHMS that has not only dramatically reduced its accident rates but also earned it a top award from the UK's Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents. Backed by the company's top management, the system is based on a 'zero-accident' vision and a special OSH programme that encourages staff to play an active role in designing a safe and healthy working environment and identifying potential risks. An important feature of this programme is rigorous documentation of all assessments, risks, accidents and related initiatives. This helps the company to tailor its regular OSH training programmes to the latest developments in its business. MIBRAG also has a well-organised communication system, enabling it to distribute OSH-related news to staff rapidly. All of these and other initiatives are clearly spelled out in a detailed three-year plan.

### How to get the report:

The full text of the report in English is available at the Agency's website:

<http://agency.osha.eu.int/publications/reports/>

The printed report "The Use of Occupational Safety and Health Management Systems in the Member States of the European Union", European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2002, ISBN 92-95007-59-X, can be ordered from the EC's Publication Office EUR-OP in Luxembourg (<http://eur-op.eu.int/>) or from its sales agents. The price is €7 (excluding VAT).