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Occupational safety and health between simplification and responsibility

EVENT REPORT

Occupational safety and health often only receives attention when something happens. Yet it should be exactly the other way around. Especially in the tension between competitiveness and efficiency, it becomes clear how early risks are identified and avoided – and how effectively prevention actually works. This was precisely the focus of the event hosted by the German Social Insurance European Representation (DSV) on 3 March in Brussels: to bring safety and health at work more strongly into focus and open up a new discussion. The fact that the event took place in Brussels was no coincidence. Few places symbolise as clearly the development, simplification and further evolution of regulations – and the starting point of new ideas. At present, the question of how regulations can be made simpler and more practical is becoming increasingly important.

With its simplification agenda, the European Commission is providing important momentum, while key framework conditions are being shaped at European level and national governments are also driving the reduction of bureaucratic hurdles. Social insurance institutions are actively contributing to this process, with the aim of helping shape change and further developing occupational safety and health in a way that combines safety and competitiveness.

“The German system of ‘Berufsgenossenschaften’ is a positive example because it is based on shared responsibility between employers and employees.” – Dennis Radtke



Dennis Radtke, Member of the European Parliament (EPP, Germany)

Occupational safety and health in Europe is multifaceted, but for a long time it was not at the centre of political attention. The keynote therefore stressed that the topic needs greater weight and visibility in Brussels. Significant challenges remain, particularly in the context of reducing bureaucracy, ensuring practical implementation and enforcing existing regulations. The subsequent dialogue also made clear that there is still a need for further development not only at European level but also nationally. The discussion focused in particular on the complexity and speed of rulemaking, as well as the question of how digital solutions and new technologies can be used more effectively. A central objective remains to design regulations in a way that is understandable and practical and to make it easier for companies to access relevant requirements.



Ilka Wölfle, Director of the DSV and Dr. Stephan Fasshauer, Director-General of the German Social Accident Insurance (DGUV)

“Every system must remain adaptable and open to digitalisation and new technology.” – Dr. Stephan Fasshauer

Simplification and occupational safety and health – Together for a more competitive EU



Eleonora Isopo, Director-General of the European Chemical Employers Group (ECEG)

The first panel focused on the question of how bureaucracy can be reduced without lowering the level of protection. The starting point was the observation that occupational safety and health is generally recognised by entrepreneurs from different European countries but in practice is often perceived as complex, costly and, in some cases, contradictory. One key outcome of the discussion was that efficient regulation and a high standard of occupational safety and health are not contradictory. On the contrary, clear, understandable and targeted rules are considered a crucial prerequisite for ensuring that requirements are implemented effectively in the first place.

“Competitiveness does not mean lowering social standards in OSH that we have in Europe. It’s about finding the right balance.” – Eleonora Isopo

The discussion also addressed how requirements can be aligned more closely with actual risks. There was agreement that regulations should primarily apply where real hazards exist, while simplifications should be made in low-risk areas. A central challenge is considered to be not so much the number of regulations, but rather their inconsistent implementation, for example in complex subcontracting chains. Additional bureaucracy often arises from contradictory regulations, creating a strong need for more coherent and better coordinated requirements.

At both national and European level, simplification is increasingly becoming a focus. This is not only about reducing documentation requirements, but above all about clearer responsibilities, more efficient processes and faster rulemaking. In this context, there is also a broader discussion at EU level about how to avoid additional national requirements that go beyond European legislation – the so-called “gold-plating”. In occupational safety and health, however, this phenomenon plays a somewhat different role than in other policy areas. Due to minimum standards that intentionally leave room for Member States, “gold-plating” is less problematic here. At the same time, the objective remains to improve procedures overall and make implementation easier for companies.

**“Simplification does not mean taking away workers’ rights.”
– Maria Luisa Cabral**



Ilka Wölfle, Director of the DSV; Dennis Radtke, Member of the European Parliament (EPP, Germany); Maria Luisa Cabral, Director for Quality Jobs, Working Conditions and Social Dialogue in the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission; Eleonora Isopo, Director-General of the European Chemical Employers Group (ECEG); Dr. Edlyn Höller, Deputy Director-General of the DGUV and Member of the Board of the DSV; Peer-Oliver Villwock, Head of the Subdivision for Occupational Safety and Health, Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS)

There was broad agreement that prevention remains the central approach: the safety and health of employees are not only part of sustainable corporate governance, but also economically beneficial. Studies such as the ISSA's "Return on Prevention" demonstrate that investments in prevention pay off in the long term. Participants identified opportunities for simplification particularly in better digital access to regulations, faster updates, increased use of data and more consistent enforcement of existing rules.



Dr. Edlyn Höller, Deputy Director-General of the DGUV and Member of the Board of the DSV

“In general, it is not easy to measure something that did not happen. But we know the costs of workplace accidents, and therefore we all benefit when nothing happens.” – Dr. Edlyn Höller

Artificial intelligence in social insurance – Harnessing new technologies effectively

The second panel focused on the use of AI and digitalisation in occupational safety and health. It began with a practical perspective from small and medium-sized enterprises. In this context, occupational safety and health is understood as a corporate responsibility rather than merely a catalogue of standards.

At the same time, implementation is made more difficult by complex regulations, different contact points, and the lack of centralised support structures. AI is already being used in areas such as risk assessments and training, but uncertainties remain regarding the quality, timeliness, and practical applicability of information. Traditional information obligations are also increasingly reaching their limits, often leading to overload and not always reaching employees effectively.

The subsequent discussion painted a differentiated picture: AI is both hype and opportunity – what matters is its concrete application. The focus was on questions of practical implementation and technological dependency, as well as participation and transparency. In light of demographic change, the potential of AI was highlighted in particular, for example for improving communication and enabling more risk-oriented prevention management. At the same time, its use remains limited in safety-critical areas, while significant opportunities are seen especially in training and education, for example through digital twins.



**“AI pays off, but what matters is where we use AI.”
– Katharina Fraune**

A central topic was the involvement of employees. There was agreement that technological solutions only work when they are transparent, understandable and meaningfully integrated into existing work processes. Without participation, mistrust and resistance may arise, especially in relation to data use. It also became clear that responsibility for occupational safety and health cannot be delegated to AI – it remains with people.

The legal framework also played an important role. Regulations such as the AI Act and existing data protection requirements were described as demanding but necessary. Rather than fundamental changes, participants emphasised the need for practical guidelines, clear requirements, and stronger skills in dealing with AI. At the same time, the discussants argued that users and innovative actors should be more strongly involved in further development.

“We need to talk about the potential of AI and not so much about the ‘but’.” – Jörg Botti



Jörg Botti, Director General of the German Social Accident Insurance Institution Energy Textile Electrical Media Products (BG ETEM); **Katharina Fraune**, Head of Brussels Office at Evonik; **Ilka Wölfle**, Director of the DSV; **Nayla Glaise**, President of Eurocadres; **Madeline Wenzel**, Senior Consultant at Capgemini Invent Germany; **Tobias Tigges**, Managing Director, Lensing Zeitungsdruck GmbH & Co. KG

Questions of data sovereignty and technological dependency, for example on non-European cloud providers, also played an important role. Particularly when handling sensitive data, the need for secure European infrastructure was emphasised. It became clear that this ambition will be difficult to realise without political support.

“Today it became clear: AI is neither a miracle cure nor a threat. In occupational safety and health, it is not only about efficiency, but also about trust, responsibility and clear rules.” – Ilka Wölfle

Overall, it became clear that simplification, innovation and a high level of protection in occupational safety and health do not contradict each other – they depend on one another. What matters are clear, coherent and practical regulations, consistent enforcement, and the responsible use of new technologies. In the end, however, everything depends on the concrete design and implementation – this determines whether and how AI can create added value.



Ilka Wölfle, Director of the DSV

About us

The German Federal Pension Insurance (DRV Bund), the German Social Accident Insurance (DGUV), the National Association of Statutory Health Insurance Funds (GKV-Spitzenverband), the national associations for statutory health and long-term care insurance funds at the federal level and the Social Insurance for Agriculture, Forestry and Horticulture (SVLFG) have joined forces to form the "German Social Insurance - Working Group Europe" (Deutsche Sozialversicherung Arbeitsgemeinschaft Europa e. V.) with a view to their common European policy interests. The association represents the interests of its members vis-à-vis the bodies of the European Union (EU) as well as other European institutions and advises the relevant stakeholders in the context of current legislative projects and initiatives. As part of the statutory insurance system in Germany, health and long-term care insurance with 75 million insured persons, pension insurance with 57 million insured persons and accident insurance with more than 70 million insured persons in 5.5 million member companies offer effective protection against the consequences of major risks of life.



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