

Questions and answers: Emerging risks and new forms of prevention in a changing world of work

Workers, employers and governments mark the World Day for Safety and Health at Work each year as part of an international campaign to promote safe, healthy, and decent work. This year, it is focussing on emerging risks at the workplace and new forms of prevention in a changing world of work. ILO Online spoke with Seiji Machida, Director of the ILO's SafeWork Programme, about new ways to promote the right of workers worldwide to a safe and healthy working environment.

04/27/2010

safety_health_day

What are some of the new occupational safety and health risks that are emerging today?

Seiji Machida: The study of new and emerging risks in the world of work has been the focus of much attention in recent years. For example, modern manufacturing processes using nanotechnology and biotechnology are found increasingly all over the world. It is expected that by 2020 approximately 20 per cent of all goods will be partly based on the use of nanotechnology. Unfortunately, the long-term impact of these new materials on human health and the environment remains largely unknown. In the biotechnology industry, those engaged in the development of new products and genetically modified organisms can be at particular risk. What's more, there has been an enormous growth in the number of chemicals being used in the industrial environment over the last 20 years, many of which have not been adequately tested. In addition, there is an increased awareness of the occupational safety and health (OSH) impact of new working conditions and emerging forms of employment.

What is the ILO doing to react to these new challenges?

Seiji Machida: As workplace conditions are changing constantly, work safety and health measures need to be adapted at the same time. An [ILO survey](#) undertaken in 2009 on the implementation of three key ILO instruments on OSH revealed that considerable progress has been made and a large number of countries are in the process of formulating OSH policies. Some countries are already updating their strategies focusing on new risks such as stress-related or musculoskeletal disorders and the promotion of best practices.

But the survey, based on contributions from over 120 countries, also showed that a number of new aspects, including the emerging risks mentioned earlier, should be taken into account for future action in this field. There is an urgent need to reinforce national OSH systems and programmes reflecting the principles laid down in relevant International Labour Standards. This is why the Governing Body of the ILO adopted [a plan of action](#) last month aimed at achieving widespread ratification and effective implementation of the ILO's key OSH instruments. Progress regarding the implementation of this plan will be monitored on a yearly basis and evaluated.

What are the main strategic goals for the future?

Seiji Machida: One important task is the aim to create a preventative health and safety culture. We want this task to be high on national agendas and to increase awareness and understanding of the purpose and usefulness of a systematic approach on OSH. Secondly, the action plan aims at improving the situation at the workplace level. Special attention should be given to hazardous sectors such as construction, mining and agriculture, the informal economy, and to the needs of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). Thirdly, we'll continue the process of capacity building, enabling national authorities to develop or further improve their national preventive systems.

The ILO "Global Employment Trends" report indicated that the number of workers in vulnerable employment has increased significantly over the past years. What does that mean for OSH strategies?

Seiji Machida: Migrants, contract workers and other vulnerable groups are likely to suffer from unsafe and unhealthy working conditions. They have little or no access to preventative measures, training or health care. Implementing and maintaining better standards for these groups is a key challenge for the future. Regarding the impact on women, general approaches often don't cover the specific needs of female workers. Therefore the gender dimension in this field needs to be analysed and considered in policy making and workplace action. Similar approaches are commended for other groups such as migrants, older and younger workers.

The ILO recently published a new list of occupational diseases. What's new about this list?

Seiji Machida: Both this list and the existing ILO labour standards on OSH, provide a common framework for ILO member States. The list reflects state of the art development in identification, recognition and compensation of work-related diseases. The revised list for the first time includes mental and behavioural and post-traumatic stress disorders – given that a direct link is established scientifically between the exposure to risk factors at the workplace and mental disorders.

What are the reasons for the increase of mental ill-health?

Seiji Machida: A large proportion of workers have difficulties coping with the conditions of modern working life. Studies show that stress is the second most frequently recorded cause of work-related health disorders affecting 22 per cent of workers in the European Union in 2005. Reasons for that are increasing pressure, heavier workloads and higher demands on mobility and flexibility. The duty to be always “on call” makes it hard to achieve a healthy work-life-balance.

Are these conditions affected by the economic crisis?

Seiji Machida: In these times of crisis insecure forms of employment like self-employment and temporary contracts are on the rise. Many workers fear losing their jobs. The international acknowledgment of stress as a reason for work-related diseases shows that there is a change in perception of these risk factors. In the long run mental stress could cause other forms of health impacts such as hypertension and musculoskeletal disorders. It can also be a major contribution to depression and even suicide.

Are businesses cutting back expenses on occupational safety in times of crisis?

Seiji Machida: If companies cut back now they will pay the price in the near future. Everyone has the right to a safe and healthy working environment – especially in times of crisis. The current situation should not be an excuse to reduce activities in this field. Prevention is good for business. In the long run investment in physical and mental health will always pay off.

We will have to work later into our lives and we have to make sure that our wellbeing will permit us to do so. If we fail to invest in a healthy workforce now we will lack healthy staff in the future. Saving money in the wrong place will also cause an additional financial burden for national social security systems.

What are the next steps for the ILO to cope with the upcoming challenges?

Seiji Machida: Through its technical cooperation activities, the ILO will provide training in reinforcement of national OSH systems including the recording and notification of occupational accidents and diseases. There is lack of reliable statistical data regarding the effectiveness of national OSH systems and the number and nature of work-related incidences. Our objective is to compile existing global data and make it usable inter alia for measuring progress in this area.

Our awareness-raising activities will include the preparation of information materials in different languages, the annual “World Day on Safety and Health at Work” and participation in international events to increase visibility for the ILO’s key labour standards on occupational safety and health. In cooperation with the Turkish Ministry of Labour and Social Security and the International Social Security Association (ISSA), we are currently preparing the [19th World Congress on Safety and Health at Work](#) to be held in Istanbul in September 2011.