



## How to convey OSH information effectively: the case of dangerous substances

### Summary of an Agency report



#### Introduction

Within the EU's legislative framework, worker information and consultation about hazardous chemical agents occurring in the workplace, health and safety risks and protective and preventive measures is a legal obligation of the employer <sup>(1)</sup>. The employer shall inform not only workers and their representatives but also employers from any outside undertaking <sup>(2)</sup>. The information shall be provided in a manner appropriate to the outcome of the risk assessment. This may vary from oral communication to individual in-

struction and training supported by information in writing.

Persons involved in implementing occupational health and safety measures at workplace level, such as employers or workers' safety representatives, sometimes find it difficult to obtain specific and practical information on dangerous substances.

For the European Week for Safety and Health 2003, the Agency has therefore collected some good practice examples describing how to transfer information effectively to different target groups and how to assess the relevance of the information for these groups. The aim is to provide policy makers, chemical suppliers, researchers, safety professionals, employers and intermediary parties (such as the social partners) with practical information to support, adapt and assess their approach.

Nineteen good practice examples from across Europe were chosen and grouped relating to the level on which the information was dealt with.

#### Within enterprises:

- Globally integrated process safety management at Lilly development centre (Belgium)
- Informing workers about the hazards of chemical products — Polimeri Europa (Italy)
- Low-cost interventions — substituting and eliminating hazardous chemicals and procedures (Greece)
- Glanbia ingredients: involving the workers on substitution of a gas system (Ireland)

#### At supplier level:

- Würth Oy audits for chemical safety for its customers (Finland)
- Prevention and control logistics related to accidents caused by chemical substances and preparations (Italy)
- Checklists on how to read and write safety data sheets (Sweden)

#### At a sectoral level:

- GISBAU: Safe use of chemicals in the construction industry (Germany)

- UVITECH: UV curing technology in the printing industry (Belgium, Germany, France, UK)
- Evaluation of biological risks in the meat processing industry (France)
- LAB-Link — The human resource in the laboratory environment (Denmark)

#### Other interventions by third parties:

- Strategy on the management of substances (SOMS): the experimental plots (Netherlands)
- Branch initiative for an organic solvent-free printing shop (from Denmark to Germany and Europe)
- COSHH Essentials and e-COSHH (UK)
- Safety and health strategy against biohazards in Austria
- PIMEX — Picture Mixed Exposure (Austria)
- A national network of asbestos information centres (France)
- Chemical and biological agents programme — Instituto Navarro de Salud Laboral (Spain)
- International Chemical Safety Cards (ILO)

### Designing successful communication strategies about dangerous substances

#### 1. Definition of the problem

- ➔ Analyse the present situation and possibilities.
- ➔ Assess the nature and scope of the problems.
- ➔ Look for previous experiences and knowledge from other stakeholders as valuable input for the project.

#### Experimental plots — the Netherlands

In 1999, the Dutch Government approved a new chemicals policy and strategy: the 'Strategy on management of substances'. To test the new policies in the workplace, and to give companies the opportunity to experiment with the new policy instruments, the Dutch Government decided to set up experimental plots (or 'test gardens') with several partners at corporate, supply-chain and branch levels. The main goal was to improve the provision and management of necessary information to the specific target groups.

#### 2. Creating the message

##### The content

- ➔ Start with reliable, complete and exhaustive information to create your message.
- ➔ Reflect upon the content to convey a well-focused and useful message, for example to inform workers and workers' safety representatives of the hazards, risks, outcomes and preventive methods.
- ➔ The level of complexity and the tone of the message depend on the target public. Translate the message to their needs, understandings and language.

<sup>(1)</sup> Article 10 of Framework Directive 89/391/EEC/ and Article 8 of the chemical agents directive (98/24/EC).

<sup>(2)</sup> Further information and checklists about information on dangerous substances can be found in factsheets the Agency is producing to support the European Week for Safety and Health at Work 2003, for example Factsheet 35 *Communicating information about dangerous substances* and Factsheet 41 *Biological agents*.

- Not every target audience needs comprehensive information. Do they need theoretical or practical information, or both?
- Where are the knowledge gaps and how can they be addressed? Fill in the content in a flexible way in order to easily adapt the message to the needs of every single user.
- Permanent monitoring, evaluation and improvement of the information are also important elements.

#### The actors

- Search for partners with expert experience in order to improve the quality and credibility of the programme.

#### Evaluation of biological risks in the meat processing industry — France

To identify and locate biological risks present in the meat flaying and carving industry, risks were examined step by step. The intention was also to enhance the perception of risks amongst the workers through general and specialised training at work, a new strategy for the reduction of risks and the introduction of protective measures. The information obtained became the basis for a series of seminars and lectures not only on a local but also on a national level.

### 3. Conveying the message

- Select the most effective channel and best available technical support.
- Possible channels: training sessions, seminars, workshops, training courses, press, mobile stands, demonstrations and infolines.
- Possible tools: leaflets, posters, brochures, CD-ROMs, videotapes, checklists.
- Adapt the media and tools in length and complexity to the needs of the target audience and to the information you want to transfer.
- Use interactive tools to increase the commitment of the user.
- Make sure that tools are easily accessible with clear and understandable information.

### 4. Reception of the message

- Involve the target group and encourage them to collaborate.
- Inform regularly about changes, in order to increase identification with the programme.
- Communicate openly about the goals and the collection of information, and be open for interaction.
- Present the costs and benefits.

#### Audits for chemical safety for customers — Finland

In order to promote its environment-friendly product series, a leading Finnish wholesaler launched a free-of-charge audit for its customers. The audit includes different steps involving all of the customer's company. Most customers are willing to cooperate, which improves the communication about the products and the relationship between chemical supplier and customer.

### 5. Collect and follow-up feedback

- Use audits, surveys or questionnaires to evaluate the information and keep it up to date, and to adjust the content of the message if necessary.

- Measure the effect and level of response or assess the progress already made. The response can go from simple understanding and memorising to adherence or concrete action.
- Consult the actors at workplace level about their suggestions and opinions. Involve them actively in changes.

#### Involving the workers on substitution of a gas system — Ireland

During the production process, a company producing ingredients for food manufacturers used chlorine gas as a disinfectant for treating the water supply.

Because the operations at the chlorine gas unit were associated with severe risks for workers, after consultation with workers, a safer method was introduced following their suggestions.

**Safety data sheets (SDSs)** are the most widely available source of information. Access to any safety data sheet provided by the supplier has to be given to workers or their representatives. SDSs contain information on the properties of the substances, the nature of risks, storage, handling, protective equipment, etc. and are used for the creation of databases, instruction cards for workers and safety manuals. The comprehensiveness of the safety data sheets tends to make them less understandable for the average worker, and mainly directed to the OSH personnel and the employer. The risks that emerge while using a product, including all the precise details needed on a specific substance in a defined process, can often not be preassessed. Because they sometimes contain incomplete and even incorrect information, it is recommended to stay critical when using them and when conveying information of the SDSs to the workplace.

**Complementing the information with other available sources and translating the safety data sheet to the specific needs of the target group, the conditions of the workplace and the context of the company is therefore essential.**

#### Checklists on how to write and read safety data sheets — Sweden

A leakage of acryl amide from a tunnel construction site brought attention to the questionable quality of the safety data sheets (SDSs) provided by the chemical supplier. After a survey on SDSs, the Swedish Plastics and Chemicals Federation started a campaign to improve their content and the methods of informing end users. The result was a checklist on how to write and read safety data sheets that is freely available on the web site of the federation.

### Further information

The full report is available in English on the Agency's web site at <http://agency.osha.eu.int/publications/reports/> and it can be downloaded free of charge.

The printed report *How to convey OSH information effectively: the case of dangerous substances*, European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2003, ISBN 92-9191-044-9, can be ordered from the EC's Publications Office in Luxembourg (<http://eur-op.eu.int>) or from its sales agents. The price is 25 euro (excluding VAT).

This factsheet is available in all EU languages at: <http://osha.eu.int/ew2003/>