

# Network for SMEs to Prevent Work-Related Health Risks Germany



*Many SMEs have difficulty applying and updating regulations. This is particularly true of complex occupational health and safety laws. The gap between the statutory requirements and practical implementation is widening and SMEs cannot resolve this dilemma.*

As SMEs clearly need the support of a third party, the statutory accident insurance for the mechanical engineering and metal-working industries has adopted a new approach for providing this sector with advice and information.

### **Project organisation**

Teams of occupational health and safety experts provided on site information and advice for employers and employees, with the aim of implementing safety and occupational health care measures in accordance with legal requirements. A report outlining areas for action, measures to tackle problem areas and a prioritised action plan was compiled following the tour of the plant.

Employers were asked to pass on these findings to everyone at the company. At the same time each firm was offered additional advice and specialist expertise on solving their difficulties in implementing occupational health and safety measures.

### **Systematic analysis**

Analysis revealed that the major "shortcomings" in small businesses are not so much of a material or technical nature but more often related to problems with organising occupational health and safety and the sheer volume of administrative work connected with it.

### **Making headway**

SMEs with 1 to 30 employees make up roughly 85% of the involved statutory accident insurance's member companies. From April 1995 to the end of March 1999, consultancy events were held at roughly 32,000 of these organisations. Advice focused on new statutory regulations, in particular, the newly amended accident prevention regulations "Occupational safety specialists" and "Occupational doctors". Recommendations were also made on occupational health and safety and preventive measures.

A free assessment of each company was provided by the accident insurance, so that the particular stresses facing individual small businesses could be identified. This information also helped in the creation of targeted measures to tackle occupational health risks.



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More than 98% of businesses are in need of help where this is concerned, particularly where documentation on handling hazardous substances, noise levels and occupational health care examinations are concerned.

The low percentage of organisations with preventive policies (between 2% and 4%) is due to the fact that the data surveys were carried out during the transitional period for the implementation of statutory regulations.

Furthermore, many enterprises are unfamiliar with the complicated statutory provisions on occupational medicine, hygiene and ergonomics that change constantly and, in some cases, can only be understood by experts.

The prevailing assumption that there is a general deficit in occupational health and safety in small enterprises was not confirmed by these results however, and a differentiation between companies had to be made.

Putting knowledge into practice  
Based on these evaluation results the accident insurance developed a support system for SMEs that brought in a number of other players including the North Rhine guild health insurance fund and the steel and metal-working guild in Düsseldorf. This approach fulfills the mandatory requirement for cooperation between accident insur-

ance, health insurance funds and occupational health and safety authorities as well as with the enterprises themselves and allied institutions.

### ***An accessible written guide***

Employers at SMEs rarely have time to read complicated texts. Therefore an accessible, straightforward and relevant guide to statutory requirements was compiled. The clarity of the presentation and the fact that it was put together following consultation with the various guilds, means that it effectively addresses the needs of SMEs. Produced in file form, each page can be removed for reproduction when required; and for ease of reading, it is divided into two sections, the first containing a brief outline of the eight chapters and the second giving more detailed information. Useful addresses and telephone numbers are listed at the back. It also contains a CD-ROM "Occupational Health and Safety (regulations and information)" providing some useful specimen letters and forms.

### ***Contents of the guide***

The list of statutory occupational health and safety regulations is enormous. It would be impossible to look at this mountain of rules and regulations in any detail, therefore the guide has picked out only

the salient points for clarification, taking the specific needs of SMEs into account while doing so.

Following consultation, "classical occupational health and safety" was left out, because SMEs already know how to deal with everyday issues such as this.

Member organisations of the accident insurance can obtain the guides free of charge. During routine visits to businesses, advice is given on how to use the guides and copies are handed out. The guides are also available at training centres of the accident insurance and are used there in business seminars. Guilds allied to the involved accident insurance are entitled to free guides as well.

These guides have been extremely well received both by SMEs and larger companies. More than half of the original run of 25,000 copies has already been requested.