

Occupational health and safety – Contribution of European standardization

The current and future role of European health and safety standards is at the top of CEN's priorities. Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) is a cross-sectoral activity connected to product safety and related sectors where health and safety are involved, including work equipment, as well as CEN's general policy on improving safety and work conditions through standardization. Information to users has emerged as a priority issue for the sector.

The New Approach, product safety and related sectors

Health and safety has been a main focus of modern standardization since it was introduced. Standards bodies around the world have not only always kept that focus, but have transmitted it into the regional and global standardization organisations that they created. This explains the huge growth of activity in CEN in the late Eighties, when the New Approach was developed to abolish technical barriers to trade whilst safeguarding health and safety at high levels, in support of the single market. In the New Approach, the European Directives, contain the headline goals for health, safety and environmental protection in the form of essential requirements and refer to "Harmonized Technical Specifications", which are defined to be European Standards, worked out by CEN, CENELEC or ETSI.

CEN has been able to draw up more than 8,900 standards. Safe product design applies across a wide range of standardization fields, such as machinery, pressure equipment, personal protective equipment (PPE), construction products, transport and many more. Furthermore, CEN now produces some 1,000 normative documents a year. European Standards are drawn up with industry participation and support from – consumer organizations and trade unions, amongst others - in excess of 60,000 professionals in all. These standards deliver extremely high levels of safety, and are anything but a compromise or average. What all this means is that products that are CE-marked – certifying that they meet the essential safety requirements of the directives and are in conformity with the harmonized standards - are as safe as can be, and so help to bring the work accident figures down, as reported by the occupational health and safety agency in Bilbao.

OHS Institutions, Notified Bodies and health and safety experts (i.e., consultants...) are key partners of CEN. They take part in CEN

Technical Committees and CEN Sector Fora established in 1998 for the main areas of New Approach standardization. Technical guidance – the documents provided by the Notified Bodies on standards to the Technical Committees - helps in identifying inconsistencies in standards, and constitutes a useful basis for the revision of standards, and when safeguard clauses are invoked. The CEN Management Centre also participates in meetings of Notified Bodies at EU level for all New Approach sectors (PPE, Machinery, Toys, Lifts, Gas, Recreational craft, CPD, Medical...), and satisfactory cooperation is now in place.

OHS sectoral activities – Information to users

As well as standardization in support of the New Approach, there is also a more voluntary side to what we do. This is CEN's sectoral activity on occupational health and safety (OHS), where a horizontal-type OHS Sector Forum addresses health and safety aspects in product standards, but also end-user information, hot surfaces, ergonomics (CEN/TC 122) and the analysis of chemical agents in workplace air (CEN/TC 137)... This horizontal activity is fully supported not just by CEN, but also by key stakeholders like the European Commission (DG Enterprise, DG Employment), EFTA, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (Bilbao Agency), CEN National Members, the Machinery Sector, UNICE, ESF (European Safety Federation), TUTB and KAN. An OHS Task Force has already identified 24% of the CEN Technical Committees concerned with OHS issues, including approximately 200 work items and European standards (eg, ergonomics, vibration, acoustics, biotechnology, work place atmosphere...) (BT N 6142 /BTC 112/2000). Information to users has emerged as a priority issue for the sector.

The OHS sector organized a seminar on Information to users on 18th October 2002 with the participation of standards bodies, sectors, the European Commission, industry, consumer organizations, trade unions and public authorities. The need for adequate information to users is already recognized in various European directives (eg, the General Product Safety, Personal Protective Equipment, and Machinery Directives). Speakers from CEN sectors, consumer associations, trade unions and public authorities focused on the contribution made by standards for machinery, personal protective equipment, guides, horizontal guidance on product information

on goods and services relevant to users, and training. Product information can be found in purchase information, instructions for use and after-sales information. The use of pictograms emerged as a crucial issue directly related to information to users, which might be subject of a guide at European level. The seminar on information to users was seen as a starting point for further discussions in order to bring some coherence to the different fields of standardization. Two Working Groups of the CEN Technical Board - BT/WG 124 "Product Information" and BT/WG 154 "Product identification" - are concentrating on this issue. A CEN Guide on product information has already been finalized and will have an impact on information to users and consumers.

CEN general policy on OHS – BT/WG 156 "Health and Safety at Work"

The CEN Technical Board saw a need for a general policy on OHS and set up a CEN strategic group in order to review the focus and strategy of the OHS sector, considering European needs in light of international development and activities. BT/WG 156 "Health and Safety at Work" has already begun reviewing many big issues for the OHS sector, including: development of guides, information to users, OHS management systems, corporate social responsibility, ergonomics and risk assessment. By the end of 2003, BT/WG 156 will bring forward a global strategy on OHS, including a framework organization, and an action plan for 2004.

To conclude, CEN continues to be supportive to health and safety issues, and to European initiatives like this TUTB Conference working towards a proposed methodology for incorporating end-user information in the standardization process. In so doing, CEN demonstrates its commitment to making Europe an ever safer place for people to work in, and is thereby taking forward an important contribution to society which started at the beginning of the last century at national level in many European countries. ■

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This paper is based on the presentation given by Georg Hongler, Secretary General of CEN, at the Conference panel discussion.

