



Shaping the future of occupational safety and health: EU-OSHA's vision for the coming years

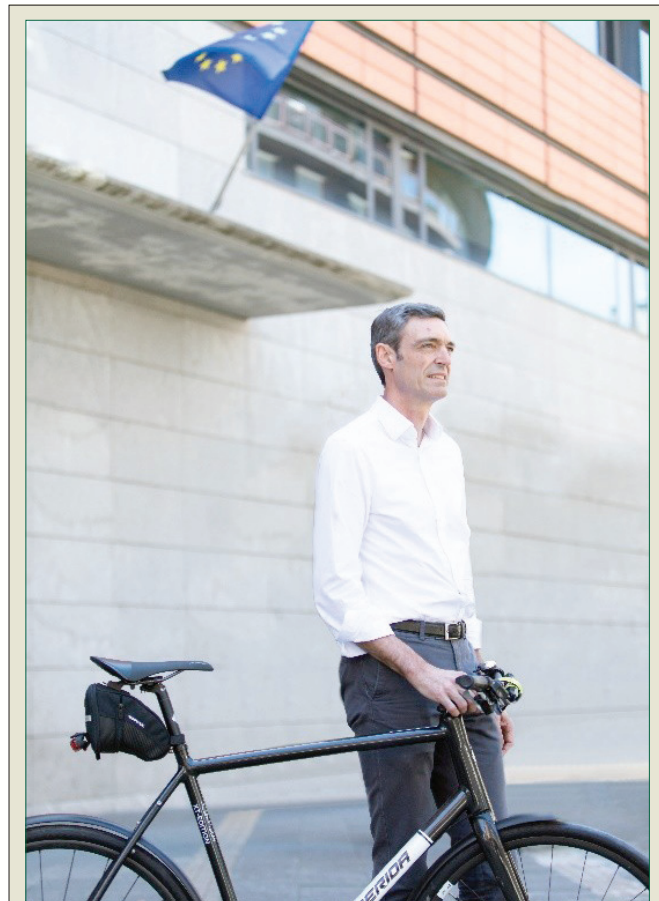
Interview on strategic direction, economic impact, global cooperation and emerging risks.

Abstract: EU-OSHA's Executive Director William Cockburn outlines the agency's strategic direction for the coming years, and discusses the economic impact and return on investment of occupational safety and health (OSH), international collaboration, and the identification and management of emerging occupational risks.

Q1 Strategic direction

As Executive Director of EU-OSHA, what do you envision as the agency's primary focus areas for the next years, particularly in light of the transitions you've identified in workforce demographics, climate change, and digitalisation?

I believe the coming years will be both challenging and full of opportunities. Our 2025–2034 strategy is built on three pillars: providing robust evidence and knowledge for policymaking, developing practical tools for risk prevention, and raising awareness



William Cockburn

EU-OSHA's Executive Director



to foster a culture of prevention across the EU. As a small agency with limited resources, it's important that we are as effective as possible and our strategy focuses on meeting the challenges of three major transitions.

First, workforce demographics: Europe's ageing workforce and changing population patterns mean we must rethink how we support both physical and mental health at work. Over the next ten years, the EU 15-64 age group is projected to decrease by 5%, or 10 million potential workers. That means more workers with age-related limitations and health conditions and longer working lives with more years exposed to occupational risks. Our research and campaigns will increasingly address the needs of older workers, promote inclusion, and tackle psychosocial risks to promote longer, healthier, more productive working lives.

Second, climate change: more frequent extreme weather events, heat stress, poor air quality and changing disease patterns are affecting workers' safety and health. This is reflected in our new OSH Pulse Survey 2025, which shows that 1 in 3 workers are exposed to climate-related risks. In parallel, 31% of workers are concerned about the impact of environmental risks on their safety and health at work. To support evidence-based decision-making, EU-OSHA has released a package of resources designed to turn data into action, to share knowledge and to raise awareness.

Third, digitalisation: The digital transformation of work is continuing at an incredibly fast pace, as we can see from our survey results. While such technology can bring great benefits, such as eliminating dangerous, dirty or repetitive tasks, digitalisation also introduces new psychosocial risks, such as isolation, surveillance stress, and job insecurity. In fact, 25% of workers say digital technologies are used to monitor their work and behaviour, and 27% report that tasks are automatically allocated through such systems, according to OSH Pulse 2025. In response, our Healthy Workplaces Campaign 2023–2025



From top to bottom: EU-OSHA Executive Director William Cockburn, EU-OSHA staff, EU-OSHA Management group. © EU-OSHA/Adina Noel

and ongoing research aim to equip employers and workers with the knowledge and tools to manage these challenges proactively with a human-centred approach.

Central to our strategy is our unique network of national Focal Points and social partners. This collaborative, tripartite approach ensures that our work is grounded in real workplace needs and reaches stakeholders across Europe.

Q2 Economic impact

You've mentioned that good OSH standards could save up to 3% of GDP. Could you elaborate on the methodologies behind this assessment and how organisations might quantify the return on investment for robust safety and health programs?

Investing in OSH is not just a legal and moral responsibility, it is essential for our economy. Preventing all injuries and illnesses caused by work would save the equivalent of 3.3% of the EU's GDP. Potential savings vary widely between countries, depending on the industrial mix, the legislative con-

text and prevention incentives. These figures are based on international and European studies that estimate the total costs to society of work-related accidents and diseases, including direct costs, such as healthcare and compensation, indirect costs, like productivity loss and absenteeism, and intangible costs, such as reduced quality of life. These costs are calculated using both bottom-up models, starting from case data and aggregating costs, and top-down models, using Global Burden of Disease figures on Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) and estimating the part caused by work, then attributing a monetary value to lost productivity.

For employers, the return on investment in OSH can be measured by tracking reductions in direct costs and indirect costs. Studies show that every euro invested in OSH can yield a return of more than two euros.

Q3 Global collaboration

How do you see international cooperation evolving to address common OSH challenges, and what specific initiatives is the agency promoting for the digital era?

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Fostering international cooperation is in EU-OSHA's DNA. The agency was created with a network at its heart that comprises a national authority in each EU member state that includes the participation of social partners at national level. This network of Focal Points provides information to EU-OSHA and plays an important role in disseminating knowledge. These institutes – like INAIL, the Focal Point in Italy – are crucial for the agency to fulfil its mission.

Beyond the EU, international collaboration is becoming increasingly dynamic and strategic.

At EU-OSHA, we are strengthening our partnerships with international organisations such as the ILO, WHO, ISSA, and key professional and social partner bodies.

Our engagement is not limited to information exchange; it extends to joint projects, capacity-building, and supporting the adoption of the EU's tripartite model of worker protection in all partner countries.

We also participate in EU programmes like the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA), which helps integrate candidate countries into our networks and activities.

EU-OSHA's recent participation in the Global Initiative for Safety, Health & Wellbeing (GISHW) at Expo 2025 in Osaka is one example of our commitment to international cooperation.

At European level, EU-OSHA's official campaign partnership scheme brings together a wide range of organisations, including businesses, trade unions, professional associations, and NGOs, to actively support and promote our Healthy Workplaces Campaigns.

This collaborative approach helps ensure that campaign themes reach workplaces of all sizes and sectors across Europe and beyond.

This global engagement reflects the agency's belief that OSH challenges, especially those linked to technology and climate, require coordinated, cross-border solutions. Our approach is to prioritise cooperation where it can have the greatest impact, focusing our resources on activities that support both EU and global OSH objectives.

We are also committed to supporting the EU's external policies and contributing to the global agenda for safe and healthy work, including through the Global OSH Coalition and Vision Zero initiatives.

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Q4 Emerging risks

Given the rapid pace of technological change, what emerging occupational risks do you foresee becoming significant concerns in the next decade, and how is EU-OSHA preparing European workplaces to address these challenges proactively?

Given the rapid pace of technological and societal change, I see several emerging occupational risks becoming increasingly significant in the coming decade.

Digitalisation is at the forefront, with advanced robotics, artificial intelligence, smart digital systems, and platform work transforming the nature of jobs and introducing new risks. These include not only physical risks but also a sharp rise in psychosocial risks, work-related stress, mental health issues, and

the challenges of remote and hybrid work environments.

Through our flagship Healthy Workplaces Campaign 2023–2025, we are continuing to promote safe and healthy work in the digital age. And our upcoming 2026–2028 campaign, “Together for mental health at work,” will focus on preventing psychosocial risks and promoting good mental health.

The transition to a circular and green economy is also bringing new risks, especially in sectors like recycling, renewable energy, and waste management. Workers may face increased exposure to hazardous substances, new ergonomic challenges, and evolving organisational processes.

To address these challenges, we are committed to proactive foresight, continuously scanning the horizon for new risks and opportunities, and translating research into actionable guidance. We also invest in research and provide practical tools (such as the Online interactive Risk Assessment (OiRA) platform) and resources to help organisations of all sizes, especially micro and small enterprises, manage risks and implement effective OSH measures. And we are raising awareness and fostering a culture of prevention through targeted campaigns and stakeholder engagement.

Our goal is to ensure that innovation and progress go hand in hand with safe, healthy, and decent working conditions for all.