

Hans-Horst Konkolewsky
President of the International ORP Foundation

The Evolution of Vision Zero: Rethinking Prevention for a Changing World of Work

Against a background of stagnating accident levels, increasing work-related health challenges and a rapidly changing world of work, Hans-Horst Konkolewsky draws on more than five decades of international experience as Director of EU-OSHA, Secretary General of ISSA and President of ORP to argue for new approaches to prevention. He explores the shift towards a holistic concept integrating safety, health and wellbeing, and the opportunities and challenges created by AI, digitalisation and psychosocial risks.

This article highlights Vision Zero as a strategic framework for transforming leadership and prevention culture, adaptable to the realities of SMEs and scalable from company and industry level to national prevention strategies, including the opportunities for Italy. At its core is a vision of prevention as a strategic investment in people, resilience and sustainable business performance.





1. THE GLOBAL EVOLUTION

"Vision Zero is not a safety programme. It is a mindset for creating value through people."

Despite decades of regulation, technological progress and professionalisation of occupational safety and health, **accident levels in many countries have stagnated**, while work-related health challenges – particularly **mental health and psychosocial risks** – are becoming increasingly important. At the same time, **digitalisation, artificial intelligence, demographic change, new forms of employment and rapidly evolving business models** are fundamentally transforming the world of work.

These developments demonstrate that **traditional prevention approaches alone are no longer sufficient**. We need to complement regulation, compliance and conventional risk management with new approaches that address safety, health and wellbeing more holistically and embed prevention into **leadership, organisational culture and business strategy**. Against this background, one of the most transformative developments has been the evolution of **Vision Zero** from a safety initiative into a **global leadership philosophy for prevention**. Since its launch by the **International Social Security Association (ISSA)** in 2017, Vision Zero has helped shift the discussion from regulatory compliance and accident statistics towards a broader understanding of prevention as a **core organisational value**.

Vision Zero is first and foremost a new **mindset** for understanding and living prevention. It promotes a **holistic approach** that integrates **safety, health and wellbeing** and recognises that protecting people and creating sustainable value are **mutually reinforcing objectives**. Rather than focusing solely on avoiding accidents, Vision Zero seeks to create workplaces where people can work safely, stay healthy and **thrive**. This message has resonated globally. More than **20,000 organisations** have voluntarily joined the Vision Zero movement, many countries have incorporated its principles into their **national prevention**



strategies, and the **European Union** has embraced the objective of achieving **zero work-related fatalities** as part of its Occupational Safety and Health Strategic Framework 2021-2027.
The real transformation has therefore been **cultural**: moving from a mindset of compliance towards a **culture of leadership, participation, prevention and continuous improvement**.

2. LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

> **"Prevention culture cannot be imposed. It must be lived."**

The most important lesson from international Vision Zero success stories is that **prevention culture** is created through **leadership and participation** rather than through rules alone. Organisations that achieve lasting improvements are those where leaders **visibly demonstrate commitment**, employees **actively participate** in solutions, and safety, health and wellbeing are integrated into **everyday decision-making**.

A second lesson is that prevention must be understood **holistically**. The most successful organisations no longer separate occupational safety, health, **mental wellbeing** and organisational performance. They recognise that **healthy, motivated and engaged employees** are essential for **resilience, innovation, productivity** and sustainable business success.

Another important lesson is that Vision Zero works best when it becomes part of **organisational culture** rather than a stand-alone programme. The organisations that have achieved the most impressive results use the **7 Golden Rules** as a practical framework for leadership, **risk management**, competence development and employee engagement.
European countries should therefore focus not only on strengthening regulations but also on fostering **leadership capability**, **worker participation** and prevention cultures that make safety, health and wellbeing part of **organisational identity**.



3. THE DIGITAL FRONTIER

"The future of prevention is intelligent - but it must remain human."

AI and digital technologies have the potential to become powerful enablers of Vision Zero. **Predictive analytics**, **smart sensors**, **digital twins** and **AI-supported risk assessment** can help organisations identify hazards earlier, anticipate risks and move from reactive to **preventive action**.

In many respects, we are entering a new era of **intelligent prevention**. For the first time, organisations can combine **real-time data**, advanced analytics and machine learning to identify **emerging risks** before accidents, injuries or illnesses occur.

However, Vision Zero reminds us that **technology must always serve people** – not the other way around. As organisations adopt AI-powered prevention systems, they must also address emerging **psychosocial risks** such as increased monitoring, **digital stress**, information overload, reduced autonomy and **technostress**.

The challenge is therefore not only to create intelligent workplaces but also **healthy and human-centred workplaces**. Under Vision Zero, the success of digitalisation should be measured not only by efficiency gains but also by its contribution to **safety, health, and wellbeing**.

4. TAILORING FOR SMEs

"Vision Zero is not a destination. It is a journey that every organisation can shape itself."

Many SMEs assume that Vision Zero requires complex systems and significant resources. In fact, one of its greatest strengths is its **flexibility**.

Vision Zero is not a prescriptive management system or a one-size-fits-all solution. It is a **mindset**





and framework that can be **adapted** to any sector, culture and company size. The principles remain the same: **leadership commitment**, **worker participation**, continuous improvement and a genuine concern for safety, health and wellbeing.
Committing to Vision Zero means embarking on a **journey** rather than implementing a fixed programme. Each organisation can decide where to begin, **what to prioritise** and at what pace to progress. Some may initially focus on accidents, others on **mental wellbeing**, ergonomics, leadership or health promotion.

The 7 **Golden Rules** provide a practical framework, but **implementation is flexible**. An SME can start with **simple measures**: visible leadership, **regular dialogue** with employees, practical training and gradual improvements in working conditions.
This **adaptability** allows every organisation to progress from its own starting point towards the same goal: workplaces where safety, health and wellbeing support both people and **sustainable business success**.

5. THE ITALIAN LANDSCAPE

"Italy already possesses many of the ingredients needed to become a European Vision Zero leader."

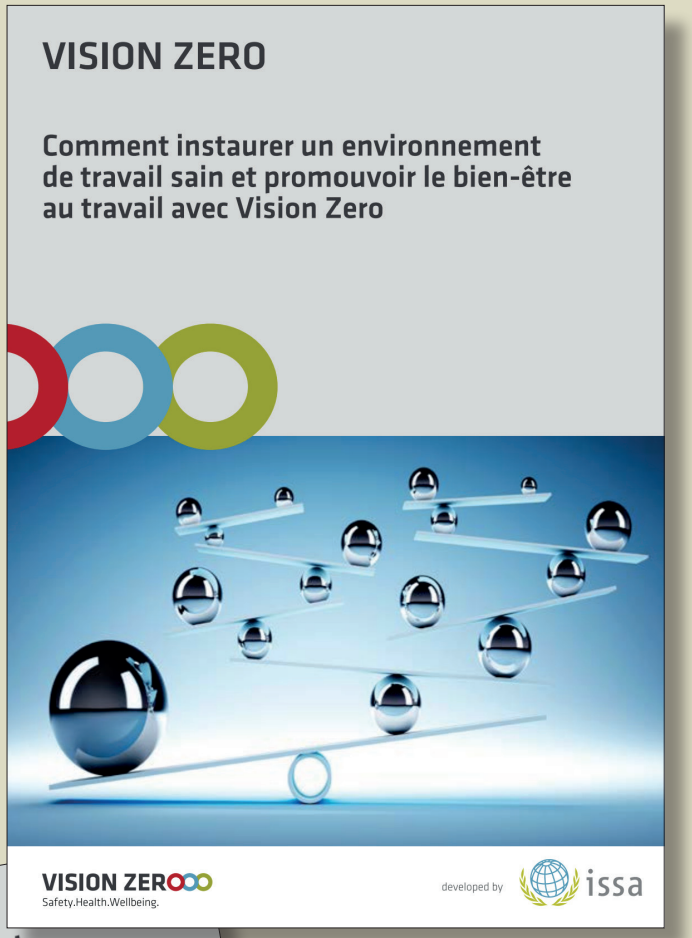
Italy has excellent conditions for further expanding Vision Zero: **strong political commitment**, active **social dialogue**, well-established prevention institutions, a highly developed OSH profession represented by **AIAS**, and a leading occupational accident insurance system through **INAIL**.

Italy also has a strong tradition of **cooperation** between employers, trade unions, professional associations, research institutions and public authorities. This is reinforced by growing political recognition that safe and healthy work supports **competitiveness, sustainability and societal wellbeing**.

The key opportunity now is to develop Vision Zero as a **national prevention strategy**, bringing together political, economic and social actors around a **shared commitment** to safety, health and wellbeing.
Such a strategy could build on Italy's strong institutions, social dialogue and prevention expertise while moving beyond a predominantly compliance-based approach. Vision Zero can provide a **common framework** connecting government, employers, trade unions, prevention institutions, professional associations and the research community.
By **integrating prevention** with leadership, sustainability, innovation and the transformation of work, Italy could position Vision Zero as a **strategic national ambition** rather than simply an occupational safety initiative.




VISION ZERO
Las 7 Reglas de Oro
para pequeñas empresas
VISION ZERO
Safety.Health.Wellbeing.
developed by
issa


VISION ZERO
Comment instaurer un environnement
de travail sain et promouvoir le bien-être
au travail avec Vision Zero
VISION ZERO
Safety.Health.Wellbeing.
developed by
issa


7 Golden Rules –
for zero accidents and healthy work
A guide for employers and managers
developed by
issa
VISION ZERO
Safety.Health.Wellbeing.