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Occupational health and safety
in times of change

1980s vs. 2025: How up to date is European occupational safety?

When the European Framework Directive on occupational safety¹ was adopted in 1989, the world of work was different. Industrial jobs dominated, computers were rarely found on desks, and psychological stress was at best a marginal issue. Occupational safety at that time was mainly intended to reduce physical risks. In the sense of securing machinery, providing protective clothing, and reducing accident numbers. The introduction of the Framework Directive and the individual directives based on it was nevertheless a milestone, because they established principles such as the right to safe and healthy working conditions throughout Europe.

More than 35 years later, the reality of the labour market has fundamentally changed. Digital technologies, artificial intelligence (AI), hybrid and new work models, as well as the blurring of working time and place, create new demands on workplace safety and health protection. Hazards today are more complex. They are often invisible and escape classic control mechanisms.

At the same time, many of the principles from that period remain valid. The obligation to carry out risk assessments,

¹ Council Directive of 12 June 1989 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work (89/391/EEC). Consolidated version. EUR-Lex – 01989L0391-20081211 – EN – EUR-Lex (last visited on 24.11.2025).





Slavina Spasova, Director of the
European Social Observatory

prevention, and worker participation still forms the backbone of the protection system. But are these instruments sufficient to effectively protect the European world of work today and in the future?

It is becoming increasingly clear that the issue is not only new laws but also a new interpretation of existing rules. Those who take psychological stress seriously must record it just as systematically as noise emissions or hazardous substances. Those who use digital tools in occupational safety must involve employees and ensure data protection. Those who discuss the occupational safety of the future should also consider the working realities of platform workers, caregiving family members, older employees, or workers who work across borders.

In today's political climate, this is more important than ever. Occupational safety is a key prerequisite for a strong and resilient European economy. Healthy employees work more sustainably, more innovatively, and more productively. Europe's economic strength depends on maintaining and continuously developing the high occupational safety standards in the European Union (EU).

"In the ongoing revision of EU health and safety pieces of legislation, it is vital that social partners work together through genuine and inclusive social dialogue, building on the EU Strategic Framework to ensure that updated rules respond to the realities of today's labour market. A future-proof EU acquis must anticipate the challenges of digitalisation, climate-related risks, demographic change and cross-border mobility, while strengthening prevention, inspection and enforcement mechanisms. This means extending protection beyond traditional employment relationships so that non-standard workers such as platform, domestic, seasonal ones as well as migrants are fully covered. Only by co-designing legislation with employers' and workers' organisations can we create legislation that leaves no one behind in the transition towards a safer, fairer and more sustainable world of work."

Older and caregiving employees: the new culture of longer working lives

Europe is ageing, and so is its workforce. In times of demographic change, the concept of so-called "silver work" is becoming increasingly important. More and more people work beyond the classic retirement age or return to working life after a period of retirement.

EU-OSHA

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) is a European Union body based in Bilbao, Spain. It was established in 1994 with the aim of promoting safe, healthy and productive workplaces in Europe. The Agency collects, analyses and disseminates information on occupational safety issues, develops prevention campaigns and supports policy-makers, employers and employees. Through research, networking and education, it contributes to improving working conditions in the EU.

Under the guiding concept of the silver transformation, a paradigm shift has been emerging, not only since the adoption of the Council conclusions on supporting older people in realising their potential in the labour market and in society² in June 2025. Instead of primarily raising the statutory retirement age, some member states increasingly rely on voluntary incentives for longer employment, for example through flexible transitions into retirement, continuing professional development, and targeted investments in occupational safety and health. Such measures are intended to enable older employees to maintain their physical and mental health, develop their skills, and participate in working life with motivation.

Older workers contribute valuable experience, stability, and knowledge to the world of work. Nevertheless, age-related physical and cognitive changes must be taken into account. Ergonomic workplaces, age-appropriate assistance systems, and flexible working time models are not conveniences for silver workers, but essential prerequisites for healthy and sustainable long-term work. Companies that provide such adjustments not only strengthen the health of their workforce but also retain experienced professionals for longer. An important resource in view of the shortage of skilled workers.

Alongside the extension of working life, the balance between work and caregiving is increasingly moving into the focus of occupational safety. Many workers in Europe take on caregiving tasks in addition to their jobs, whether for relatives or other close persons. This double burden is physically, mentally, and organisationally demanding.

A study from North Rhine-Westphalia shows the pressure on employees who provide care, with effects not only on the individuals themselves but also on the company.³

The European Commission has sent clear signals with its care strategy⁴. It calls for better support measures for caregiving relatives, for example through publicly funded family care leave models, training, psychosocial services, and the expansion of professional care infrastructure. The basis for this also includes the directive on improving the work-life balance⁵, which had to be transposed into national law by 2022, in particular with regard to non-transferable care and parental leave as well as protection against discrimination.

The growing number of silver workers and caregiving relatives presents occupational safety with new challenges, while also creating opportunities for a future-proof protection system. Prevention is at the centre of this. Risk assessments must systematically take age-related limitations into account. A broader view of prevention is needed, one that integrates individual life situations and biographies. Flexible working hours and psychosocial support services

² Council Conclusions on supporting older people in reaching their full potential in the labour market and in society, 19 June 2025. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9321-2025-INI/en/pdf> (last visited on 24.11.2025).

³ M. Evans-Borchers, J. Lenzen, S. Völz und L.M. Wirth, Wie gestalten Unternehmen in NRW Vereinbarkeitsstrukturen von Beruf und Pflege? 26. June 2024. https://berufundpflege-nrw.de/uploads/2024/12/Landesprogramm_Unternehmensbefragung-1.pdf (last visited on 24.11.2025).

⁴ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European care strategy, COM (2022) 440 final of 07.09.2022. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52022DC0440> (last visited on 24.11.2025).

⁵ Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, OJ L 2019 188/79. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2019/1158/oj?eliuri=eli%3A2019%3A1158%3Aoj&locale=en> (last visited on 24.11.2025).

are not merely HR topics, but integral components of modern occupational safety.

Finally, protecting older and caregiving employees is also a key factor for the resilience of the entire labour market. If their potential can be fostered and their burdens reduced, a more robust and more solidarity-based working environment emerges, one that approaches demographic change not as a problem but as a challenge to be tackled proactively.

Mental health as a generational question

For Generation Z, meaning those born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s, mental health is no longer a taboo, but a topic of central importance. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z speaks openly about stress, anxiety, and exhaustion. At the same time, the number of sick leave cases due to mental illness has been rising for years, especially among young employees.⁶

The reasons for this are diverse. An uncertain world of work, constant availability, high expectations for performance and self-optimisation, but also loneliness and isolation, especially in digital work models, put more pressure on Gen Z than seemed to be the case for earlier generations. While working from home offers more flexibility for all employees, it also takes away the social anchor that work used to represent, particularly for many young people. There is also the fact that entering the labour market today often happens in fixed-term or project-based

employment without long-term security or perspective.

The Framework Directive on occupational safety obliges employers to avoid hazards to the safety and health of employees and to assess and combat risks. However, the directive remains unspecific with regard to psychological stress. There are no mandatory requirements on how to conduct or document psychological risk assessments. This leads to inconsistent implementation across member states. Some countries, including Germany, have detailed national rules that require a psychological risk assessment, while others, such as Romania and Spain, hardly do.⁷ For this reason, Members of the European Parliament and the European Trade Union Confederation have long called for a European directive on psychosocial risks. Such a directive is intended to give priority to combating work-related stress and mental health problems resulting from psychosocial risks.

Unlike noise or employee exposure to hazardous substances, psychological stress at the workplace cannot easily be measured with instruments. Occupational safety must therefore become more dialogue-oriented throughout Europe and actively involve employees in assessing their work situation. It is no longer only about preventing accidents, but also about shaping workplaces jointly so that workers remain physically and mentally healthy. In addition to workplace health management and raising awareness among managers, strong prevention and early detection are needed.

Mental Health

The European Commission is increasingly committed to promoting mental health in Europe. It pursues a holistic approach that encompasses prevention, early support and destigmatisation of mental illness. In 2023, the Commission presented a comprehensive mental health initiative aimed at raising awareness, improving care and supporting vulnerable groups. The goal is to treat mental health as equal to physical health.

⁶ DAK Health Report 2025: Generation Z in the world of work. https://www.dak.de/dak/unternehmen/reporte-forschung/gesundheitsreport-2025_142376 (last visited on 24.11.2025). The report is only available in German.

⁷ G. Kampl, H. Kastner, Protection of workers from mental stress in the EU. A comprehensive overview study of legal frameworks and instruments used. Institute for the Evaluation of Mental Stress in the Workplace GmbH. 2017. https://www.iepb.at/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Psychischer_Arbeitnehmerschutz_in_der_EU_2017.pdf (last visited on 24.11.2025). The report is only available in German.



Mario Nava, Director-General of the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission

“In the EU, we have strong rules that protect people against health and safety risks at work. Because our lives and our work environments are constantly changing, we continuously update these laws. Working remotely, for instance, brings great benefits and great challenges – and mental health at work is a growing concern. This is why the Commission is considering explicitly addressing psychosocial risks at work.”

The new working reality of younger generations requires a new understanding of work. Occupational safety is the central hub that determines how this understanding can find its place within today's structures. Only through the continuous development of good working conditions for today's and future generations can the foundation be created for a resilient working population in Europe.

Allow me to introduce my colleague AI

Digital technologies are fundamentally changing everyday working life, whether through automated dispatching in logistics, algorithmically controlled staff scheduling in care facilities, or AI-based performance monitoring in customer service. Increasingly, systems are taking over tasks that were previously the exclusive responsibility of human management. These developments offer great potential, but also new risks for safety, health, and equal opportunities in the world of work.

Algorithmic management, meaning the use of digital systems to steer, monitor, or evaluate work processes, is already used today in more than one quarter of companies in the EU, with a continued upward trend.⁸ Used correctly, this technology can facilitate routine tasks, reduce physical strain, and make work processes more efficient. For example, digital assistance systems support warehouse workers in moving heavy loads in a way that protects their backs, or they enable delivery services to plan routes in an optimised way to save time and resources.

At the same time, new risk situations are emerging. Some of the best known include job losses due to automation,

growing technological dependence, surveillance, stress caused by constant availability, and a sense of alienation from human interaction. How the use of algorithmic management systems in the workplace should function is currently being discussed by Member of the European Parliament Andrzej Buła (European People's Party, Poland) in his own-initiative report.⁹ His goal is to establish clear standards for transparency, participation, and health protection across all sectors. Whether he will succeed in persuading the European Commission to extend existing rules for platform workers to other areas of employment remains to be seen.

⁸ European Commission: Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Visionary Analytics, Paliokaitė, A., Christenko, A., Aloisi, A. et al., Study exploring the context, challenges, opportunities, and trends in algorithmic management in the workplace – Final report, Publications Office of the European Union, 2025. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/5629841> (last visited on 24.11.2025).

⁹ A. Buła. Draft report with recommendations to the Commission on digitalisation, artificial intelligence and algorithmic management in the workplace – shaping the future of work (2025/2080(INL)). 26.06.2025. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/EMPL-PR-774283_EN.pdf (last visited on 24.11.2025).

But the AI-driven transformation does not only affect the private sector. Social insurance systems are also undergoing a profound transformation. Making administrative processes more efficient, improving communication with insured persons, and relieving employees of routine tasks are central topics that should be addressed with the help of AI. There are already numerous practical examples of AI use in European social insurance systems.¹⁰ For instance, the German Social Accident Insurance Institution for the building trade (BG BAU) uses AI-supported prediction models to identify companies with increased need for support at an early stage and thus direct the deployment of supervisory and inspection staff in a targeted manner.

This creates a double dynamic. Social insurance is both an actor and a party affected by digital transformation. It must not only observe and help shape the consequences of algorithmic management and AI use in companies, but also make its own structures fit for the future. This requires practical legal frameworks, clear standards for data protection and cybersecurity, and systematic development of expertise within the organisations.

The path out of Europe's care crisis

Whether in skilled trades, education, healthcare, or many other sectors, the shortage of workers is becoming increasingly visible. Nowhere, however, is the crisis more evident than in the healthcare sector, where the shortage has direct consequences for the security of care provision. During the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare workers were thrust into the public eye

through balcony applause and political recognition. Gradually, awareness of the work carried out every day by an ever-shrinking number of healthcare professionals faded. Yet the structural challenges have remained. The shortage of skilled workers in health and care professions threatens the security of care provision in Europe.

According to current OECD figures, the EU is short more than 1.2 million healthcare professionals, and the trend is rising. One third of physicians and one quarter of nurses are older than 55 and will soon reach retirement age. At the same time, demand is increasing due to ageing populations, rising care intensity, and more complex treatment requirements. The European single market further exacerbates the situation, since many professionals from eastern and southern member states migrate westward. In addition, informal care is becoming increasingly important. Caregiving family members provide a significant share of care, often with substantial personal effort. The shortage of skilled workers results in more unpaid care work, with far-reaching consequences for employment, gender equality, and the quality of care. They need stronger support and relief measures.

Recognition of healthcare professions must go beyond symbolic gestures. This is emphasised not only by an OECD discussion paper.¹¹ The European Commission is also attempting to address the problem. Through the European Care Strategy, programmes like EU4Health, and targeted mobility support, it is trying to counteract the shortage. Interest groups, however, consider this commitment insufficient.

Algorithmic management

Refers to the use of digital systems and algorithms to monitor, control and evaluate employees. Decisions on work allocation, performance monitoring or remuneration are made automatically on the basis of data analysis. This form of management is particularly common in platform work and digitalised working environments and can increase efficiency, but raises questions about data protection, transparency and fair treatment of employees.

10 OECD Artificial Intelligence Papers. AI and the future of social protection in OECD countries. June 2025. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/06/ai-and-the-future-of-social-protection-in-oecd-countries_038f49ed/7b245f7e-en.pdf (last visited on 24.11.2025)

11 OECD. Beyond Applause? Improving Working Conditions in Long-Term Care. 27 June 2023. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2023/06/beyond-applause-improving-working-conditions-in-long-term-care_4523ea50/27d33ab3-en.pdf (last visited on 24.11.2025).



William Cockburn, Executive Director,
European Agency for Safety and Health
at Work (EU-OSHA)

“The reductions achieved in recent decades in work-related injuries and illnesses are giving way to trends that are flat-lining or even increasing in the case of musculoskeletal disorders and mental health problems. Europe’s rapidly ageing population and the increasing effects of climate change pose urgent challenges for the protection of workers’ health and safety. At the same time, greater automation and the broad uptake of AI presents both an opportunity to prevent occupational risks as well as new risks that need to be managed.”

They are calling for a coordinated European “Health Workforce Strategy” that links training, working conditions, digital support, and cross-border workforce planning. The goal should be to pool synergies and learn from one another. The European Parliament shares this view and is currently working on an own-initiative report on the shortage of skilled workers in the healthcare sector.¹²

A look beyond national borders shows that countries like Slovenia and Finland have already taken measures to get their national care crises under control. A central element of their strategy is the targeted use of EU recovery funds for digitalisation in healthcare. At the

same time, recognition of professional qualifications from abroad remains a major challenge. Within the EU, there are significant shifts of healthcare professionals between member states, but for professionals from non-EU countries, bureaucratic hurdles persist. Programmes like the EU Talent Pool aim to help solve this and make access easier.

Projects focused on retaining nursing and healthcare staff are also gaining importance. Attractive workplaces should not be the exception, but the basic condition for quality of care. Those who create good working conditions ensure longer retention, lower absenteeism, and stronger professional identification, and in doing so contribute to protecting health. A European healthcare system fit for the future needs not only more staff, but better conditions for everyone who is already working in it.

From niche to interface: occupational safety as a cross-cutting issue

At the European level, not only is a lot happening politically, but institutional responsibilities are also shifting noticeably. For a long time, safety and health at work were anchored almost exclusively within the responsibility of the Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL). In the meantime, however, there is a clear expansion into other policy areas. Increasingly, topics relevant to occupational safety, and therefore also to statutory accident insurance, are today overseen by other Directorates General.

Whether machinery regulation, sustainability reporting, or the circular economy, regulations concerning occupational and health protection are now being adopted in many policy fields. This development reflects the growing importance of cross-cutting

12 L.Fourlas, R.Razza. Draft report on an EU health workforce crisis plan: sustainability of healthcare systems and employment and working conditions in the healthcare sector (2025/2062(INI)). 01.10.2025. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CJ54-PR-776849_EN.pdf (last visited on 24.11.2025).

issues. Protecting employees can no longer be viewed in isolation. It is increasingly intertwined with economic, environmental, and competition policy. This becomes especially clear in areas where technical standards, market rules, or sustainability requirements directly shape working reality.

There are also cross-sector EU initiatives that go beyond classic occupational safety but still have a significant impact. These include, for example, the General Data Protection Regulation or European public procurement law. The shift becomes even more evident in the example of European chemicals policy. The planned revision of the REACH Regulation, which governs the registration, authorisation, restriction, and evaluation of chemical substances, has direct implications for preventing workplace hazards. Responsibility for this, however, does not lie with DG EMPL, but with the Directorates General DG ENV (Environment) and DG GROW (Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs).

The influence of European decisions on the work of social insurance institutions is steadily increasing. In practice, this means not only closer interlinking of political responsibilities, but also the need to identify European developments early on, to accompany them actively, and to engage in dialogue with the European Parliament, the European Commission, and other stakeholders, always with the aim of systematically bringing in the perspective of social insurance.

The institutional shift makes one thing clear: occupational safety is no longer just a social policy concern, but also an economic and environmental cross-cutting issue. For German social insurance, this creates new opportunities for shaping policy. At the same time, however, this development requires

strategic positioning at the interfaces of European policymaking, as well as continuous monitoring and assessment of legislative initiatives across departmental boundaries.

Ready for the future?

The world of work is undergoing profound change. Digitalisation, demographic change, and increasing deregulation are shaping the conditions under which work is carried out, and they raise new questions for occupational safety and health.

The digital transformation has made cross-border work easier. Working from home is no longer just an emergency solution, but has become a structural work model in many sectors. Employees can work independently of location, often across national borders. This new flexibility not only changes the relationship between work and private life, but also presents companies with new challenges. Tax and social security issues must be clarified when employees work from abroad. The national responsibilities of social security systems increasingly collide with the reality of digitally mobile forms of work.

At the same time, the social fabric within companies is changing. Where physical proximity is missing, the loss of collegial bonds, team cohesion, and informal support becomes a risk. This creates new challenges, especially for psychological occupational safety. Yet digitalisation, AI, and mobile work also offer great potential. They enable more efficient processes, relief in physically demanding tasks, and improved work-life balance. These opportunities, however, must be actively shaped. Because change is unstoppable. All the more important, then, that occupational safety and health keep pace with technological development.

Quality Jobs Roadmap

It signals the European Commission's strong commitment to improving the quality of work and creating sustainable jobs in the EU. The Roadmap focuses on areas where European action is particularly effective. These include promoting and securing high-quality employment, greater fairness and modernisation in the world of work, support for ecological, digital and demographic change, strengthening social dialogue, and effective access to rights and sufficient investment.

Parallel to the digital transformation, the European Commission is increasingly focusing on boosting competitiveness through deregulation. A central tool in this regard is the so-called omnibus proposals, which bundle various legislative amendments to streamline administration and make the single market more efficient. Optimisation proposals concern areas such as sustainability, agriculture, defence, and increasingly topics of digital and chemical regulation.

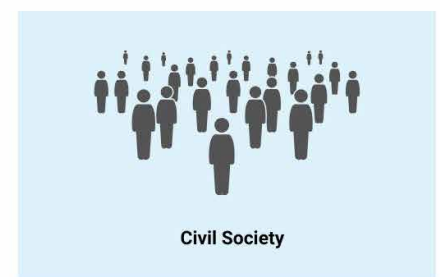
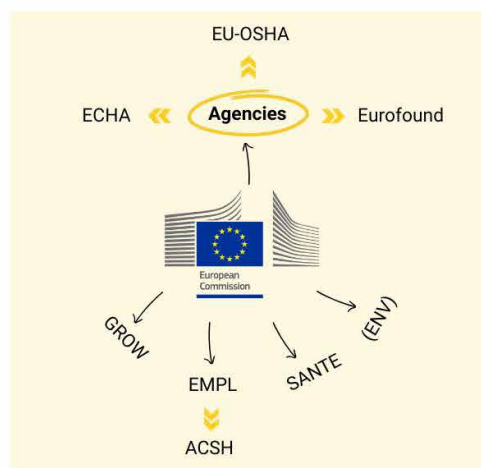
But not every rule is a burden. In the pursuit of efficiency, occupational safety requirements must not be viewed as mere bureaucratic obstacles. EU

directives on safety and health at work have provided reliable standards across Europe for all sectors and forms of work for more than 30 years. They not only protect employees, but also form a foundation for productivity, innovative capacity, and healthy labour markets.

Strong occupational safety systems provide a competitive advantage, particularly in times of accelerated transformation. Healthy working conditions reduce absenteeism, lower turnover, strengthen motivation, and at the same time relieve social security systems. Investments in good, safe work pay off for the economy as a whole.

Deregulation must therefore not mean lowering protection standards. Small and medium-sized enterprises in particular benefit from clear, comprehensible, and practical rules, not from uncertainty or gaps. Increasingly, voices in the European Parliament are pointing out that the focus on reducing bureaucracy must not come at the expense of workers' rights. The occupational safety and health system of the future must therefore deliver both: provide reliability and remain open to change. Only then is Europe truly ready for the future.

Who is influencing OSH at EU level



Outlook

At the end of the year, Executive Vice President Roxana Mînzatu presented the Quality Jobs Roadmap.¹³ This key initiative of her mandate is intended to secure good working conditions across Europe, through fair wages, stable and secure employment relationships, effective occupational safety and health protection, comprehensive training and worker participation, as well as better reconciliation of work and private life.

The Roadmap is also meant to serve as a response to the challenges of demographic change and the twin transition, meaning digitalisation and decarbonisation. How the impetus for regulating AI and algorithmic management in the workplace will take shape is still unclear. What is clear, however, is that dealing with AI as a colleague will shape the European world of work just as strongly in the coming years as the debates on reducing bureaucracy. Both topics, the use of new technologies and the reduction of unnecessary regulations from Brussels, will play a decisive role in determining whether Europe's workplaces truly remain future-proof and attractive.

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¹³ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions. Quality Jobs Roadmap. COM(2025) 944 final of 04.12.2025. https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/82975aa7-bdd6-4a64-b3e3-82433901f8f7_en?filename=Quality-Jobs-Roadmap_Communication_2025.pdf (last visited on 04.12.2025).