



EUROSHNET

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The founding of EUROSHNET, the European network for OSH experts, dates back to the 1st European conference on standardization, testing and certification, which was held in Dresden in October 2001. The conference identified a need for the OSH community in Europe to coordinate and agree policy better in order to respond more effectively to the challenges arising from the globalization of markets and the associated internationalization of standards.

An Internet-based, English-language communications platform has since been developed with the aid of which experts from European OSH institutions can reach agreement and develop jointly supported positions, quickly and without bureaucracy. For this purpose, a private area was set up within the site which is accessible only to participants of the network by means of a personal password - an important requirement for the open exchange of views between the OSH experts, and essential for agreement and coordination at European level. Participation in the network and therefore access to the password-protected area is reserved for representatives of European OSH institutions who are active in the areas of standardization, testing, certification, and/or related research.

The password-protected area contains a database of experts which forms the basis for a user-friendly combined search and mail function. The database enables experts to be identified according to specified criteria, e.g. nationality or membership of certain standards committees, and contact to be made with them. Groups of experts can be composed according to certain criteria and saved as dedicated e-mail distribution lists. Once saved, the distribution lists can be used to send e-mails to defined groups the individual participants of which need not be known.

At the heart of the private area within EUROSHNET are subject fora in which topical subjects are discussed online. The fora are set up as and when required, and remain available as long as is considered necessary by the experts. At present, nine discussion fora and sub-fora exist in which all registered experts may express their opinions online. Registered forum participants are notified by e-mail of each new post. A link within the notifying e-mail permits direct access to the post concerned. Documents of any type or size can be attached to posts in forum discussions. These documents can be viewed directly or downloaded and saved on users' PCs.

In the documents area, searches can be made through all documents uploaded with forum posts or directly to the system. These documents can also be viewed directly or downloaded and saved on users' PCs.

Bboard" is provided which can be used in a similar way to a discussion forum in order to raise and discuss questions for which a forum has not yet been created. The particular feature of this notice board is that all EUROSHNET participants are notified by e-mail whenever a new post is made to it. The notifying function of the notice board cannot be disabled, in contrast to the subject fora. This ensures that all participants are informed of new subjects and are able to take part in the discussion themselves or to make other experts aware of it.

The activity of the network is supported by a number of groups:

The Steering Committee, comprising members of OSH institutions from six countries (INRS and Eurogip, France; KAN and BG-PRÜFZERT, Germany; FIOH, Finland; HSL, Great Britain; INSHT, Spain; and CIOP, Poland), takes policy decisions concerning strategies and activities and the admission of institutions to the private area. Further tasks of the Steering Committee include adopting important statements on certain OSH subjects, which have been formulated by the experts, as EUROSHNET policy, and making these statements public.

The EUROSHNET Working Group meets several times each year in order to promote development of the network, organize events, and maintain contact to the institutions and experts involved. This group is made up of staff from the institutions represented on the Steering Committee.

A coordinator is responsible for each discussion forum in the network. The coordinator is generally supported by a second coordinator. The coordinators' function is to summarize the forum discussion at intervals, and to intervene and guide discussion when necessary. The coordinators meet two to three times each year in the Coordinators' Group to exchange their views and pool experience. At these meetings, new subjects are agreed which are to be addressed and/or which concern several disciplines.

Why is yet another network deemed necessary?

Whilst OSH institutions have been participating in European standards development activity increasingly since the 1980s, greater involvement in standardization has now been observed for some time at the international level: the internationalization of standardization has been one consequence of the progressive globalization of the economy. At international level, however, there is no counterpart to the European approach of supporting the essential requirements of binding directives by means of harmonized European standards. It is nevertheless important that the level of protection required by European Single Market directives be upheld. Only then can international standards be adopted unchanged in the European body of standards, and barriers to trade avoided. Involvement in standards committees which operate at international level is however considerably more costly than activity on national or European committees. A need exists for the stakeholders to coordinate their positions. Industry, trade unions and consumers have been grouping at European level for some time in order to present their interests to the standards development process. Co-ordination and distribution of the work at European level are also essential for the OSH institutions of individual Member States, since in isolation, they have only limited means of presenting their concerns to the international standardization process.

When the EUROSHNET communications platform was launched at the end of 2003, 74 experts from six countries were registered, and the discussion fora had a total of six posts. As of August 2005, the number of OSH experts has risen to over 240, from 66 OSH institutions and 15 European countries. The number of posts in the nine discussion fora now amounts to around 200. In purely statistical terms, then, a notable development: within a year and a half, the number of experts has more than tripled and the number of posts increased by an order of magnitude.

Subjects of relevance to occupational health and safety and which concern standardization and essential issues relating to testing and certification, particularly in the areas of machinery, personal protective equipment, electrical safety and emissions, are discussed

in eight fora and one sub-forum. The forum posts were initially seen to be purely informative in nature. Information was posted for instance from the European Commission, Council Resolutions concerning standardization and documents concerning measurement uncertainty in tests. More general questions were also posed, for example concerning research projects conducted by European OSH institutions. Increasingly, experts are seen to be commenting on very specific issues, for example concerning the safety requirements for tower cranes, fixed ladders, or the search for experts on fork-lift trucks. Notification at an early stage that a Member State is planning to raise a formal objection to a standard resulted in rapid formation of opinion and agreement with the OSH experts of other Member States, with the result that the formal objection was supported by the OSH groups of other Member States and was consequently successful.

To summarize: EUROSHNET represents a joining of forces by European OSH experts in order for them to reach common positions on issues of relevance to occupational health and safety in standardization, testing and certification. The Internet-based communications system, which has been tailored to the needs of the user group, enables contact to be made with experts in other institutions throughout Europe in a fraction of a second, and common positions to be developed. The OSH community thereby has at its disposal an instrument the value of which cannot be overestimated, particularly against the backdrop of globalization and the associated internationalization of standards. Obviously, the network is still in its infancy. The experience already gained also shows that a critical mass of participants is necessary in order for discussions actually to take place across the broad area covered by EUROSHNET. Further participants in EUROSHNET must be found in particular in the countries which have joined more recently. The groups already mentioned, who are furthering development of the network, are well aware of this fact and are making every effort possible to publicize the network throughout Europe and to place it on a wider footing in terms of the experts involved. This initiative, which is not abating, is borne of the firm conviction that EUROSHNET is of inestimable value to occupational health and safety, and that its use will enable considerable savings in time and cost to be made.