

Plenary 3

Abstract citation ID: ckaf165.071

PL003. Workplace Safety and Workforce Preparedness in a Changing Europe

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Despite significant progress, occupational injuries and work-related illnesses remain a pressing public health and policy challenge globally. In the European Union (EU), in 2022, 3,286 workplace fatalities and nearly 3 million non-fatal injuries were recorded, demonstrating the magnitude of this issue for the region. High-risk sectors, such as construction, agriculture, and transport, bear a disproportionate burden, while heat stress and hazardous exposures are rising, with workers in Europe and Central Asia reporting a 17% increase in heat-related injury rates. The economic cost is equally profound, i.e., work-related accidents and illnesses account for an estimated 3.3% of the EU GDP annually.

Existing and emerging risks are reshaping the occupational landscape. Climate-related hazards, precarious employment arrangements, and psychosocial stressors linked to digitalization and shift work are generating complex health challenges in terms of prevention and response, as well as managerial and organizational challenges. Mental health is now progressively more formally recognized as a core dimension of occupational safety, with burnout, depression, and anxiety impacting a growing share of the workforce. In addition to the challenges of protecting those working in workplaces that may not be considered to be healthy, safe, or, with low quality of working-life conditions; the added importance of addressing

psychological safety compounds these issues. This adversely impacts individuals, but also places public health at risk.

Furthermore, given preventive and rehabilitative services largely remain fragmented, the EU's collective resilience is compromised. Rehabilitation and work reintegration strategies are inconsistently applied across the EU, leading to long-term exclusion, economic hardship, and increased health inequalities, where injury-related disabilities grow in number, where effective and timely rehabilitation would have mitigated this. Chronic, comorbid, injury-related disability predisposes individuals to substance use and mental health disorders. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed systemic vulnerabilities, from workforce shortages to supply chain fragility, prompting the European Court of Auditors (CoA, 2024) to conclude that the EU is still "not fully prepared" for future crises, and look at modalities such as rehabilitation and workplace (re-)design in relation to increased resilience and preparedness.

This workshop directly supports the EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work (2021–2027) and the Global Plan of Action on Workers' Health of the World Health Organization (WHO), both of which call for stronger prevention, integrated and timely surveillance, mental health promotion, and resilient workforces working in workplaces that meet or exceed quality of working-life standards. The session will address preparedness and work design not only as emergency planning but as future proofing. We strive to build the foundation of a healthy, trained, and adaptable workforce capable of responding to crises in a proactive and planned manner, to mitigate system collapse.

This panel will bring together public health epidemiologists/data scientists, legal specialists, academics, researchers, and EU bodies' representatives to exchange evidence, share practical insights, and co-develop strategies for strengthening occupational safety, mental health, and workforce preparedness across Europe.

The session will draw on the latest findings from the European Working Conditions Survey 2024, offering robust, pan-European insights into job quality, health and safety at work, and emerging risks. These results will frame debate systemic challenges, such as workforce shortages, the rise of precarious employment,

psychosocial risks, and the increasing complexity of work, while also identifying opportunities to increase resilience and enhance protection for workers across sectors.

The discussion will further address surveillance gaps and the urgent need for integrated European data systems capable of capturing injuries, mental health exposures and outcomes, and emerging risks. Legal and regulatory frameworks will also be explored to establish the extent to which workforce resilience can be reinforced through cross-sectoral approaches that connect key elements, such as workplace design, health, environment, and urban planning policies. Complementing this, frontline perspectives will focus on managing burnout, depression, and trauma, and the training needs required for both prevention and recovery-oriented care in diverse occupational and workplace settings.

By integrating insights from surveillance, law, clinical practice, sociotechnical practice, and policy innovation, this panel will map actionable pathways towards a future-ready workforce and supportive workplaces. Particular emphasis will be placed on aligning prevention, rehabilitation, and reintegration strategies with EU and WHO priorities, thus, reducing long-term disability, promoting social and economic inclusion, and strengthening a culture of safety across Europe's labor market.

Through moderated discussion and practical case studies, the panel will contribute towards establishing shared understanding among stakeholders, i.e., European institutions, policymakers, civil society and academia on how to advance evidence-informed policies that enhance workforce resilience and protection for all workers.