

A smaller EU policy perspective

SMEs are at the core of the EU's entrepreneurship policy revamp. *Michelle Wyart-Remy*, IMA-Europe General-Secretary, describes the problems industrial minerals SMEs may encounter when facing the EU health and safety programme.

IN A RECENT recommendation¹, the European Commission (EC) defined small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) both in terms of staff head count and financial ceilings. According to this definition, SMEs have less than 250 employees and their annual turnover does not exceed €50m. More so, the June 2005 "CSR: Competitive, Small, Responsible" conference² looked at the promotion of corporate social responsibility (CSR) amongst SMEs.

CSR is a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns into their business operations on a voluntary basis, and most SMEs do not feel concerned by it. In its CSR programme, the EC is, therefore, developing an SME good practice database, which includes health and safety (H&S) examples³.

The European Union (EU) counts approximately 20m. SMEs, which offer employment to 75m. people. The H&S performances of SMEs are severely evaluated at Community level. In a recent document published by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work⁴, it was reported that due to a lack of financial and organisational resources, and limited occupational H&S experience and capacity, these SMEs record a disproportionate 82% of all occupational injuries and approximately 90% of fatal accidents. The Community strategy calls for specific measures in terms of information, awareness and risk prevention programmes.

The May 2005 ISSA Committee Mines conference held in Prague looked at the problems met by SMEs in implementing H&S programmes. IMA-Europe

presented how SMEs of the industrial minerals sector face H&S policies.

Industrial minerals industry structure

In the last 20 years, the industrial minerals industry has experienced significant consolidation. As a consequence, it includes relatively fewer SMEs than the rest of the European extractive industry: around 65% in comparison to a generally reported rate of 95%.

In addition, the European industry counts within its ranks a dozen global leaders who provide thousands of direct jobs in the region. However, even subsidiaries of these large groups may still behave as independent SMEs. This may be explained by relatively slow, or no, implementation of group policy. For example, the central management may consider this as superfluous preferring to rely on local experiences, while recently acquired subsidiaries are reluctant to follow new rules.

With respect to the implementation of H&S policies being at the centre of our concern, one may add to this picture issues such as cultural and language barriers and problems in identifying and recruiting appropriate corporate managers.

Recognising the need to respond better to the needs of SMEs, in 2004 IMA-Europe questioned some 50 SMEs. One of the conclusions drawn from this survey was that industrial minerals SMEs have a high level of awareness of the H&S programmes developed by their EU representation. How far these programmes are implemented, however, is another matter.

IMA-Europe H&S policies

Let us briefly review some of the IMA-Europe policies related to H&S, ie. the IMA Sustainable Development (SD) Charter and SD Indicators (SDIs) collection and the IMA Dust Monitoring Protocol.

The IMA Sustainable Development Charter was published in 2004 as an ambitious code⁵. Voluntary and self-regulatory, it not only encompasses SD but also corporate social responsibility, and ethics. Implementation of the charter is through a quantifiable commitment measured by the EC's annual sustainable development indicators (SDIs) reporting scheme⁶.

This set of twelve SD indicators was designed by a group of stakeholders including member states, NGOs, and industry representatives under the leadership of the EC's Enterprise Directorate General. The indicators seek

Table 1. EC's annual SDI reporting scheme⁷

	2001	2002	2003
% of working time spent on H&S training	0.31	0.30	0.32
Fatalities	4	4	3

to balance the three pillars of SD. Two of these indicators reflect H&S conditions: the percentage of training time dedicated to H&S training and the number of deaths reported yearly. One may estimate that 40-45% of our members participated in these data collection campaigns. Not surprisingly, the participation rate of our SMEs was lower with only around 15% of them reporting data.

Another important H&S programme of the Association relates to a very common health concern in the extractive industry, ie. dust exposure. To address the issue, IMA has developed a dust monitoring strategy allowing dust exposure assessment through the collection of representative and comparable data. The protocol defines strict minimum criteria for data collection and handling: notably the use of personal samplers collecting the respirable dust fraction on a series of defined job functions, and the obligation to collect six samples for each of these to guarantee the statistical relevance of the data.

Today about 6,000 samples have been analysed for their respirable dust and respirable crystalline silica content. The work is in progress and in the long term a job exposure matrix – representative of the industrial minerals sector – should be developed. However, this would only be possible with the participation of all members.

Significant progress has been recorded in the last year with approximately 80% of our talc section involved and 50% of our silica section taking part. As a whole, however, participation remains relatively low with an overall rate estimated at 16% and with only approximately 4% of the SMEs involved.

One may say that SMEs' participation in H&S programmes is hampered by the fact that they are generally driven by productivity aspects, local thinking, and short term vision. In addition, they may be limited in their involvement by the language ability of their staff, and their limited access to information technology and information in general. They may also suffer from poor travel capacities due to the isolated location of their headquarters being attached to production sites. Some may face limited investment capacities, and most generally


do not have in-house H&S manpower.

SMEs' participation may be boosted by their managers' commitment: when a SME manager is convinced it has a direct effect. In the same way, when their small teams are convinced, their enthusiasm guarantees success. Company information flow may be better than in a larger company and, finally, small companies generally show greater expectations and buy quickly into promising programmes.

To help SMEs to successfully implement H&S programmes, or any kind of voluntary initiatives, it is essential to give them H&S protocols, plans, and guides in their own language; to organise training courses locally; and to provide local assistance (through national institutions or associations). When feasible, financial incentives such as the reduction of insurance premiums, social charges and/or taxes could certainly motivate their participation.

Raising awareness

Irrespective of their size, companies willing to remain competitive will have to integrate the principles of sustainable development and corporate social responsibility in the future. Without a doubt, SMEs are essential to EU competitiveness. More so, the goals of the Lisbon strategy, which initially aimed to make the EU "the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world" by 2010, will not be achieved without the contribution of the SMEs.

Institutions and associations should work hand in hand to raise SMEs' awareness of the benefit of voluntary programmes, in particular in the area of H&S. It is also up to the institutions and associations to create the level playing field that will convince SMEs that their investment will pay off in the long run. 

References

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