Irish Safety Organisation (NISO) conference, delegates were asked to really consider their attitude to ageing workers.

Orlaith Carmody of Carmody Coaching and Consultancy spoke during the NISO conference in October on a topic that will affect every single human in the world: ageing. Delivering a passionate and energetic talk, she turned what can be perceived by many in the workforce as a negative into an incredible positive. Challenging the traditional ways of viewing older people, Orlaith's talk focused on the potential in an older workforce.

"Older people bring knowledge, emotional intelligence, experience and balance", to a workforce, she explained. There is also the benefit of corporate memory, the knowledge that a worker builds up over time which often enables companies to continue to operate effectively, by learning from past experiences and making informed decisions for the future.

Unfortunately, Orlaith observed, there can be a negative bias towards older employees. She gave the example of companies who lack age diversity awareness when recruiting for employees. "A friend of mine, 62 years old, who's fit, active and extremely experienced, could not get a seat at an interview table for a host of roles she applied for", recalled Orlaith.

The attitude of the organisation reflects the attitude of the company's management, was a stark message from her talk. She also made the point that companies who "design workplaces for the young, exclude the old, and if they designed for the old, they could include everyone".

What this means, when it comes to technology and digitalisation, is that providing training and upskilling for older people is equally beneficial to younger people. And making changes to workplace ergonomics to suit an older person has also proved to be beneficial to younger people.

So what does it mean for employers? Orlaith challenged all leaders and managers to really consider how they view older people and especially older employees. "There's often a depiction by the media of older people as being needy and dependent", she confirmed. Instead, she encouraged everyone to reflect not on a person's numerical age and instead concentrate on their 'moral age and workability'. This means, she added, that we as a society need to really consider what we can realistically do to keep people in the workplace who want to be there.

Poor work cultures can damage worker mental health

MARGARET KIRBY

A European conference on workplace mental health had three key messages: there is now confirmed evidence that workplace factors can cause depressive disorders; wellbeing apps are helpful, but not the solution; and all workplaces need to be aware of their impact on their workers' mental health.

HSR was invited to join over 100 delegates in Brussels in the impressive Charlemagne Building, directly across from the European Commission, to listen and engage in high level discussions on the European approach to worker mental health on October 13th. The event was hosted by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA), who also officially launched their 'Healthy Workplaces Campaign 2026–2028'.

This campaign follows the completion of the last campaign during 2023–2025, which focused on safe and healthy work in the digital age. This new campaign is now firmly committed to supporting employees across Europe in a risk which is increasing in profile – mental health. Employers, large and small, and in every sector, are encouraged to keep this on the workplace agenda, at a minimum for the next two years of this campaign and ideally beyond.

Depressive conditions

The reason this is essential is partially explained by evidence presented during the event by Professor Reiner Rugulies, Professor of Psychosocial Work Environment and Mental Health, National Research Centre for the Working Environment (NFA), Denmark. There is now clear evidence linking depressive conditions in workers to adverse workplace stress factors, such as time pressure, poor work organisation, weak leadership and workplace bullying and harassment.

This means that leaders and managers need to understand that when work factors are not properly managed, it can make their employees sick – all of which can negatively impact on absenteeism, sickness rates and ultimately the retention of valuable workers. And focusing on fixing the worker is not the solution, said Professor Rugulies. For instance, whilst meditation apps and wellbeing platforms

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may be helpful, it is more powerful and effective to focus on the organisation.

And therein lies the challenge for most organisational leaders. It can be easier to provide health apps, wellness webinars and counselling services than to systemically influence how work is managed, delegated, how leaders lead, how workers treat each other and how much trust there is in an organisation. Yet this is what is needed, according to Professor's Rugulies research, which recommended an integrated approach to workplace mental health, focused on risk prevention, developing worker strengths and responding to any problems or illnesses.

Systematic approach

During this conference, EU-OSHA Executive Director William Cockburn Salazar referred to research on formal approaches to managing workplace mental health factors, in the form of psychosocial risk management. He said it tends to tail off in companies with less than 100 employees. What this means, he said, is that smaller, family-type businesses try to find solutions themselves. He suggests this is not the favoured approach, adding that having a system with procedures which outline what to do and when are important.

Roxana Mînzatu, Executive Vice President of the European Commission, spoke about quality jobs in the upcoming 'Quality Jobs Act', which she emphasised has a clear occupational safety and health connection. Up to 37% of workers experience work overload or fatigue, she called out, and one in three believe that their mental health is being worsened by their job.

Concerns around the completion of risk assessments on workplace mental health hazards, known as psychosocial risk assessments, was also raised. Esther Lynch, General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), said that "it's a quality job deficit if an employer does not have a psychosocial risk assessment completed". Quality jobs were a topic routinely referred to during this conference. In addition, delegates were reminded that having a job can also have positive impacts on mental health, providing a daily structure and social connections for workers.

Li Andersson, Chair of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs in the European Parliament, re-emphasised the connection between quality jobs and mental health. Referring to Eurofound's Working Conditions in Europe latest research, she noted that the issue of work intensity has not been successfully addressed in many sectors, in particular the healthcare and education sector.

Health and social care

And that partially explains why there is a focus on the health and social sector in EU-OSHA's 'Together for Mental Health at Work 2026-2028' campaign across European workplaces. In Ireland, this sector has frequently reported overcrowded hospitals, staff shortages and a high level of stress and risk of burnout from its workers. A report by the State Claims Agency in 2025 also highlighted that work-related violence, harassment and aggression is a common issue impacting healthcare workers. This report confirmed that workers can suffer from both physical and psychological harm due to these risks.

All of this means that addressing the psychological element in worker roles in this sector and others is becoming increasingly urgent. Yet, there are barriers to doing this. One of those barriers relates to the stigma when the words 'mental health' are used, whether verbally or in writing. What this translates to on the ground is workers feeling uncomfortable and or unwilling to speak to their manager or supervisor about their mental health. EU-OSHA's research in this area shows Ireland as having one of the lower rates of workers reporting feeling comfortable on this issue, compared to other European countries.

To help break down this stigma, more conversations are needed, was a comment made by Alan Dillon, Ireland's Minister of State for Employment, Small Business and Retail, in a video recording to delegates. Representing the Irish EU Council Presidency, he welcomed the campaign and said that mental health is a deeply personal and complex issue. And as complex as it may seem, worker engagement on this topic is essential, was another point made during the conference. Yet, according to EU-OSHA research, worker involvement in dealing with psychosocial risks in organisations is as low as 51%, compared to over 80% for general health and safety risk assessments.

Barriers

Other barriers highlighted in this research relate to a lack of expertise or specialist support when risk assessing and managing this risk in organisations (44%), a lack of awareness among staff (43%), and also a lack of awareness amongst management of their responsibilities (32%). This is a particular concern for smaller enterprises, which makes it even more important to get the message out.

Health and safety professionals are key people when it comes to communicating the message in workplaces, and the Health & Safety Review reminded delegates of the

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need to keep the message relevant and practical. Also, when it comes to mental health, the benefit of sharing lived experiences can be powerful, which will also be a feature in the current campaign.

Delegates heard the campaign has five priority areas identified over the next two years. The first area is psychosocial risk assessment and management (February to May 2027), the second is harassment, sexual harassment and violence (June to September 2027), the third is physical risks and mental health (October 2027 to January 2028), the fourth is psychosocial risks in the health and social care sector (February to May 2028) and the final area is supporting mental health at work (June to September 2028).

Reminding conference delegates on the campaign goal, conference speakers emphasised the need to continue to raise awareness of a positive working environment on mental health and wellbeing, and the importance of assessing, preventing and managing psychosocial risks.

Key facts on mental health in the workplace:

1. Evidence now confirms a link between an unhealthy workplace culture and an increased risk of depressive disorders in workers.
2. More than 4 in 10 workers across the EU (44%) report they are exposed to severe time pressure or overload of work (OSH Pulse Survey 2025).
3. Having a job can promote positive mental health, for instance having a routine and structure, only if this is mismanaged it can lead to poor workplace mental health conditions.
4. Only 51% of organisations report involving workers in dealing with psychosocial risks, compared to 80.1% for general risk assessment.

More information: *https://tinyurl.com/3856jxar*

New approach to workplace road safety by state agencies

MARGARET KIRBY

The Heath and Safety Authority (HSA) and Road Safety Authority (RSA) are moving to an integrated approach to work-related road collision data, following on from their essential workplace guidance, '*Driving for Work: Risk Management Guidance for Employers*'.

How many people died at work on Irish roads last year? This question was raised during an Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) webinar on workplace road risks in October. Unfortunately, in Ireland, there are currently four different answers to this question.

These range from 182 road deaths on Irish public roads, to 48 killed in collisions where at least one driver involved was driving for work, to 19 whose trip purpose was recorded as "for work", all reported by the RSA. Meanwhile the HSA reports a different number. Neither dataset is wrong, yet what each agency is counting varies.

This variance in numbers is set to change, as both the HSA and RSA are to share data gathering methodologies on work-related collision data. What this means for employers is better information, which is intended to help identify the causes and preventative measures for workplace road risks.

UK road strategy

Also, on the horizon for employers who are subsidiaries of UK companies or part of a UK supply chain, is a possible increased scrutiny on driving for work risk assessments and evidence of the management of driving for work risks. This comes as result of the UK Government publishing a major new 'Road Safety Strategy' early in 2026.

Meanwhile, in Ireland, a combined state agency approach involved in the publication of the 'Driving for Work: Risk Management Guidance for Employers' in 2025 calls on employers to benchmark their approach to road safety. The guidance outlines six key steps to do this, in addition to providing guidance on driver checks, fleet management and safer journey planning.

Worth noting is that ownership of vehicles is irrelevant when it comes to collisions, which means private vehicles are included. This becomes even more relevant during HSA inspections against the requirements of this guidance, making it an essential tool for all those involved in managing one of the highest risks in workplaces.

More information: Driving for Work: Risk Management Guidance for Employers. Link: *https://tinyurl.com/yc4zwkjj*

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