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An appeal to acknowledge the impact of the working environment on the overall societal competitiveness and development in the 2020 Strategy

As the Lisbon strategy 2000-2010 comes to an end, the EU has started a consultation process to prepare a new strategy for growth and employment for the next ten years. The objectives for Europe as put forward in the working paper¹ are to “*lead, compete and prosper as a knowledge based, connected and greener and more inclusive economy, growing fast and sustainably, creating high levels of employment and social progress*”. The priorities to address these challenges are three-fold:

1. Creating value by basing growth on knowledge.
2. Empowering people in inclusive societies.
3. Creating a competitive, connected and greener economy.

PEROSH, the Partnership for European Research in Occupational Safety and Health, is committed to research and development activities for a healthier, longer and more productive working life. The partnership comprises 13 Occupational Safety and Health institutes, employing approximately 1.000 researchers and advisors, affiliated to national authorities and health insurance systems in Europe.

By contributing to the EU 2020 Strategy, PEROSH intends to add value by providing input based on its research, statistics and foresight studies on the future of the European labour market.

A healthy workforce – a healthy economy

As has been specified in the Commission’s Community strategy on health and safety at work 2007-2012², productivity and quality of work are closely intertwined and play an essential role in guaranteeing a competitive society. Improving and developing the working conditions of the active population leads to more sustainable jobs and prevents early exclusion from the labour market. The cost for society associated with a lack of good occupational safety and health is highly underestimated and inhibits economic growth and competitiveness.

In fact, the relations between health and wellbeing at work *and* the overall societal competitiveness are more relevant than ever in the light of continuing ageing of the workforce and the long term requirements of globalisation for a healthy workforce, mainly in order to ensure life quality for the individual, but also in order to strengthen the economic performance of Europe and its enterprises. The current and temporary economic crisis and its surplus of labour will not affect the long term trend.

Investment in prevention of accidents and work-related illness as well as promotion of health and wellbeing at work pays off both for the individual employee and for enterprises and the EU. It is associated with life quality, workability, creativity, and productivity. And vice versa, a lack of such investment leads to reduced life quality of employees, reduced productivity for enterprises and increased societal costs for health care and social benefits as well as reduced production capacity and tax revenue.

¹ Commission Working Document: Consultation on the Future “EU 2020 Strategy, Brussels, 24.11.2009 (COM (2009) 647).

² Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Improving quality and productivity at work: Community strategy 2007-2012 on health and safety at work, Brussels, 21.2.2007, COM(2007) 62 final.

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During a recent PEROSH seminar³, European and international occupational safety and health experts emphasised the following challenges to the European economy:

1. The pressure on competition from the economic crisis and globalisation leads to a higher degree of work intensification and emotional demands on employees, leading in turn to e.g. mental disorders such as depression
2. Demographic changes characterised by an ageing workforce and increasing migration requires special attention to the health, wellbeing and workability of specific risk groups such as elderly employees, the chronically ill, obese employees, and migrant workers
3. Poor lifestyle habits in youth such as physical inactivity, insufficient sleep and poor dietary practices
4. Musculoskeletal disorders and the effect of combined exposures including the relation with mental health
5. New work processes and risks due to the emergence of new technologies, materials and products such as bio- and nanotechnology, IT and automation

In an ever-changing world, proactive and evidence-based research on safety and health which accompanies new technologies and subsequently new working environments and new lifestyles would be an optimal basis for further development of Europe.

PEROSH would be happy to further elaborate to the Commission on its knowledge on working environment challenges of the future.

Yours sincerely,

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Chairman of PEROSH

³ Seminar Proceedings: Working Environment Challenges for the Future, International Expert Seminar, Copenhagen, 24-25 September 2009, Danish Working Environment Authority and Partnership for European Research in Occupational Safety and Health (PEROSH), Copenhagen, 2009, 95 p., <http://www.perosh.eu/p/SEMINAR>