IRELAND'S NISO COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: SUPPORTING OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH COMPLIANCE (CASE IE5)

1 Introduction

Promoting effective occupational safety and health (OSH) practices is key to safer and healthier workplaces. Improving arrangements and practices for managing OSH across a whole range of industry sectors and firm sizes — large, medium and small — is stimulated, supported and sustained by a range of institutional actors and internal and external processes to firms. Scientific research[1] highlights, among other things, the critical role that state regulators for OSH, such as Labour Inspectorates and prevention services, can play. This case study is part of a research project conducted in Ireland to provide further insight into this topic.[2]

The National Irish Safety Organisation (NISO;[3] pronounced neeso) is a long-established, well-regarded and widely recognised Irish prevention services provider that operates as an OSH compliance community of practice (Gilardi et al., 2021). Formed as the result of a government initiative over 60 years ago, NISO is today an autonomous organisation that is funded by subscriptions from circa 900 member companies. A particular characteristic of NISO is the popularity of its events that are very well attended, allowing its supporting OSH compliance message to be communicated to all sectors and employees of the Irish workforce. It is unique in presenting enjoyable social gatherings whereby the Irish community can benefit from its large social network using regional structures, as well as annual conferences, regional safety quizzes and safety awards. NISO describes itself as providing a range of services to members that include: information, advice, support, high-quality training and educational awards, regular newsletters, safety products, quizzes, a national safety awards scheme, regional seminars and a very well attended annual conference. NISO serves to exemplify the beneficial effects of providing an enjoyable social network OSH compliance community for its members.

2 Methodology

The general manager of NISO was interviewed for this research. Additional background data and grey literature were also collected to inform the analysis. In this case study, information from NISO's annual reports newsletter and selected outputs from its website were included.

The principal mission statement for NISO is as follows:

- To create the conditions where Irish workplaces are among the safest and healthiest in Europe.

NISO sets out to achieve this by:

- providing leading information, advisory and training services;
- promoting a culture of excellence in workplace health and safety;
- playing a leading role in advancing the national health and safety agenda; and
- helping members develop a culture of health and safety in their workplace.

[1] EU-OSHA – European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *Improving compliance with occupational safety and health regulations: an overarching review*, 2021. Available at: https://osha.europa.eu/sites/default/files/Improving_compliance_OSH_regulatons_lit%20review.pdf

[2] EU-OSHA, 2025. Ireland's approach to supporting occupational safety and health compliance: the role of labour inspectorate and prevention services. Available at: https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/irelands-approach-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-role-labour-inspectorate-and-prevention-services

[3] See: www.niso.ie

NISO has member companies in all 26 counties of Ireland as well as in Northern Ireland. In 2024, it had an annual budget of circa €750,000 with seven staff of whom four are full-time and three are part-time. There is one general manager, one finance and business manager, and five corporate and administration staff. NISO's governance consists of eight regional directors, being: East, Midland, Midwest, North East, North West, South, South East and West as well as an executive committee. It is a voluntary independent body and has charitable status. It has strong links with the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), Ibec, Ireland's largest lobby and business representative group (see Case IE4[4]), the Irish Congress of Trade Unions,[5] which is an umbrella group for worker unions in Ireland, and Insurance Ireland,[6] all of which sit on its Board.

NISO's flagship events include an annual conference, an annual general meeting and the all-Ireland Safety Awards as well as the all-Ireland Safety Quiz. These events are characterised by their sociable nature and extensive networking opportunities as well as the dissemination of OSH compliance guidance from credible sources such as the HSA, Health Services Executive in the United Kingdom[7] and the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA).[8] There is also extensive provision for disseminating safety via a very detailed website with extensive OSH-related guidance and information. Training as delivered by educational programmes awarded by NISO is extensive and nationwide while it includes the well-known NISO certificate in Safety Management at Work. In addition, NISO has collaborated with Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin) to deliver the Institution of Occupational Safety & Health (IOSH)-accredited Continual Development Diploma and Certificate in Safety Management at Work.

NISO has 900 members both in the northern of Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. These companies represent over 600,000 or close to a quarter of the current 2.7 million Irish employees as reported by the Central Statistics Office (2024).

Membership fees are based on company size and vary between €210 and €615. An indication of the range of company size that characterises NISO members can be seen by detailing employee numbers as follows:

- Employees >100, 36.2%
- Employees 50-99, 10.3%
- Employees 10-50, 30.3%
- Employees <10, 23.2%
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3 Safety awards

NISO has a number of annual awards for participating members. These awards range from the Supreme Award to distinctions. These awards are presented by NISO during award ceremonies held in various national locations. The number of companies that apply for these awards are numerous and diverse. One way to depict the variety and composition of the actual awards with their multiple wins is to present the award categories[9] that in 2023 were as follows:

- Supreme Award
- Gold Award
- Silver Award
- Bronze Award
- President's Award
- Excellence in Safety Award
- Chemical / Pharmaceutical Award
- Construction Award
- Northern Ireland

[4] Case 4 is available at: https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/ibec-and-its-online-community-good-practice-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-case-ie4
[5] See: www.ictu.ie
[6] See: www.insuranceireland.eu
[7] See: www.hse.gov.uk/
[8] See: www.osha.europa.eu/en
[9] Health and Safety Review (2023), a national OSH-related magazine published in Ireland.

- Regional
- Higher Distinction
- Distinction

4 NISO's reach and popularity

The popularity of NISO activities can be demonstrated by the numbers of delegates attending its flagship events.

NISO's general manager reported that attendance at NISO flagship events is the largest in Ireland for OSH compliance issues, as exemplified by the following:

- The annual conference attendance is circa 200 delegates.
- A typical number of entries for NISO safety awards is between 100 and 150 member companies.
- Regional Safety Award Nights are attended by 50 to 100 individuals.
- The annual all-Ireland Safety Awards is an even more popular social event attended by circa 600 individuals, with awards being presented for various categories.

NISO's president has stated that in 2023 there were over 3,500 individuals who took part in NISO events. He also pointed out that its innovative coffee break briefings were proving very popular (HSR, 2024; HSR, 2024b; HSR, 2024c).

'Our branding is good and we are very well known in Ireland'.

'Our reach and membership is extensive from the smallest companies to the largest multinationals'.

The reach achieved by NISO can also be considered with data gathered by this prevention services provider. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, NISO had over 5,000 email contacts who had opted in for regular electronic resources. That number has reduced to the present 1,400 contacts due to GDPR effects, but it is again increasing. These 1,400 contacts are in addition to current member email contacts and again reflect the active participation of NISO's community of practice.

'NISO events present a very positive picture for health and safety'.

'The Award Nights have a very motivational effect and my feedback is that they serve as good practice examples'.

'We get companies who submit good practice entries every year showing how popular and useful the award nights are'.

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5 Collaboration by NISO

NISO can demonstrate extensive collaboration with the Irish OSH community. In Ireland, NISO works in close harmony with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment,[10] which is the government department responsible for OSH as well as the HSA. NISO also has a cross-jurisdictional working relationship with the Northern Ireland Safety Group[11] and the Health and Safety Executive of Northern

[10] See: www.enterprise.gov.ie/en/
[11] See: www.nisg.org.uk/

Ireland[12] (the Labour Inspectorate for Northern Ireland). It maintains extensive links with the HSA and attends the National Focal Point. NISO has also worked with the European Network of Safety and Health Professional Organisations (ENSHPO[13]), through which it has discussed its Safety Quiz function with an Italian counterpart.

NISO is also represented on the Construction Safety Partnership initiative run by the HSA and the Healthy Workplace Implementation Group[14] from the Health Services Executive in Ireland. NISO actively supports governmental OSH compliance initiatives. For example, a frequent request from members and non-members is for advice and on how to conduct work-related risk assessments. In such instances, NISO will recommend BeSMART.ie, which is an HSA-hosted online OSH resource that is itself presented in the main report as Case IE2.[15] In this manner, NISO has extended the reach of HSA's BeSMART.ie in supporting compliance for small-sized companies and the self-employed.

6 OSH compliance and promotion

NISO is primarily a supplier of competent OSH-related education training and guidance. At the minimum, an important effect that NISO achieves will be to raise awareness of OSH compliance. As discussed in the main report,[16] all such education, training and guidance providers will have challenges in presenting evidence of OSH compliance and promotion given that such organisations rarely have the ability to collect the empirical data required to evidence OSH compliance and promotion.

However, two strands of evidence are available to demonstrate NISO's OSH compliance and promotional capabilities. The first, as mentioned above, is the continued reach, engagement and popularity of NISO. This organisation continues to hold an excellent reputation in the OSH community, which is a function of its continuing influence regarding OSH compliance and promotion.

The second is a notable achievement in engaging with small companies and the self-employed. Just over 23% of NISO's membership is made up of micro-enterprises, here defined as fewer than 10 workers. As is detailed in the main report, small companies and the self-employed are notoriously difficult to access and are over-represented in terms of accidents and injuries. For example, in Ireland in 2023, over half of the work-related fatalities were self-employed individuals[17] (see also for example, EU-OSHA, 2021, 2023). This is a significant achievement considering that NISO membership is not obligatory. In addition, it also demonstrates that micro-enterprises are positively influenced by NISO's activities, as demonstrated by their presence in the awards given by this prevention services provider in 2023 and depicted above.

7 Innovation by NISO

The use of safety quizzes in a highly social setting is one example of NISO's innovative approach to supporting OSH compliance. These quizzes consist of a wide range of OSH-related questions covering, for example, applicable legislation, good practice and emergency procedures. These quizzes are attended by teams from member companies with an overall winner announced on the night. Each year, eight regional safety quiz nights are followed by the all-Ireland final quiz night. These quizzes are for shopfloor workers only, safety professionals cannot enter. This ensures that the safety message is better delivered to those who have to implement good practice. Their involvement and adoption of this message is reflected in the numbers attending NISO quiz events.

[12] See: www.hseni.gov.uk/
[13] See: https://www.enshpo.eu/
[14] See: www.healthyworkplace.ie/
[15] Case 2 is available at: https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/irelands-besmart-ie-online-interactive-risk-assessment-tool-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-case-ie2
[16] The main report is available at: https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/irelands-approach-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-role-labour-inspectorate-and-prevention-services
[17] HSA, 2023. Health and Safety Authority, Annual Report 2023. Available at: https://www.hsa.ie/eng/publications_and_forms/publications/corporate/annual_report_2023.html

A further recent educational innovation is a collaboration with Technological University Dublin to deliver the NISO/TU Dublin Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Certificate and CPD Diploma in Safety Management at Work.

> *'Our NISO cert course run three or four times a year with circa 25-30 online attendees. That way we can better reach rural areas'.*

NISO reports that educational awards and training seminars are increasingly being delivered online. Face-to-face classroom-based teaching is provided, but there has been a notable increase in the number of delegates who wish to attend online. There is also a proposal to introduce sectoral categorisation for member companies to run alongside the current regional structure of member companies.

8 External assessment of NISO

A number of external assessors have demonstrated the positive role and reputation of NISO. For example, the senior journalist for the Health & Safety Review (a well-respected national OSH-related magazine) wrote the following description as a piece for NISO's Update Journal, Vol. 63, 60th anniversary special:

> *'NISO is at the heart of the health and safety community in Ireland which we as a nation can be proud of. It offers friendship and support to health and safety practitioners'.*

9 Transferability

It is considered that the NISO community of practice approach is eminently suitable for use by other EU Member States. As stated above, NISO has contact with ENSHPO with whom it discussed its OSH compliance role. Therefore, the NISO approach to OSH compliance that utilises a social network setting for its community of practice should be considered transferable.

10 Conclusions

NISO exemplifies a successful OSH community of practice that actively provides and encourages a very popular social network for its members. The number of applicants it receives annually for its safety awards and safety quizzes as demonstrated by the number of national recipients is a notable achievement. NISO exemplifies the promotional OSH compliance advantages of facilitating popular and well-attended social networking events and shows clear demand for such activities.

NISO is a long-established and well-known Irish prevention services provider. In terms of providing OSH good practice and educational awards, it functions very well. By delivering awards, conferences, quizzes and educational qualifications, NISO promotes, contributes and influences OSH compliance. Therefore, a clear and important conclusion from this case study is the positive role that providing an active and enjoyable social network brings in terms of supporting OSH compliance.

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Authors: Dr Victor Hrymak, Dr Patrick Bruce and Dr Chiara Leva.

Project Management: Ioannis Anyfantis and Lorenzo Munar - European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA).

This case study was commissioned by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA). Its contents, including any opinions and/or conclusions expressed, are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of EU-OSHA.

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