

Taking UK OS&H forward

The struggle to raise and maintain H&S standards is still an uphill one. More resources are definitely needed for a cash-strapped HSE. But what organisational levers are there that can be used to get organisations to ‘up their game’? RoSPA partnership consultant **Roger Bibbings** looks at the options.

Last year, 100 employees, 44 self-employed workers and 100 members of the public were killed in notifiable work-related accidents. Several hundred people were killed in work-related road crashes. There were 71,000 notifiable work-related injuries reported, with the total number of injuries of all kinds being nearer 500,000. And even more hidden from view is the extent of work-related health damage. Over 14,000 people died early from conditions associated with past exposures to hazardous agents in the workplace such as asbestos. Some 1.4 million workers reported suffering from work-related ill health conditions, big categories being: deafness; skin disease; respiratory disorders; work-related stress; and musculoskeletal disorders. Around 31 million working days were lost as result – and the overall cost to the UK economy was estimated at £15 billion.

These are pretty sobering statistics – but at the same time it is worth remembering that standards of health and safety at work – that is the policies, people and processes which

organisations have in place to ensure hazards are recognised, risks are assessed and are eliminated and/or controlled – have risen steadily over four decades. However, there is still a ‘first’, ‘second’ and ‘third’ world of health and safety in Britain, with many companies at the lower end paying scant regard to the need for basic precautions in the workplace. And even among the top organisations, their health and safety performance can still at times be a bit of a curate’s egg – ‘good in parts’.

The role of all those individuals and organisations that care about health and safety at work is to constantly seek new ways of refreshing interest and commitment in it among dutyholders – and to work to ensure that everyone at work is suitably protected from harm to their physical and mental wellbeing.

Being good at managing for good health and safety outcomes – that is the capability to manage risks effectively and achieving a reducing rate of error, harm and loss – is a matter not just of corporate awareness, skills and knowledge but of motivation too.

Back in the mid-1970s, Dame Hazel Genn from the Oxford University Centre for Socio-Legal Studies divided firms according to the following considerations: ‘don’t know, don’t care’; ‘do know, do care’; ‘do care, don’t know’; and most worrying perhaps ‘do know, don’t care’. Those that lacked understanding and knowledge required education and assistance. Those that lacked motivation needed a firmer hand, including, where necessary, enforcement. The prime mover in the system was seen to be the regulator in the form of the Health Safety Executive (HSE) which, even at the height of Thatcherism, was still a vigorous, publicly-funded educator and campaigner and still undertook quite a lot of proactive inspection of workplaces. Today it is much reduced and does much less PR work on key health and safety themes, and so far as enforcement is concerned, apart from visiting major hazards sites, its inspection role is almost completely reactive, following up accidents and prosecuting. The level of fines has increased for serious offences, perhaps in the belief that this alone will be enough to cause non-compliant businesses to fall into line.



The constant deregulatory mantras and reviews of the Coalition and the present Government have not helped either, leading to health and safety and many other vital measures needed to control risk being portrayed in the media as burdensome ‘red tape’ (‘stuff that gets in the way of managing’) rather than essential safety and quality standards that support business efficiency and effectiveness.

The struggle to raise and maintain standards is still an uphill one. More resources are definitely needed for a cash-strapped HSE. But what other organisational levers are there that can be used to either motivate or assist organisations to ‘up their game’ when it comes to managing for health and safety? And what role can the regulator play in helping them all to ‘up their games’ and work together more effectively? Here are a few suggestions:

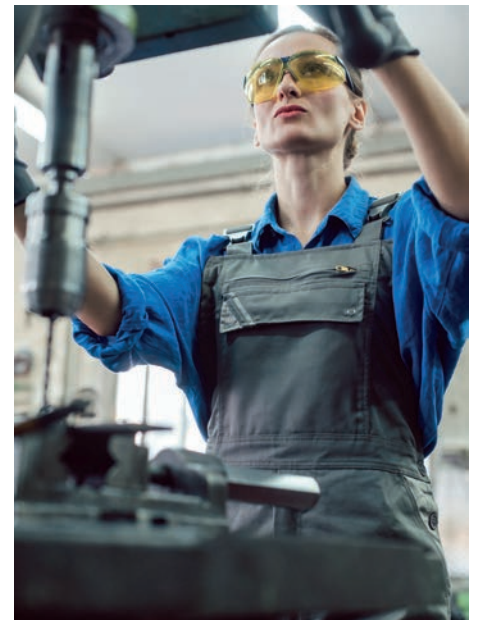
- **Performance reporting:** Despite much official support for the idea of Corporate Social Responsibility there is no official recommendation that organisations should report on their health and safety performance in their annual reports or on their websites.
- **Benchmarking:** Under the influence of Chris Grayling when he was at DWP, HSE guidance to help organisations benchmark their H&S performance with others was withdrawn. In consequence, except in various switched-on trade associations, there is no official encouragement for businesses to share and compare their performance data with their sector peers.
- **Certification:** ISO 45001 is now with us but how much official encouragement is being given to employers to adopt it? As exemplar employers, to what extent are Government and public sector bodies being encouraged to go for 45001? It may only cover the ‘system essentials’ for managing health and safety but exposing an organisation to the challenge of certification shows a willingness by its directors to be tested against the international standard. Who is driving uptake of this standard and also making sure that, as a best practice standard, it can also be made more SME friendly?
- **Awards and recognition:** Despite sterling efforts by RoSPA and others, only a few organisations seek official recognition of their performance by entering awards. Award-winning companies are a massive reservoir of commitment and expertise. Too many awards applications are discarded, even if they have won. This is very wasteful. These narratives need to be much better exploited to raise standards, something which RoSPA is working to achieve via its *Awards Excellence Forum*.
- **Strengthening the ‘OS&H ripple effect’:** What people learn about health and safety while at work helps them to keep themselves and their families safer and healthier in other settings too. Workers suffer up to ten times more accidental injury outside working hours than they do on the job. So whether it is safety while driving or in sports and

DIY, or in ensuring the safety of children or the frail elderly, the hidden hand of positive safety culture in the workplace is at work quietly adding value by stopping injuries outside the workplace with all the misery and waste they cause. How can this ‘OS&H ripple effect’ be better understood publicised and enhanced?

- **The role of key influencers?:** How can the contributions of all the various non-regulatory influencers in the health and safety system, such as trade unions, trade associations and the public sector, be enhanced? (see box on *page 13*)

And then there is the whole challenge of enhancing communication of information and messages about health and safety. HSE’s *Health and Safety Myth Busters* panel was set up to counter negative and unhelpful stories about the subject in the media. But how can a much more proactive approach be adopted to persuade newspapers and broadcasters to increase their positive coverage of health and safety? Is a special thinktank or unit needed here that can help the whole H&S community to engage more effectively with mainstream media?

The same question can be asked about the coverage of health and safety on social media and via the Internet generally. Despite the massive potential of social media to carry key messages to key audiences and





to signpost people to solutions, guidance and services, is not more research needed to understand why this now ubiquitous resource is not leading to an even greater rate of improvement in standards of health and safety performance?

There are several other key issues and key influencers that could be examined in the context of this discussion. The key questions, however, are:

- Who has made a systematic and realistic assessment of the potential of all the key influencers to raise health and safety performance, and what steps are necessary to develop their full potential?
- How can their effects be synergized?
- How can each actual and/or potential influencer be challenged and helped to 'up their game'?
- Where is the leadership required, and how can it be encouraged, supported and enhanced?

There is a strong argument for the regulator, HSE, building on their strategies to date, to establish a new *Council of Health & Safety Champions*, with a senior and influential champion recruited from each of the constituencies mentioned in this article to drive forward a target-driven set of 'task and finish' improvements in each of their areas. This would be taking the *Helping Great Britain Work Well* strategy forward to a new level. Space would be needed within it for champions for each of the nations and for the regions of England and for each of the key sectors – but the advantage would be that the HSE Board would have a direct link to a core body of leading influencers in each of the main parts of the British health and safety system, each one of which would be accountable for delivery in their particular area. It would be a bold plan and it would require some extra government resources for the regulator but the return in terms of more lives, limbs and health safeguarded and preventable waste averted could be truly massive. Who is prepared to campaign for and realise this vision?

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How can the role of non-regulatory key influencers be enhanced to take UK OS&H forward?

- *Supply chain influence*: 'Higher performers', particularly in sectors characterised by contracting, have a key interest in selecting only competent firms to work with and for them and to help drive performance improvement among their partners. In some sectors this is well developed but in many it is still weak. Who is setting the benchmark for excellence here and how is it being promulgated?
- *Trade associations*: Who is helping trade associations (TAs) who want to develop the health and safety support services they provide to their members, for example, mapping out how a small TA could use HSE info for basics and then maybe add some sector specifics?
- *Trade unions*: There are over 100,000 trained trade union safety representatives. They are a huge reservoir of commitment, knowledge and expertise but they operate mainly in high-end UK private sector businesses and in the public sector. How can their knowledge and skills be made much more widely available, for example to SMEs?
- *Professional and campaigning bodies*: Besides the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) there are several other bodies such as those concerned with occupational hygiene, occupational medicine, occupational health nursing, ergonomics, noise and vibration and so on who play a vital role in assuring and supporting the professional work of their members. And together with bodies such as RoSPA, the British Safety Council and others, they have great potential to raise awareness, provide services and recognise achievement. There are numerous other bodies campaigning for victims and also ones, like the British Lung Foundation, who campaign on specific issues. All these bodies added up, have major resources, and ought to be capable of more compelling joint output. How well are they all working together?
- *Public sector clients*: Government and public bodies need to be prepared to act as exemplars for other business in the way they address health and safety in procurement – particularly in their selection and management of contractors – and in the way they approach their management of the health and safety of their own staff and of the public affected by their operations. The focus needs to be on things that are transferable, that are practical and cost-effective. Which public body (or Minister indeed) should take the lead in driving this approach and offering benchmarking and support?
- *Training bodies and colleges*: The whole educational sector – from primary school to business school – has a massive role to play in helping learners at all levels to better understand health and safety. There are massive challenges in enhancing and supporting the professional development of teachers, lecturers and trainers around health and safety – as well as in developing new and innovative approaches to health and safety learning such as the LOCHER project (<https://about.locherproject.com/>). 'Teaching safely and teaching safety' needs a comprehensive national strategy. Again, who will lead this?
- *Other key influences are*: Chambers of Commerce: local voluntary health and safety groups; safety equipment suppliers; consultants; publishers and exhibition organisers; lawyers and insurers.