

Unhealthy attitudes to workplace health and safety



SAFETY STRUGGLES FOR PRIORITY STATUS IN UK COMPANIES

Survey by RRC Training



A major survey in the United Kingdom has shown that the state of health and safety in the workplace has reached a critical level and that current attitudes to it are decidedly unhealthy.

Nearly half (42%) of those surveyed believed that health and safety demands have become so unreasonable that there is a risk of devaluing the very idea of health and safety. In which case, rather than protecting workers, health and safety legislation could actually be putting them at risk.

Last year, Britain's Health and Safety Executive, which has since become the country's single national regulatory body responsible for promoting the cause of better health and safety at work, launched its "Simplification Plan", aimed at better and smarter regulation.

While maintaining and improving levels of worker and public protection, the initiative seeks to make legislation easier to understand and help to secure stronger commitment and compliances from businesses.

The HSE aims to communicate its vision through clearer and simpler advice and information.

Simplified safety still too complex!

RRC Training, a leading British safety training organisation, commissioned a survey to see if the HSE's important and timely message – that health and safety need not be complicated to be effective – is getting through.

It says that results have been illuminating and will have implications for managers, directors and CEOs and anyone with responsibility for health and safety and personnel.

RRC says that legislation over the past 30 years has helped secure significant improvements in health and safety in the workplace to the great benefit of society and the economy.

Few employers or employees would deny that health and safety is of vital importance, since poor health and safety can have such a catastrophic effect on the lives of individuals as well as on a company's success.

Regulation frustration

But over complication and unnecessary red tape is a complaint heard over and over and which has certainly done much to tarnish health and safety's reputation. Indeed, it is surely such complaints and the risk that they would ultimately devalue the whole notion of health and safety that are the impetus for the HSE's Simplification Plan.

The survey was conducted at random among health and safety managers within companies with a turnover of more than £3 million (\$A6.3 million). 230 questionnaires (130 online and 100 anonymous telephone interviews) were analysed in October 2007.

16% see health & safety as a burden in their company!

The HSE has given a commitment to work towards a 25% target reduction in administrative burdens, but this message has not filtered down as yet, or had enough of an impact to cause a sea-change in attitudes. When asked if health and safety is seen as a burden or a benefit in their company, 16% of those surveyed on behalf of RRC Training, say it is a burden. This figure rises to 23% in the risk manufacturing sector.

The situation has become so serious that 5% of MDs taking part in the survey did not even see health and safety training as something their staff need in order to do their job properly with 20% of those questioned stating that health and safety regulation is affecting their business's ability to improve their production line.

Most significant of all is that a staggering 40% feel the cautiousness which has bred the current health and safety environment in the UK is stifling business.

Many of the people making health and safety decisions are juggling it with other responsibilities and are likely to lack the experience and/or specialist training that would enable them to understand the limits of what they are allowed to do. They are erring on the side of caution and blaming a confused health and safety culture for hampering them.

RRC Training says the HSC's laudable simplification message is just not hitting home. When respondents were asked about the value of health and safety regulations, one in ten said that, in their opinion, around half of it is worthless.

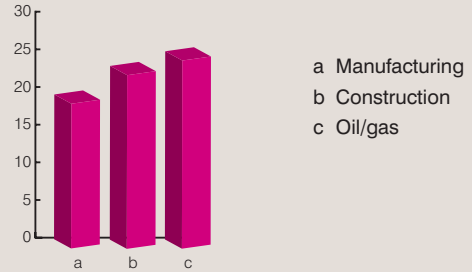
Again indicating the problems of entrusting health and safety to personnel who lack the time to dedicate to it, half of those taking part in the study said they believe new health and safety legislation is introduced too often for managers and workers to keep sufficiently abreast of it.

Safety not a major priority for half of UK managers

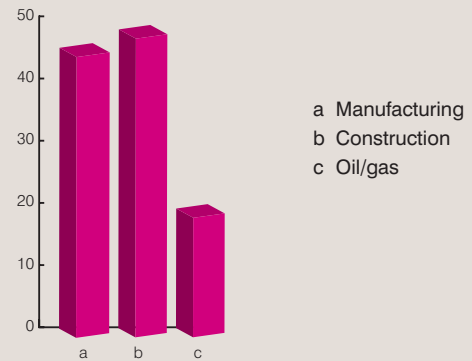
When questioned about their production priorities, nearly half (48%) do not see safety as a major priority and nearly a quarter rate it as not a priority at all, or a very low one. However, in the UK health and safety is now commonly grouped with environmental concerns (EHS) and the list of priorities includes many issues that fall under this banner – namely reducing waste, making lines safer, reducing downtime, reducing odour and cutting water usage. Taken as a whole, therefore, HSE is, in fact, of great concern to many companies.

The general frustration and malaise is also impacting on approaches to training, which are mixed and in many cases lack lustre which only serves to exacerbate the problem.

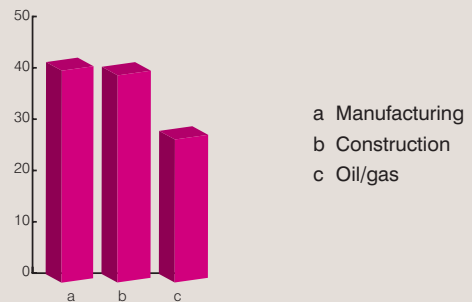
Is health and safety regulation affecting your ability to improve your production line? Yes...



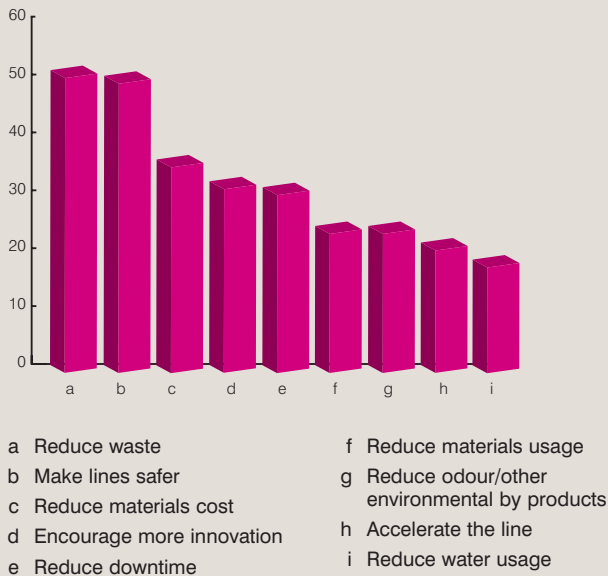
Do you feel health and safety demands have become so unreasonable that we are at risk of devaluing the idea of health and safety? Yes...



Do you feel the cautiousness which has bred our current health and safety environment is stifling business? Yes...



What are your production priorities at present – score each from 1 - 5 where 1 = not a priority and 5 = a big priority



What's your company's approach to health and safety training?



Respondents were asked about their company's approach to health and safety training and one in five said it was either done only at the induction stage or that only a few staff received formal training. Almost one in ten in the oil and gas sector said they hardly did any!

This lethargy is handed down the line to staff with more than a third (36%) either reluctant to learn or don't see the point! Yet, education and training holds the key to understanding health and safety and making it work for rather than against other priorities.

Dedicated person for finance or sales, safety mixed with other responsibilities

One crucial issue affecting attitudes to health and safety is lack of time and effort devoted to it. Bosses of most companies of any size in the UK would consider it vital to have a dedicated team or, at least one fully-trained and dedicated person in charge of finance and sales/marketing, but in many companies, the person with ultimate responsibility for health and safety is juggling it with other elements of the job. (refer to graphs next page)

At best, this means they are not giving it their full attention and at worst, it means they have other priorities which may be at odds with health and safety and can compromise the focus they give to it.

A significant proportion of the companies taking part in the survey entrust health needs to the hands of either their managing director or the CEO. Inevitably busy people with huge demands on their time, their prime concern is with profitability, which as previous results of the survey have

demonstrated, is erroneously perceived to be diametrically opposed to health and safety. When asked if the person in charge takes the role seriously, or sees it just as an addition to his or her overall tasks, more than one in ten (13%) said that this was the case!

Yet this problem is not insurmountable. With a relatively low level of training for just one individual, MDs could delegate responsibility for health and safety to one of their managers, freeing up their own time to concentrate on other business issues. They would also have a team member who has been trained to understand exactly what can and cannot be done while adhering to current legislation.

26% commit to safety because of a fear of prosecution or to meet their legal obligation

Less than three-quarters (74%) of health and safety policies are driven by a desire to protect employees, while the remaining quarter are doing it out of a fear of prosecution or just because they are legally obliged. While this is alarming, it can also be viewed in a more positive light – most companies do want to make a difference but need help to identify ways of doing this that does not require them to neglect other business objectives in the process.

Again reflecting the abounding lack of understanding and consequent devaluing of health and safety, those companies that do employ a dedicated health and safety manager assign them surprisingly little influence and power over operations where health and safety should be among the most crucial issues.



The survey showed that MDs/CEOs and finance directors wield significant power over decisions affecting the hazardous areas of production, and since their demands are seen to be opposed to those of the health and safety manager, this is a real problem.

Half work in health and safety “to make a difference”?

Despite the difficulties facing those with responsibility for health and safety outlined in this report, only one in ten (13%) do not see themselves working in health and safety in five years time and only 15% do not plan to make a career of it! But it is vital that these respondents and their peers do not become disillusioned. Nearly half (48%) choose to become involved in health and safety because they thought they could really make a difference! A fifth believed they would be well respected.

The impetus for excellent health and safety lies with such keen professionals. The HSE’s initiative coupled with investment in effective training should make sure that health and safety, and the people who work within it, are valued and respected and are armed with the information to help them make a great difference to all concerned.

In the UK, the Health and Safety Executive’s commitment to “Sensible Risk Management” breaks down into specific aims to increase compliance, simplify guidance and encourage proportionate risk assessment and management. But RRC Training says the results of its survey indicate there is a long way to go to achieve this.

Health and safety “stifling” UK business

Those in charge of health and safety in British companies still feel burdened by too much legislation and that health and safety is stifling business, hampering the production process and that it is impossible to keep sufficiently abreast of new legislation.

RRC Training says this is due to the fact that health and safety is all too often left in the hands of those who lack understanding, training and experience and for whom health and safety is not a prime concern.

As a result, it has to vie for attention with seemingly opposing sales, marketing and production pressures. But the one sure way to make company bosses sit up and listen is to illustrate how health and safety can relieve these pressures rather than add to them.

This survey shows how health and safety registers most strongly on the radar where it is seen to impact on the bottom line. Not only are so many policies driven more by a desire to avoid prosecution than injury to workers, but a resounding 85% believe that insurance premiums should reflect a business’s health and safety policy.

All too often EHS is seen as being the cause of all evil in the business world, but companies who are giving it the respect it deserves know that it contributes to their other business objectives rather than detracting from them.

Realistic training with a base in the real world can help companies use EHS to implement all their business objectives instead of it being used as an excuse for why things can’t be done!



RRC Training, with more than 75 years experience, is a leading health, safety and environmental training provider in the UK.