

IBEC AND ITS ONLINE COMMUNITY OF GOOD PRACTICE: SUPPORTING OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH COMPLIANCE (CASE IE4)

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 research¹ 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

This case study details the creation, development and management of a successful OSH compliance online community of practice by the OSH team in Ibec,³ which is Ireland's largest lobby and business representative group (Ibec, 2022). It details the conditions needed to create such a community of practice and how it can be sustained. It also describes how such communities of practice can support and provide evidence for OSH compliance for participating organisations. Ibec is Ireland's best-known business lobby group and a long-standing institution founded in 1993. Originally known as the Irish Business and Employers Confederation, it now uses the acronym Ibec. Its structure consists of a Board, national council and a CEO. Ibec is funded through corporate member subscriptions.

Ibec has over 279 employees spread over six regional offices in Dublin, Waterford, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Donegal. Furthermore, it also has an office in Brussels where it provides representation for Irish business interests. In addition to its lobbying role on behalf of Irish businesses, Ibec's professional services and training for its members cover all aspects of OSH, human resources (HR), management, worker relations and employment law.

In terms of Ibec's OSH compliance function, it employs a team of highly qualified and experienced professionals whose roles include providing OSH-related expert guidance, policy development, training and consultancy for its members.

Ibec's purpose is stated as being:

'to help build a better sustainable future by influencing, supporting, and delivering for business success'.

Its mission is stated as:

'we will accelerate our development as a professional member services organisation by growing our membership and commercial services'.

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/en/publications/improving-occupational-safety-and-health-changing-world-work-what-works-and-how>

² EU-OSHA, 2025. 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>

³ See: www.ibec.ie

Ibec's membership is subdivided into 39 trade associations that cover a wide range of Irish industry sectors. In 2022, 17,500 people attended Ibec webinars. In the same year, Ibec held over 200 events for its members and 5,800 professionals were trained through its academy.

OSH-related commercial services to non-members are also provided through its Ibec Academy. In 2022, this academy issued over 500 accredited diplomas, certificates and short customised programmes that include OSH-related programmes. As part of its OSH-related offerings, Ibec has recently implemented and accredits a corporate wellbeing programme known as KeepWell.

2 Methodology

Two of Ibec's current OSH professionals were interviewed for this research. The first of these professionals has an OSH-related PhD, with over 30 years of extensive and specialised but not exclusive dealings with OSH in the bio-pharma-chem sector. The second professional has an OSH-related master's with over 25 years of experience and provides a more generalised OSH and environmental health and safety commercial role. Together, these two professionals and their OSH colleagues will be referred to as the Ibec OSH team. Additional background data were also collected from Ibec's annual reports for 2023.⁴

3 How Ibec's community of practice benefits OSH compliance

A community of practice has been described as a social group that generates good-quality knowledge for its members in order to achieve improvements. An example of a successful Italian Labour Inspectorate-created community of practice is described by Gilardi et al. (2021).

Ibec's OSH team have created a successful online, member-led community of OSH practice. Through this mechanism, members bring their OSH concerns and questions to this forum and the Ibec OSH team facilitates a discussion on how best to deal with the issues raised. The Ibec OSH team report that this directed interactive discussion elicits a variety of pragmatic solutions that in many cases have already been tried and tested by other members. In addition, Ibec's OSH team further report that the most appropriate solutions are often seen as 'best-in-class' by members. This often motivates other companies to adopt these best-in-class examples and thereby improve their own OSH compliance. In particular, Ibec's OSH team emphasised the motivational effect of members wanting to seek out and adopt tried and tested best-in-class solutions.

The main factor underpinning this reported benefit in adopting peer professional OSH good practice can be characterised as a competitive benchmarking effect. Member companies are very keen to see what the consensus is on good practice among their peers, on a vast array of workplace hazards. These online meetings facilitate this good practice knowledge. This leads to participating companies being more motivated towards, and thereby more likely to adopt, OSH good practices that are seen as best in class.

This competitiveness between members coming together to seek out and adopt best-in-class solutions has not been reported in the academic literature. The nearest initiative would be from Case IE5⁵ on the National Irish Safety Organisation (NISO) that organises and judges annual awards from participating members regarding OSH initiatives they have undertaken.

As reported by Ibec's OSH team, this process of member companies raising OSH issues, self-diagnosing these issues and presenting benchmark solutions is viewed as being far more effective than the more traditional and now previous practice of visiting companies, assisting with writing risk assessments and presenting good practice guidance. Ibec also reported that an underlying motivation to implement OSH good practice is worker retention and their increased work-related wellbeing expectations post-pandemic.

⁴ Available at: <https://www.ibec.ie/-/media/documents/about-us/ibec-annual-report-2022-2023.pdf>

⁵ Case IE5 is available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/irelands-niso-community-practice-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-case-ie5>

It should also be noted that this online community of practice is not restricted to OSH; the Head of the Irish Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)⁶ has presented at these online meetings. This indicates that there is no reason why impending EU-led environmental and social governance requirements cannot be brought to such communities of OSH practice.

Applying this context, Ibec's OSH team now manages a highly successful online employer-led community of OSH good practice. This Ibec OSH team development is now dedicated to eliciting practical and pragmatic measures that support OSH compliance and are largely raised, driven and derived from participating members. This community of practice has now entirely replaced the Ibec's previous model of engagement that largely (but not exclusively) consisted of its OSH team visiting member organisations and organising meetings there on OSH matters.

4 The transition to an online community of practice

The motivation to move to an online platform began during the pandemic. With face-to-face meetings effectively curtailed, Ibec moved its meetings online as a means of continuing OSH good practice communication and facilitation. The success of these online meetings quickly became apparent and Ibec's stated intention is to continue to use this online platform for the foreseeable future.

The majority of working time spent by the two Ibec OSH professionals interviewed now relates to the provision, support and management of this online employer-led community of OSH practice. These online meetings are held on a monthly basis and agendas are largely driven by member company OSH concerns.

This evolution to an online platform has completely transformed Ibec's reach, engagement and influence on OSH good practice for its members. This is particularly so for the Ibec grouping that adopted this online community of practice initiative, being the Irish bio-pharma-chem trade association within Ibec. There are over 70 bio-pharma-chem companies that are members within this Ibec trade association. Of these, 60 companies are licensed by the EPA and over 20 or so are Control of Major Accident Hazards (COMAH) (Seveso) sites.

Prior to the pandemic, meetings between Ibec's OSH team and its members tended to be quarterly and attended by circa 20 to 25 professionals. Currently, these monthly meetings can regularly attract up to 80 to 100 professionals from these bio-pharma-chem companies. An email listing held by Ibec's OSH team that facilitates these online meetings currently stands at 337 OSH managers. Ibec's OSH team has a wider email listing of OSH, HR and general management professionals who can attend this online community of practice from all of Ibec's members standing at over 890. It is also a common occurrence that workers leaving one Irish bio-pharma-chem company for another will request renewed inclusion in this email listing as well as seek company membership for their new employer.

This current reach and good practice influence facilitated by this online community of practice is described by Ibec as being 'orders of magnitude greater than previously' more traditional models that were largely based on face-to-face meetings at member company premises.

Ibec's OSH team also reported that all employment levels and disciplines from companies are represented in these online meetings. Attendees include shopfloor workers all the way up to CEOs. OSH professionals are well represented but increasingly so are HR managers, facilities management and further middle management personnel.

5 Example use of online polls during meetings

The principal tool used during these meetings is the online poll. Poll questions will vary widely in number and in topics. The vast majority of polls and issues to be discussed are suggested by members prior to online meetings. Up to five polls are commonly delivered in any one meeting and could include OSH topics as diverse as training needs for emergency rescue technicians, smoking shelters, pay rates for first aid staff, mental health at work initiatives and intoxicants at work. The Ibec OSH team have also successfully run 'deep dive' polls resembling questionnaires that can include over 20 individual topics

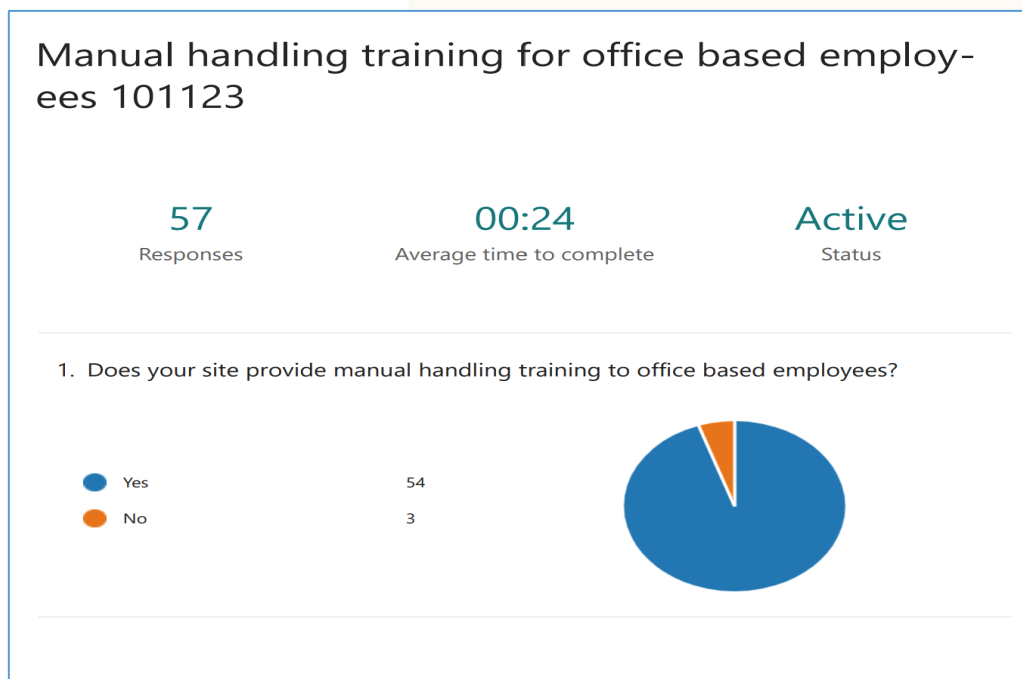
⁶ See: www.epa.ie

of interest. An example of one member company-requested poll delivered during an online meeting is illustrated in Figure 1.

'On request, we created a poll on manual handling training for office workers.'

'We got 57 responses, and the same for safety reps training'

Figure 1: Poll result on manual handling training for office workers⁷



6 The underlying requirement for trust practice

Ibec reported that the underlying success of its community of practice and the polls relies on trust. In short, Ibec and its members are all cognisant of and trust the confidential and anonymised nature of the communication and data produced during online meetings. It should be noted that this trust in Ibec and its OSH team has been built up over many years and confidentiality is expected at all times.

7 The success of Ibec's community of OSH practice

Ibec are unequivocal about the success of the use of online meetings as their main communication and engagement strategy. This success is reflected in increased membership, large numbers of attendees at online meetings, very few (if any) complaints from members and continuous engagement during meetings. Ibec's OSH team was very effusive about this community of practice and in particular how the exchange of good OSH practice was quickly generated and implemented by members.

In addition, further evidence for the success of Ibec's member-led community of OSH practice is provided by Ibec's own internal quality assurance reviews that include:

⁷ Source: supplied by a current Ibec OSH professional.

- A large increase in membership that now stands at twice the number it was in 2013.
- A high score in regularly returned questionnaires sent to member CEOs and HR managers. Ibec's OSH team regularly score very highly, if not the highest, regarding Ibec professional services.
- The positive results from audits of Ibec's 9001 QA system and Technological University Dublin's annual audit of OSH training.

A selection of example quotes from the Ibec OSH team also illustrate the success of this online engagement:

'These online meetings are far more effective, and they have massively extended our reach'.

'We are getting insane levels of buy-in'.

'There's far more engagement in these meetings due to members wanting to know what other members are doing'.

'If it does not work, our companies very quickly tell us'.

'There's been a tenfold increase in contact as a result of online meetings'.

'We are 100% confident that our approach benefits safety in our companies'.

8 Collaboration by Ibec

Ibec has a long history of extensive collaboration with the wider Irish OSH community. One example of collaboration that this online community of practice has provided is an efficient and influential communication channel for OSH-related regulatory bodies such as the HSA⁸ and the EPA. For example, the CEO of the HSA has attended and participated in meetings. The EPA has also had particular views and guidance communicated to Ibec member companies via this online platform. A member of Ibec's OSH team reported being in contact with the HSA on a fortnightly basis.

In addition, Ibec is a representative on the employer group of the Irish social partners. Through this representation, its OSH team, it regularly engages with the wider Irish OSH community as well as with OSH and business groups in the EU.

9 Innovation by Ibec

Ibec's online approach harnesses a natural competitiveness and curiosity in relation to supporting and improving OSH by members of this employer-led community of OSH practice. Through online sessions, the OSH team can nudge member companies to better recognise potential areas for OSH improvement. Additionally, the presence of national regulatory bodies that regularly attend online meetings also reinforces the credibility of this community of practice.

The utilisation of online meetings for networking and exchange of good practices, together with extensive polling and data analysis, represents the first reporting of this important and noteworthy innovation in how OSH information is exchanged, spread and implemented among members. The use of participating members to identify their own hazards and how best to manage them through group discussion further enhances the efficacy of this approach to OSH compliance. Importantly, this model of engagement evidences a motivational effect to support and improve OSH compliance by those within this particular community of practice.

⁸ See: www.hsa.ie

10 Transferability

While embedded in the Irish context, the conduct of Ibec's OSH compliance-related community of practice that uses an online meeting methodology can be adapted and applied in other settings, including other EU Member States. In addition and as clearly demonstrated by Ibec, such an OSH compliance community of practice can greatly leverage its effectiveness by going online. Therefore, Ibec's collaboration tools and networking in a highly reputable OSH compliance community of practice has the potential for motivating better performance and it has broader applicability in improving OSH practices globally. Ibec's approach can therefore be seen as a good example of a community of practice approach, as per the model described by Gilardi et al. (2021). There is nothing to suggest this approach cannot be extended to other jurisdictions, including existing EU Member States and accession and candidate states.

11 Conclusion

The main learning from this case study is that the Ibec OSH team, through the creation of an online community of practice, has demonstrated an effective way to promote and improve OSH compliance among its members. This model has also been successful because of Ibec's ability to build trust with its members who freely and credibly express their OSH compliance views online with their peer professionals. This has contributed to its success and allows frequent communication, exchange of views and new knowledge on OSH compliance, and it is well supported by an internal platform allowing for questions, discussions and networking.

This online engagement has facilitated far higher levels of communication and informal learning among its members. Typical meetings use agendas driven by members and feature the extensive use of polls and informally prompting and thereby eliciting OSH-related good practice examples. This format allows companies to compare and benchmark themselves and appears to be a major motivational driver for improvements in OSH compliance.

References

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