

INVOLVING YOUNG WORKERS IN OSH

Introduction

Involving young workers in occupational safety and health (OSH) is a powerful tool to help strengthen workplace safety culture and performance.

Getting young people to buy in to the safety culture of a workplace involves:

- engaging them in OSH;
- empowering them; and
- giving them a voice that is heard.

Young people should be given safe and healthy jobs that are within their capabilities. They require proper training and supervision. They need to be actively engaged if they are to take on board the safety culture of their workplace and cooperate on OSH matters; it is not enough to simply provide them with a handbook of safety rules.

With the necessary encouragement and support, and by developing their knowledge, understanding, confidence and competence, young people are far more likely to play their part in managing the risks and possible ill health associated with their jobs, and become tomorrow's 'health and safety champions'.

Communication and empowerment

In addition to training and supervision, a best practice OSH approach to young workers includes the following:

- **Communication** — a two-way dialogue to ensure that young workers' voices are heard and their opinions taken into account. Only if young workers feel that something is being done about the issues they raise will they be interested in continuing to be a part of the process.
- **Empowerment** — giving young workers the confidence to challenge more experienced workers and managers, but also recognising that they have responsibilities as well as rights.

Increasingly, young workers will have learned about the basics of risk prevention at school and college. This gives a workplace something to build upon and ensures that young people are more receptive to occupational safety and health in the workplace.

Company practice

The following examples demonstrate how young people can be involved and play an important part in an organisation's safety management system.

Health and safety is an integral part of UK **energy company E.ON's** apprentice training. Engaging apprentices in OSH management and securing their involvement is all part of the process.

- A skills coordinator contributes to supervision. Every three months, a progress review, during which the apprentice's performance is evaluated, gives the skills coordinator an opportunity to capture the apprentice's views on OSH.
- Young workers are involved at first hand. For example, graduates are assigned real-life safety projects to investigate and asked to make recommendations for improvement. Graduates, whether they are following a management or a technical path, are engaged in the safety culture of the organisation.

- Communication forums include apprentice managers' electronic safety bulletins and text messages — a combination of complementary measures.
- An example of a method used to empower apprentices is apprentice forums, which include work groups on personal protective equipment and tools. Here, more experienced apprentices pass on their knowledge and advice to their newer peers. In addition, representatives from apprentice forums are invited to attend a national conference for E.ON worker health and safety representatives. For example, apprentices remarked that safety glasses were not being worn because they did not 'look cool'. A new model was provided that was more accepted.

Experience from training programmes suggests that involving young people in solving real-life OSH problems in their workplace is more meaningful to them and helps them to learn more effectively. It can also enrich employers' hazard detection and risk management processes. One German **energy supplier, RWE Westfalen-Weser-Ems**, involves its second-year apprentices with teaching the first years. With the support of their supervisor or the safety department, they draw on their own experiences of accidents and near misses to prepare a class on OSH for their newer peers. This simple, cost-effective approach also provides the employer with an additional input to risk assessment and management.

UK construction sector company ROK Construction has a culture of empowerment that allows its young workers to take responsibility for and engage in health and safety. They are encouraged to challenge a colleague or superior — the ethos being that employees can both contribute and question. Other ways for their voices to be heard and ideas taken on board include an open-door policy, a confidential helpline and a confidential reporting form. Mentors also relay any concerns or ideas. Young workers are encouraged to be active in the company's employee forums, and the employee magazine is used to publicise employees' contributions.

Young workers may have more relevant ideas than other workers for engaging young people in OSH. For example, in Belgium, **steel company Arcelor** recruited staff through an employment agency, **Manpower**. Potential employees first had to complete some health and safety training and pass a test at the employment agency. However, the failure rate of this test was high and it was observed that new employees had retained little information by the time they started in the workplace. In response, young workers at the mutual insurer **AXA** were asked to develop an interactive tool for training potential employees at the employment agency. Upon implementing the new pre-recruitment training and test, new employees were more safety conscious and the pass rate greatly improved.

The value placed on young workers' ideas was demonstrated in a Dutch vocational training initiative in the **agricultural sector**, involving OSH advisers **Stigas**. Following training on prevention of musculoskeletal problems, students at an agricultural college were asked to propose a solution to a real-life problem during their work placement. The solutions were often simple; for example, students on a work placement in a landscape gardening project suggested laying the garden path at the start of the project, so that wheelbarrows could be pushed more easily through the site. This cost-free solution was adopted by the employer.

To help identify and deal with problems, apprentices of **UK construction company Sheldon** have regular one-to-one discussions with the human resources manager, training manager or health and safety manager. Sheldon is aware that people have different personalities and characteristics; some are shy, whereas others are full of confidence, and people may 'click' more with one manager than another, so all three managers are available to talk to.

Although these are examples from larger companies, these types of approaches could be adopted by organisations of any size.

The role of worker representatives

Some workplaces are required to have worker representatives. National regulations set the precise requirements. A good safety culture involves active cooperation with worker (safety) representatives and trade unions, where they exist. Where there is a trade union, young workers should be encouraged to join. Worker safety representatives and trade unions should be invited to contribute to

the induction training programme. They should be consulted on OSH issues concerning young workers, for example when risk assessments are being carried out.

One role of the worker safety representative is to provide a channel of communication between the employer and the workers. For this to be effective, young workers need to be involved. For example:

- Worker safety representatives should speak with young workers, encourage them to follow safety procedures and help them to feel confident in raising OSH issues.
- The worker safety representative could organise a specific discussion for young workers on OSH or carry out a body- or hazard-mapping exercise with them.

Resources

- More information about the UK examples is available in: British Safety Council, *Ensuring the safety and health of young workers*, British Safety Council, London, 2010. Available at: https://www.britsafe.org/sites/default/files//editor/Young_Workers_Report.pdf
- More information about the examples from Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands can be found in: European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *A safe start for young workers in practice*, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg, 2007. Available at: <http://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/reports/GPB06/view>
- European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *E-fact 7 — Worker safety representatives and the protection of young workers*. Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/e-facts/efact07/view>
- EU-OSHA web pages on worker participation: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/topics/worker-participation>
- EU-OSHA web pages on management and leadership: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/topics/management-leadership>
- EU-OSHA web pages on young people: http://osha.europa.eu/en/priority_groups/young_people