

H&S PROFESSIONALS ARE THE ESSENTIAL ENABLERS IN BUSINESS

Health and safety professionals need to re-align themselves as key advisors within their organisations, who can provide real-added value, advice and support that will enable the business to reach its objectives. Their advice and technical help must be seen as relevant to the overall business, writes health and safety consultant Mary Darlington.

Change is all around us and there is no organisation or business immune from what is happening in the economy and in the country. But what impact is this having on the health and safety profession? Well, I believe it provides us all with challenges and potential opportunities.

The challenges are to remain highly relevant to the business in which we are working. In some cases we are seen as people who constantly say 'No, you cannot do that' which prevents or frustrates the organisation from doing what it wants to do.

This can bring resistance and in some cases outright hostility to what we are all about – being a valuable resource to the organisation, enabling work to be done in a safe and healthy way. This is particularly evident in the UK with many examples of "elf and safety" being ridiculed in the printed media.

ALL-BUSINESS APPROACH

We need to be careful that we tread a different path. We need to broaden our approach to an "all business one". What do I mean by that? I mean that we need to get out of our health and safety silo and learn about other aspects of the business we are in.



This includes the following:

- What is the business model operating in our organisation?
- What are the market pressures?
- What are the key challenges facing the business as a whole?
- What are the key deliverables that CEO and Senior Management are concentrating on?

We need to up-skill on finance, marketing, human resources, production management, information technology and logistics, so when we speak and make a contribution it is well-rounded and thought-out and takes all of these disciplines into account.

The opportunity exists for us to become essential enablers within the business. We need to position ourselves as people either entitled to a seat in the

boardroom or reporting to someone who has a seat there. We need to earn a reputation for saying 'Yes, you can do that but this is the safe and healthy way to do it'.

GREATEST ASSET

Almost every day I hear the worn-out phrase 'people are our greatest asset' yet management decisions rarely if ever follow through on that belief. Human Resource (HR) professionals genuinely believe it and are focused on:

- Attracting the best talent;
- Developing that talent;
- Minimising absenteeism and disruptions to business;
- Enabling employees to work at maximum for the business;
- While providing meaningful work and reward to those employees.

We have a great deal in common with HR professionals, more than you might imagine, in that we the health and safety professionals are focused on:

- Attracting competent employees;
- Developing their competence to ensure they can work safely;
- Creating safe places or work and safe systems of work;
- Minimising disruption to business caused by incidents, accidents, claims etc;
- Reducing costs through effective work processes.

We are effectively singing off 'the same hymn sheet' but coming at the issues from a slightly different angle. We need to work more closely with HR on our common agenda.

Many HR practitioners are also becoming interested in wellbeing at work and the promotion of workplace health, again topics where there is a high level of overlap with us in the health and safety role.

SKILLED WORKFORCE

The future workforce in Ireland is likely to be highly educated and highly skilled. They will come into organisations that attract them, whose brand they trust and who reward them financially and otherwise for their superior effort.

One of the basics values that all organisations should have is the provision of a safe and healthy place of work. Here I include psychological safety as well as physical safety.

As well as looking at work processes, machines, use of chemicals, noise work at height, and so on, we also need to be mindful of the hours that we ask employees to work. We are all aware of the recent death of a 21-year-old UK Banking intern who it is alleged had worked for three days and nights in the run-up to his death.¹

We all know that working longer hours does not automatically lead to great output or greater productivity but leads, not surprisingly, to greater errors, loss of concentration and fatigue.

NEW CHALLENGES

We also need to actively monitor stress, workloads and the appropriate level of 'contactability' as technologies now enable employees to be emailed night and day (even while on holiday) through a raft of mobile devices.

The replacement of desktop computers with tablets, smart phones kindles is creating all sorts of new challenges in terms of repetitive strain and awkward postures that were never included in the Display Screen Regulations.

When health and safety professionals are involved at the early stage in project teams (set up to develop new products or new services) due to their skills they can anticipate hazards within those new processes, and can either design them completely or input control measures to minimise them.

Therefore, we need to ask to be involved in every new project, where we will get a chance to demonstrate our value in eliminating problems at the earliest stages.

Once the economy picks up, and it will, organisations will need to be ready for the challenges it will present. Many employees who are staying put right now are doing so out of necessity.

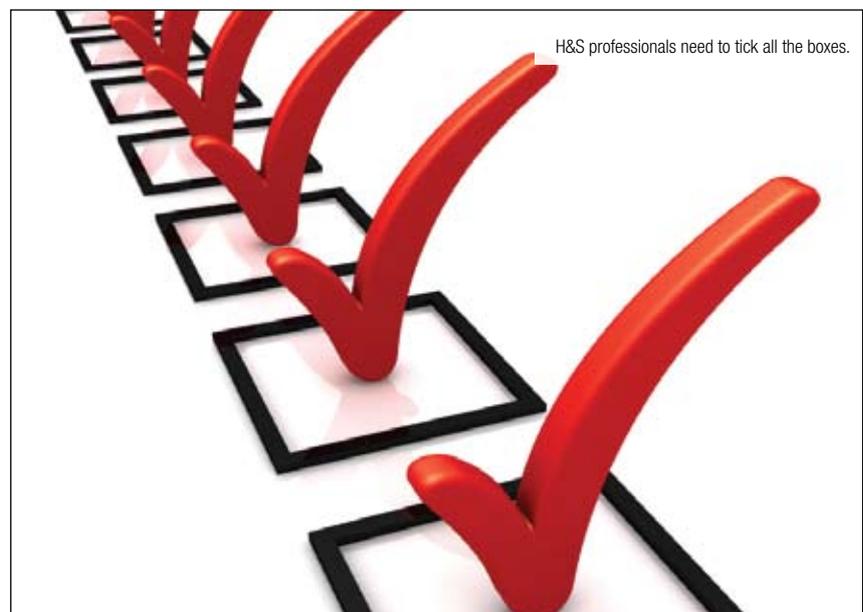
As soon as other and better job offers become available they will walk out the door. According to Frank



Dillon, writing recently on 'Nurturing Talent with Trust', "40 per cent of Irish employees say that they intend to move jobs over the next two years".²

FEELING VALUED

They will not just move for more money (as money is not the only motivator) but will take into account a range of other factors. These include job security, opportunity for



professional development, the quality of the relationship they have with their immediate manager and with peers, the level of trust and whether they feel valued or not. Feeling safe and valued falls directly in to the health and safety management within the organisation.

Think about it logically – why would any talented employee stay in a company where they feel that senior management does not genuinely care about their health, safety and welfare? Equally why would we risk injuring a valuable employee that we have spent time and money hiring, inducting and training? Yet companies do exactly that every day.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT

The greatest part of the relationship between an employee and their employer is not what is contained in their contract of employment or even what is printed on their pay slip but rather what is contained within the 'psychological contract'.

Dr Marla Gottschalk states that this comprises the employee's perceptions and beliefs concerning the exchange agreement that exists between them and their employer. Unfortunately, when balance is not achieved, perceived breaches of this contract do occur and can ultimately result in lowered levels of trust, job satisfaction and performance. Breaches of trust, or unfulfilled promises, can have far-reaching consequences upon their relationship with work.

Numerous studies tell us that an engaged workforce can contribute to the success of an organisation. On a very basic level, engaged employees are happier; they smile more, laugh more learn more and organisations with a greater percentage of engaged employees appear safer and more profitable.³

WORKING TOGETHER

All managers need to work together to maximise employee engagement within the business to get their buy in and commitment. Within health and safety we call this consultation and involving employees in coming up with solutions to health and safety issues within their own work. When this is done well it can achieve remarkable results.

The ideas that employees on the front line often come up with are far better than those that might have been put forward by management and even by health and safety professionals. Not all



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solutions lie in management's heads.

And we all know that employees whose ideas and suggestions are implemented will work twice as hard on those suggestions, because they own them, than on those imposed by others.

EFFECTIVE SYSTEMS

Small companies also need to recognise that they have to put in place effective health and safety systems, firstly to keep costs and claims down and secondly to hold on to talented staff just as much as larger companies.

SMEs are crucial here as they represent 72% of all those at work out of 1.1 million employees across the entire non-construction, non-agriculture real economy, according to Central Bank in 2012.⁴

Regrettably many are not investing in training or in any other kind of health and safety activity because survival is their primary objective until the upturn comes. There is a major challenge here for health and safety professionals to convince them that any investment in health and safety is money well spent.

Poor safety costs as we all know and the impact on a small business of a key employee being injured and being out of work for an extended period can be huge.

STRATEGIC ASSETS

Health and safety professionals need to work harder to remain relevant and valued and we will only achieve that when we broaden our perspective on our organisations. We need to create alliances with departments such as Human Resources, and work together to influence senior managers. When the business is going well CEOs often wonder if they need a health and safety manager at all.

Equally when there are many accidents and injuries they wonder if

they need a health and safety manager because that person does not appear to be influencing the rate of injuries etc. Sometimes we cannot win yet we all know that creating safe workplaces, preventing injuries, protecting the organisation's most valuable asset is a job well worth doing.

The rewards are there for a job well done but we must continually strive to achieve excellence in everything we do and to have our contribution recognised by the key decision makers. It is all to play for.

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