



Short guide to improving health and safety on construction sites through

effective worker involvement



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Foreword by the Chair

Alan Ritchie writes...



Worker involvement is key to improving health and safety in the workplace. This is particularly true for an industry such as construction which suffers from a high number of workplace accidents and ill-health and a high level of false self-employment.

The Strategic Forum for Construction's Encouraging Worker Involvement Working Group has developed a simple piece of guidance to help improve the level and quality of worker involvement on construction sites.

It is aimed mainly at smaller firms working on smaller sites, but is also of benefit for workers themselves and larger companies. The guidance document explains the different approaches that can be used for better engaging the workers in all health and safety matters. It also gives a short account of the legal background, describes the vast benefits worker involvement entails and gives some real-life examples where worker engagement has been a success.

The Working Group is passionate about the importance of a fully involved, qualified and directly employed workforce for improving the health and safety record in construction, and would like to urge everybody to fully commit to it.

A. S. Ritchie

Alan Ritchie

General Secretary: Union of Construction, Allied Trades & Technicians (UCATT)

Chair: Strategic Forum for Construction's Encouraging Worker Involvement Working Group

What is worker involvement?

Worker involvement stands for the involvement of the workforce in the decision-making processes so that risks can be managed in the most effective way. The workforce has direct experience of site conditions and is often the first to identify potential problems, which is why involving workers is crucial to improve health and safety on site.

This booklet gives some basic information in why and how to engage effectively with the workforce, with some real-life examples of methods which have worked well on construction sites.

Overwhelming benefits

Engaging the workforce has proven to have major benefits for the project and all involved, including:

- Safer working conditions, reduced accident rates and less work-related ill health.
- A more motivated workforce, as workers feel they are an integral part of the work processes.
- Increased productivity and efficiency and lower staff turnover.
- Improved technical knowledge throughout the organisation, site or project team.

Legal requirements

In addition to these benefits there are also legal stipulations which require employers to engage their workforce. Main pieces of legislation dealing with worker involvement are:

Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations (SRSCR) 1977

[<http://www.tuc.org.uk/extras/brownbook.pdf>]

At workplaces with trade union representation, an employer must consult the trade union safety representatives on issues affecting those represented by the representative. Safety representatives have a wide range of roles allowing the active involvement and representation of the workforce on health and safety issues.

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Health and Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations 1996
[http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si1996/Uksi_19961513_en_1.htm]

Workplaces without trade union representation still must consult with their workforce, either directly or through elected workplace representatives.

Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 2007 (CDM2007)
[http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2007/ukxi_20070320_en_1]

CDM 2007 places duties on contractors and principal contractors to inform, consult and engage with their workforce on health and safety on site (see CDM 2007, Regs. 5, 13 and 24; also see the Approved Code of Practice, para 241-255).

Different approaches to engaging the workforce

Engaging the workforce must be a two-way **‘top-down’ AND ‘bottom-up’ communication** between management and workers – just informing workers about health and safety rules is not genuine worker engagement.

No two projects are the same and will therefore need different approaches as to how best to involve the workers. Small projects will probably rely more on informal means of communication and consultation, while large projects will require more formal methods.

Informal approaches

Informal approaches to involve your workforce are more appropriate for small sites, which have plenty of direct communication between all or most people working on site.

Informal worker involvement does not require formal committees or meetings but will involve ad hoc meetings or conversations. They are usually started by management when walking through the site at

break times or during conversations about the tasks to be done. It may also involve regular joint walkabouts with members of management and the workforce.

This is one of the most frequently used forms of engagement with the workforce. It is recommended that site supervisors or managers carry a site diary and record the issues and actions to take. They should inform the workers when an issue has been dealt with successfully.

Formal approaches

Larger sites where regular direct communication between the workforce and management is less frequent should supplement their informal approaches with formal mechanisms that guarantee the consultation and involvement of all workers. Mechanisms that have shown to work well in construction include:

Site inductions

In addition to site health and safety issues, the induction should explain the arrangements for worker engagement. This includes information on:

- How the workers will be consulted
- Who they can contact with questions, concerns and who their union representatives are
- Relevant findings resulting from risk assessments
- Who is responsible for implementing health and safety procedures on site, and how to contact him or her.

Pre-task briefings

These should be provided at the beginning of a shift or task, or when conditions change that will affect the workers. The briefing consists of discussing the work to be done and asking the worker to compare the risk assessment controls and method of work with the actual task in hand. The workers need to be given an opportunity to ask questions and express their views.

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Safety representatives

In workplaces with trade union recognition, employers must consult with trade union appointed safety representatives on health and safety matters. In workplaces without trade union representation, employees must also be consulted, either directly or through their elected representatives. Both types of representatives are entitled to paid time off and training in order to enable them to carry out their functions. Union safety representatives receive their training from the TUC and their unions.

The TUC provides a range of general and specific health and safety courses and training material as well as online information [http://www.tuc.org.uk/h_and_s/index.cfm?mins=395&minors=395].

The rights and responsibilities of safety representatives include:

- Being consulted 'in good time' over a large range of health and safety issues
- Attending safety committee meetings
- Inspecting the workplace for potential hazards, and taking part in risk assessments
- Investigating accidents, cases of diseases or ill-health, and dangerous occurrences.

Sites with trade union safety representatives have been shown to have much better accident and ill-health records than those without, demonstrating the effectiveness of the union effect. Safety representatives offer a direct source of information for workers and are well trained and experienced to discover health and safety hazards [http://www.tuc.org.uk/h_and_s/tuc-8382-fo.cfm].

Toolbox talks

These are short talks focused around the risks relating to specific health and safety issues (such as lifting, slips and trips, falls from height etc). The talks should be clear and concise, and show the relevance of specific topics to particular tasks. Toolbox talks are seen as particularly useful when they address real incidents or near misses. There should be plenty of opportunity for workers to input their ideas.

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Suggestion box and free-phone number

One of the means for workers to report their concerns and suggestions could be through a suggestion box. Suggestion boxes have the added advantages that they allow anonymity of the worker. A good way to encourage using the suggestion box is to organise a monthly or bi-monthly prize draw of all (non-anonymous) comments received. A free-phone number is a similar method and usually used at larger sites.

Safety committees

If two or more safety representatives request the employer to set up a safety committee, the employer must do so within three months of the request. The membership needs to include workers and actions should be recorded.

The tasks of safety committees include:

- Monitoring all arrangements for health and safety, revising them whenever necessary
- Reviewing risk assessments
- Monitoring the effectiveness of health and safety training
- Monitoring and reviewing the adequacy of health and safety communication and publicity within the workplace.

Safety action groups

Also known as 'safety circles', these consist of volunteers who come together for the purpose of solving specific problems. They differ from a safety committee in that they do not have to meet at regular intervals. The group can follow up on recommendations from a suggestion box, or from issues reported to an organisation's free-phone number. The group is dissolved after each meeting until another problem arises that needs a solution. Only required actions need to be recorded, which keeps paperwork to a minimum. However, safety action groups should not be used as a substitute for safety committees which are established in law.

Surveys and questionnaires

These can be either paper based or by telephone and can reach every worker. They can be anonymous, which makes it easier for people to

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air all their concerns. Workers could also be asked to fill in a questionnaire (asking about concerns as well as positive feedback) when leaving the site for the last time. This would allow for lessons to be learnt from their experiences on the site.

Dealing with issues

Management should communicate the results of the worker engagement process, including how issues have been closed out, to the workers and safety representatives. An 'action list' in a prominent place displaying measures that have been taken to improve health and safety is an effective method of providing such feedback.

Other issues to consider

Workers need to have enough knowledge

It is acknowledged that sites that predominantly adhere to the principle of direct employment have a greater level of worker involvement. Worker engagement is most effective when the workforce has enough knowledge to identify risks and provide feedback on how to eliminate or reduce the risks. Workers have the confidence to do this when they are properly trained, know how to report their concerns and see quick action being taken as a result.

Skills registration schemes such as CSCS (Construction Skills Certification Scheme) or equivalent are a useful method of ensuring that everyone working on the site has some basic awareness of the hazards on construction sites. However this is not enough by itself and other more extensive training (e.g. training days, support in achieving higher NVQ level etc) should be provided to make sure that workers are properly trained. This means that they understand the physical hazards on construction sites and know how accidents can be prevented.

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Non-English speaking workers

It is important that communication on site is also possible with those workers that have no or only a basic knowledge of the English language. A common way to deal with this problem is to have a worker or supervisor who can interpret for the group. However, this person needs to be with the group at all times and alternative arrangements will need to be made when they are not available. This may include using an external interpreter.

Risk assessments and method statements may need to be interpreted in different languages. Employers could offer English language courses for longer-term workers. A number of employers already fund language courses, and there has been an enthusiastic take up of this provision.

The right to stop work

In the case of serious and imminent danger, all workers have the right to stop work and immediately proceed to a place of safety. 'Serious and imminent danger' means there is a real and substantial risk of injury and ill-health, and that the danger will arise as soon as the work would begin.

Managers and contractors must ensure that all workers are aware of this right, and that procedures are in place to effectively deal with such situations when they arise. The policy should be provided as a written document so that workers have physical proof of their right.

Encouraging real-life examples of effective worker engagement

Case study 1: thePlace, Sunderland

Project facts

■ Refurbishment of six Grade II-listed buildings and a new building in Sunnyside historic quarter, Sunderland. Developed to become an arts and business centre, including offices, an art gallery and exhibition space, artist studios and cafes

■ Start: 2007

■ End: Summer 2008

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- Total cost: £6m

- Principal Contractor: Kendall Cross

Development of network of safety representatives

This site benefited from a joint scheme to improve worker involvement by NFB and UCATT, being a continuation of the Worker Safety Advisor scheme, which ran from 2004-2007.

The contractor of the project, Kendall Cross, was keen to increase its health and safety performance by getting the workers on site more involved with health and safety. With the joint scheme promoted by NFB and UCATT, UCATT health and safety advisor Peter Wilson went on the site presenting the benefits and practical working of trade union safety representatives. Various workers then received extensive initial and then ongoing safety representatives training, which allowed them to conduct necessary workplace inspections, toolbox talks and contribute to risk assessments. Most importantly, their training and increased knowledge allowed for an effective representation and involvement of the workers in all questions concerning health and safety.

Following on from this initiative, after the termination of the project, Kendall Cross has continued to develop its own in-house network of safety representatives. Malcom Paton, Kendall Cross Operations Director said: “We now have a number of people trained and I am even more convinced than ever of the benefits of worker safety representatives. They assist the site management team with site safety inspections and help out with toolbox talks. We are working towards having one worker representative on all sites and I can see that the message is getting through with a continued improvement in our safety performance.”

Case study 2: Manchester Royal Infirmary

Project facts

- Development of five new hospitals

- Start: 2005

- Scheduled end: 2010

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- Total cost: £383m

- Principal Contractor: Bovis Lend Lease

A commitment to worker engagement

At the Manchester Royal Infirmary site different methods for worker engagement have been introduced at an early stage. The methods have resulted in effective and wide-ranging processes for engaging the workforce on the site. The continuous functioning of the methods has been possible due to the commitment of both union representatives and management. Everybody working on site now feels the positive effects on a daily basis.

Mechanisms implemented

UCATT Health and Safety Advisor Billy Baldwin first approached Bovis to work together to improve worker engagement on the site. Formal mechanisms then agreed and implemented include:

- A safety committee meets once every month. Around 16 members from different subcontractors attend the meeting, which allows for a wide representation of the workforce. The regular meeting schedule makes sure that there is continuous exchange.

- A network of safety representatives has been built up. The safety representatives have been trained on a wide range of health and safety issues, as well as in other useful areas such as communication skills. The advantage of the safety representatives is that they are working at the sharp end, which means they become aware of a problem or concern immediately or at a very early stage when it arises. Due to their training they can also give direct help and support on health and safety issues where necessary.

In addition to the work of the safety representatives, a full-time UCATT Convenor spends large parts of his work dealing with health and safety issues. This includes co-ordinating the safety committee, acting as a central contact point for complaints referred to the HSE, and working closely with the principal contractor to feed back workers' viewpoints and concerns.

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A written stop work procedure provides operatives with documentary proof of their right to stop work. If an operative feel that s/he is put at an unacceptable risk they must stop work immediately and report the circumstances to their supervisor.

Lasting effects

The UCATT Health and Safety Advisor working on the site states that: “The work undertaken at this site has by no means been the easy option but the rewards will last for some considerable time to come. Representatives that have moved to other sites have requested the same facilities that were made available at the Royal Infirmary site. Worker engagement is a continual process due to the transient nature of the workforce and the fact that contractors leave site on completion of their package to be replaced by those working on the next phase. However once the framework is in place and the people involved with implementation have a good understanding of what is required, then it is a simple process to replicate.”

Case study 3: Joint initiative between Balfour Kilpatrick and Unite

Unite ran a joint initiative with Balfour Kilpatrick to encourage new trade union safety representatives to come forward, giving them quality health and safety training and support to carry out their roles. Representatives were trained to increase awareness of their rights and the scope of their role, good practice in health and safety specific to construction, risk assessment, accident investigation and site inspections. The initiative was supported by union and company officials at the highest level.

There are now 20 representatives operating in the company within an organised structure, with incident rates falling significantly. These representatives cover an area and are entitled to inspect sites other than their own, a good example of roving representatives, assisted by both the company and the union. This is an ongoing company/trade union initiative that has endured for many years over several hundred contracts, where Balfour Kilpatrick has been willing to recognise representatives even when a contract has finished.

Further information

- *HSE worker involvement website:*
[<http://www.hse.gov.uk/involvement/index.htm>]
- *Consulting employees on health and safety: A guide to the law; HSE, October 2008:* [<http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg232.pdf>]
- *Involving your workers in health and safety: A guide for small businesses; HSE, October 2008:*
[<http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/web35.pdf>]
- *UCATT safety representatives website:*
[<http://www.ucatt.info/content/view/542/28>]
- *Reps in Action – How workplaces can gain from modern union representatives; BERR, TUC and CBI, May 2009:*
[<http://www.berr.gov.uk/files/file51155.pdf>]
- *Safety representatives. A charter for change; TUC, October 2008:*
[<http://www.tuc.org.uk/extras/safetyrepscharter.pdf>]
- *The union effect; TUC, August 2004:*
[http://www.tuc.org.uk/h_and_s/tuc-8382-fo.cfm]
- *HSE Topic Pack: Worker Consultation and Involvement; HSE, July 2007:*
[<http://www.hse.gov.uk/foi/internalops/fod/inspect/workerinvolve.pdf>]
- *Information and guidance to Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 2007; ConstructionSkills:*
[<http://www.cskills.org/supportbusiness/healthsafety/cdmregs/index.asp>]
- *Trades Unions and Safety Representatives Contribution to Health and Safety Standards in Construction; CONIAC, July 2005:*
[<http://www.unitetheunion.com/pdf/CONIACPaper2009.pdf>]



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