Health and Safety in a Changing World: a summary of key findings

This is a selection of the key findings from six studies commissioned by IOSH as part of its research programme.

The studies were:
- OSH knowledge and its management – Institute of Occupational Medicine
- The changing landscape of OSH regulation in the UK – University of Nottingham
- Management of OSH in networked systems of production or service delivery: studies in healthcare, construction and logistics – Loughborough University
- Engagement of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in occupational safety and health – Loughborough University
- The changing legitimacy of health and safety at work – Universities of Reading and Portsmouth
- Networks of influence: practising safety leadership in low-hazard environments – Cranfield University

Mission

IOSH is an advocate for advancing OSH practice and continuing improvements in societal responses to safety and health issues.
- The critical political, general public and media response to "'elf 'n safety" seems to be much more concerned with what might be described as public rather than workplace issues. Members of the public are more supportive of interventions to promote safe working than of those in places where they feel able, or entitled, to make their own assessments.
- Members of the public seem to respond rather differently to "'elf 'n safety" as a general phenomenon than as something that would impinge on their own working conditions. This may suggest that the most effective response to attempts to reduce levels of protection would be to emphasise personal implications – this is not about 'workers in general going home safely' but about 'you going home safely'.
- OSH professionals face many challenges in relation to actual, potential and perceived conflicts of interest. Whether directly employed or acting as consultants, OSH professionals are pulled between the economic considerations of different kinds of enterprise, and possibly their own business interests, and their mission to protect the safety and health of workers at all levels.
- There is some evidence of a concern, particularly among SMEs, that the economic interests of OSH professionals

may lead to 'gold plating' recommendations which impose costs that are disproportionate to the risks. (It may also be that the SME owners under-estimate the economic and emotional costs of an accident to a small 'family' or 'family-like' organisation.) The reports do not suggest that this concern is widely shared – and it would not be unique to the OSH profession. However, it may be a business risk for OSH professionals in terms of their social licence to operate.

Expertise

The research addressed a number of issues emerging around the OSH profession's knowledge and its management.
- Worker-led solutions to OSH hazards may be better suited to dynamic work environments. 'Work-arounds' should not necessarily be dismissed, but understood as practical attempts to solve problems from which specialists can learn.
- The operational achievement of OSH outcomes rests mainly on the local decisions of workers and supervisors. OSH practice needs to think about how to engage with these and to encourage in situ leadership to identify problems, remedy them and, in particular, institutionalise the learning.
- The formal, rule-oriented approaches that may have been important for traditional extractive and heavy industries are not a good fit for contemporary workplaces. Even in high-hazard environments, there are serious questions about whether rule-following and an emphasis on process may compromise OSH outcomes if workers are not able to raise concerns at points where the process seems to be failing.

Dissemination

The research programme's reports offer tools that practitioners can use to influence how their organisations perceive them.
- Arguably, the future OSH professional will be more of a consultant or coach to workgroups or project teams, assisting proactively with problem-solving rather than mapping processes against rules. Dynamic work environments may require a greater emphasis on safety and health outcomes than on specific means of achieving them.
- The future role of an OSH professional may involve both the application of their own expertise and the recognition

that complementary expertise is required. An OSH professional in a team may serve as both a team expert and a knowledge broker, knowing who to call when a particular problem emerges. This would be a familiar model in many other professions but has not been explicitly developed in the OSH profession.

- Lead contractors may be under reputational pressure to minimise safety and health risks, as a dimension of their social licence to carry out such works. This has created incentives to develop thinking on safety, to invest in research or, at least, knowledge acquisition, and to engage sub-contractors, as network members, in pursuit of the same goals. The sub-contractors benefit from the knowledge transfer and can take this to other workplaces, which may not operate on the same scale.

- A large number of smaller businesses are essentially disconnected from communities of practice that might strengthen their OSH capacity. The same may be true of their professional OSH advisers: some formerly worked for leader companies and retain connections that can be used for advice and updating, but many others do not have access to comparable social networks.

- One corollary of a dynamic work environment may be a more transient and ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse workforce. These workers are often disconnected from the informal knowledge that promotes safe working among core employees and do not have the same opportunity to build knowledge through practice. They present a greater risk, not only to themselves but also to core employees (and the wider public), unless structural barriers to knowledge flow are addressed explicitly.

- Effective safety management is likely to be achieved by scenario-based training rather than rule-based training. This approach encourages workers to focus on outcomes rather than on procedures, so that their capacity to analyse risks and improvise solutions is developed rather than simply following rules, even when these are not relevant or are leading to an unsafe outcome. Managers should minimise attempts to control things that do not need to be controlled. At the same time, workers must expect to be accountable for their OSH decisions.

'IOSH's investment in the research programme *Health and Safety in a Changing World* has delivered a rich resource for strategic thinking and discussion within the OSH profession. In particular, it offers a deep analysis of the changing institutional contexts of work and employment, the evolution of management thinking and practices, and the emerging place of OSH within this.

'This analysis provides an opportunity to widely reflect on the fitness for purpose of established approaches to education, training and professional development and on the relationship between OSH professionals, managers and workers to ensure currency and connectivity of the profession in the world of work and society.'

Professor Robert Dingwall
Research programme director

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