Joint meeting

7th August 2020

**South Cumbria &
North Lancashire Branch**

**South Cumbria Occupational
Health & Safety Group**

Venue: *Zoom* meeting

Topic: *Rising to the new challenges for our organisations as Covid-19 restrictions are eased.*

Speaker: Elsa Mason, *DMA Safety Management Ltd* (Inspire Safety), Seascale.

Gary McAteer, Chairman, *South Cumbria & North Lancashire IOSH Branch* welcomed attendees to the joint meeting of *South Cumbria & North Lancashire IOSH Branch* and *South Cumbria Occupational Health & Safety Group*. He then introduced our speaker, Elsa Mason, Director, *DMA Safety Management Ltd* (Inspire Safety), who is also an active member of our Branch committee.

Elsa started her presentation by explaining that, as lockdown restrictions eased employers and managers are facing unique challenges due to differing work patterns during lockdown - some employees had been on furlough, some had needed to carry on working, others had worked from home and many had faced additional problems associated with home schooling. This meant that everyone's lockdown experience was different, and their Covid-19 risk perceptions would also be different. It was therefore important that organisations fostered clear communication systems between managers and employees to help everyone adjust to the Covid-19 workplace restrictions. For instance, employees who had been required to continue their 'normal' work during lockdown would have different expectations and worries from those who had been furloughed.

She explained that employers and managers needed to review what had worked well during the lockdown period as well as things that could have been managed better with hindsight. This assessment should cover management of: technology (during lockdown and beyond), the workplace environment, communication systems (employees and customers), employee wellbeing (workplace, home working, furlough), health and safety (home working), company survival needs in the near and medium term.

Elsa said that it was particularly important to ensure that workplace communication needs were reviewed for example, between team leaders and their teams, between colleagues and with customers as Covid-19 restrictions are eased. These reviews may identify a need for:

- *Covid-19 workplace induction training*.
- *Skills training* - months away from work can lead to skill fade - check that employees still have the necessary skills to work safely and efficiently eg provide training in new systems of work that comply with Covid-19 restrictions and refresher skills training as necessary.
- *Reintegrating work teams* - especially if some have been at work while others have been on furlough.
- *Health checks* - consider Covid-19 workplace testing and/or daily temperature checks before allowing employees into their workplace.
- *Amend workplace policies* – for example, on work travel and workplace visitors.
- *Develop additional policies* – for example to help employees who are desperate to return to work and for those who are reluctant to return to work.
- *Prepare for a recession* – for example, criteria for redundancies (and support packages), possible alternative business model (new lines, focus on successful line), honest discussions with work force about possible ways forward etc…

She stressed that it was important for employers and managers to adopt a consistent approach that was fair and seen to be based on objective assessments.

Elsa then reminded members that if employers decided that it was appropriate for some members of their workforce to work from home on a permanent basis this did not absolve them from their responsibilities for those employees such as:

- *Workstation assessments* – ensure that the employee's home, work area is compliant with health and safety regulations and suitable for their tasks.
- *Lone working assessments* – clear line management system with appropriate checks (especially if an employee lives on their own), clear task responsibilities and work contact requirements, develop appropriate systems for travel from home on in workplace role (meetings, site visits, specific jobs etc…).
- *Need for social interactions and understanding of workplace culture and structure* – consider Buddy networks, virtual meetings, regular workplace days, psychological support (particularly for those who have faced bereavement.

Next Elsa considered the possible impacts of Covid-19 and lockdown on the mental health of employers, managers, and employees. She explained that a recent report produced by the *Centre for Mental Health* identified key factors that had an impact on people's mental health:

- *Financial worries* – difficult to alleviate, but employers should try and provide as much financial support and practical advice as possible for those are made redundant, have to work shorter hours or are left on extended furlough due the Covid-19 restrictions - to help alleviate worries about further financial insecurity.
- *Psychological worries* – employers can provide information about available advice and support to help to create a sense of psychological safety for employees who have become afraid to go out following lockdown.
- *Recovering from Covid-19 infection and/or bereavement* – employers can develop mental health support to people who have received hospital treatment or home treatment for Covid-19 and to those who have experienced a recent bereavement.
- *Prepare for a recession* – to help employees cope better with possible future redundancies and reorganisations. This needs financial and human resources and robust policies tailored to cope with a single, deep recession this year or to a series of economic shocks each of which will inevitably create the need for additional mental health support for some employees.

Elsa then summarised strategies that businesses can use to develop a Covid-19 business interruption plan:

- *Develop key Covid-19 policies for dealing with*: employee illness eg temperature testing, pay, return to work etc…; employees required to undertake Corvid-19 isolation eg holiday, Covid-19 contact etc…, Covid-19 testing, HR support.
- *Amend standard policies* – accident recording and reporting, risk assessment, environmental impact assessments, safe systems of work etc…
- *Future business planning* – review business continuity, assess potential new markets, emergency planning, coping with future local/national lockdowns.
- *People* – two-way communication, rebuild confidence, develop resilience strategies, use a reward system that is seen to be fair for employees who have 'gone beyond the call of duty'.

Elsa then displayed a slide with photographs of four well known world political leaders and challenged members to think about what sort of workplace leader they wanted to be.

She ended her presentation by suggesting that employers and managers are faced with the dual challenge of needing to re-build their businesses while complying with Covid-19 restrictions and their impact on staff resilience. She suggested that effective communication must be an integral part of this process and that many OSH professionals had a unique opportunity to help build a positive and better workplace health and safety culture.

Gary, then asked Elsa for her views on some of the questions that had been raised in Zoom chat during her presentation. These included:

Q I understand that there is increasing resentment between some workers who have returned to the office against those who are still 'relaxing' on furlough and vice versa. Based on your experience, what is the best way of dealing with this?

Q. We have a workforce split between remote/home workers in the regions and office-based staff. Some of the teams do physically mobile work and travel a lot eg managing youth work services, the office-based business support activities are more corporate and traditional. Furlough and lockdown has exacerbated different perceptions and pre-existing splits. The gap between those who want to come in to work/go out on site visits and those who are very anxious and don't want to have been exacerbated by local restrictions and 'spikes' near our base office. Any suggestions on how we can bridge the divide?

Related Zoom comments:

"…*this is something that I have seen when a client thought they were 'doing the right thing' and topped up the salaries of those on furlough thinking it would only be for a couple of weeks. Many weeks later those 'left behind working' were very unhappy*…"

"…*My husband's company arrange virtual pub visits periodically to keep in touch with remote workers. Run on MS Teams, you have to bring your own drinks and snacks but they provide the entertainment - no arguments about how the bill is split...the next one is scheduled for 5pm today!...*".

Elsa agreed that this was a difficult situation that could only be resolved by effective and honest communication between employers, managers, and employees as she had stressed during her presentation. She suggested that staff needed the opportunities to discuss resentments 'in confidence' with line managers and that it was important that employees understood the reasons for behind decisions that identified a need for some workers to be at work, while others were working from home and others were on furlough. This could be done via workplace Newsletters, virtual meetings, induction training sessions, reskilling training, one-to-one meetings etc… taking account of the workplace health and safety culture and individual needs.

Q. If people are allowed to continue working from home surely managers have got to take responsibility for these home workers by visiting their homes to check that work-station assessments have been completed competently?

Elsa agreed that this is a management responsibility. She suggested that assessments could be undertaken by home visits or by a virtual assessment of the workstation and work area via a video link.

Gary then brought the meeting to a close after thanking Elsa for giving members such a comprehensive presentation about the challenges facing organisations as lockdown eases and they seek to rebuild their businesses.

Related *HSE* web site links:

Covid-19 workplace risk assessments: https://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/working-safely/risk-assessment.htm

Social distancing in the workplace: https://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/working-safely/covid-secure.htm

Managing work related stress: https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/what-to-do.htm

Protecting home workers: https://www.hse.gov.uk/toolbox/workers/home.htm

Drivers' welfare: https://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/drivers-transport-delivery.htm