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The development and implementation of the Roads Service safety management system

Abstract

Roads Service is an agency of the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland (renamed Department for Regional Development), responsible for over 24,500km of public roads. Roads Service's unique position in the UK and Ireland as the region's sole road authority gives it the ability to implement consistent and cost-effective practices.

Roads Service's overall aim is to ensure the provision of a safe and effective road network throughout NI, recognising the need to protect the quality of the environment.

Roads Service employs 1035 professional, technical and administrative staff and 950 direct labour workers. The workforce is involved in a wide range of work activities, each with its own particular hazards and risk control measures. It is important, therefore, that the safety controls identified through risk assessment are implemented in a way that promotes an improved level of safety across the organisation.

Public Sector

The public sector has always considered that it should give a lead in complying with the HASAW legislation. In the past this was done through the production of detailed safety policies and the development of safe systems of work relating to all workplace hazards. Over the years there has been the fear that compliance with the HASAW legislation could not be guaranteed unless everything was carefully documented and nothing was overlooked. The net result was that volumes of paper were created as a means of defence. This proved to be counter-productive, since it was not always logical or cohesive and was very difficult for the end user to assimilate.

Recently a more practical approach has developed which has seen a trend towards managing safety in line with an accepted management model. As the public sector comes to accept this position the fear has subsided and organisations have grown more confident in their ability to manage safety within the requirements of the European framework.

Since 1997 Roads Service has completely revised its approach to safety. The resulting system, embracing many of the principles of the International Quality Standards, ISO9000, is exceptional within the NI public sector and perhaps even within NI industry.

Roads Service recognised the need to revise its current safety management system, which had been developed in the early 1980s. The existing arrangements were a collection of safety circulars, hazards warning notes and safe systems of work. Much of the dissemination of information was reactive, often dealing with specific legislative requirements. In order to derive the benefits from a more cohesive and comprehensive system Roads Service grasped the opportunity for a radical improvement of health and safety management, using appropriate continuous improvement tools. The changes were necessary, not because everything was going wrong, but because there was the danger that paper generation was

- Is it enough?

Whether Chief Executive, manager or employee we all have a responsibility to look out for the health, safety and wellbeing of ourselves and others who may be affected by our activities - a 'duty of care'. With this at the heart of our safety systems issues of legal compliance and best practice approaches become a natural and normal part of our everyday work activities. Duty of care gets us to the point of legal compliance in many areas and well beyond it where we recognise the potential for harm to be greatest.

This approach has increased Roads service's standing with HSENI since they recognise the value of adopting a best value approach. Roads Service as a result, recently signed up to the 'Good Neighbour Initiative' and co-hosted a seminar on the control of Hand-Arm Vibration Syndrome. This partnership was the first since HSENI was formed in April 1999 and the first Good Neighbour Initiative between two Government Departments.

Management and employee ownership

No system will ever succeed without buy-in from senior management and the staff. The challenge facing the architect of any health and safety management system is to establish and maintain a balance between these two, sometimes conflicting, interests. The objective must be the development of quality-based safety system that encourages total employee involvement in the safety management process.

Before developing the new safety management system Roads Service conducted a targeted sample survey across all disciplines, grades and business units. The survey examined deficiencies in the current arrangements and sought respondents' views on what features and information would be required. The survey indicated a high level of dissatisfaction with the current arrangements, citing them as unwieldy, unprofessional and often too detailed. There was an overwhelming desire for documentation that is clear, concise and accessible to all staff. The suggestion of an electronic version of the documentation received widespread approval and will be introduced to the Roads Service Intranet in the coming year.

The new approach is as much about ensuring that safety does not become a single event but rather that the whole process becomes enjoyable and eventful for all concerned.

Consequently the revised safety management system contains the following key elements;

- a new safety manual (soon to be available on the intranet),
- a simplified approach to risk assessment (available on the intranet),
- a new pocket safety book, and
- a safety awareness campaign for all current and future staff.

There was wide consultation during the production of the pocket safety book. The general consensus was that it really should be pocket sized and present the information in a simple, 'do-don't', format (sample included in submission). The success is evident in the fact that it has rapidly become the first point of reference for most employees requiring safety guidance.

Roles and responsibilities

The change in approach to safety management was opportune in that it coincided with a reorganised management structure. Emphasising line management responsibility for safety allows the organisation to change and grow, without adversely affecting the safety management arrangements. In the new Roads Service structure senior management responsibility for OHS policy is at Boardroom level, with the Director of Engineering.

The safety advisory officer has played a central role in safety management within Roads Service since the enactment of the HASAW legislation. It is now recognised that safety management is not something that can be left to those few individuals, but something for which every employee, from the top down, has a responsibility. The new approach is quite different to what the Service has been used to over the years, but it is an approach that is needed for the safety strategy to be successful.

The safety manual clearly defines the key tasks and major outputs for everyone within the organisation; policy makers (at boardroom level), planners (all managers) and implementers (the workforce). Additionally each safety procedure details who is responsible for their successful execution. Any new system causes concern among those who have to use it, but in this case nobody lost control or gained any additional responsibility, rather the roles have just been more clearly defined.

The approach adopted is in line with thinking at the highest levels within the HSENI and HSEUK. The safety advisory role of giving clear and succinct professional advice whenever it is needed remains crucial to the success of the new approach.

Conclusion

Risk assessment is central to how we manage safety, a point that was emphasised to every employee at a series of seminars entitled 'Working Safety', held between November 1998 and February 1999. There is a need for plain speaking in the way that the safety message is communicated to all employees. In producing its safety management system Roads Service has honoured its guiding principle; to keep the degree of detail at the minimum needed to achieve the desired level of safety. Safety can not be treated as an event or a series of single

events spread across the working year. It is a thought process within each of us that can and should be reinforced through the production of original and thought provoking material.

This fresh approach has received broad support within Roads Service and its adoption has certainly changed how management and staff view safety management. Change is never easy to accept but often it is inevitable and in this case the changes outlined are to be welcomed. The challenge remains for all the leaders in Roads Service, to ensure that the changes on paper translate into positive changes on the ground.

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