

Lone workers & behaviour

Dr Tim Marsh explains how behavioural safety techniques can be used to help protect lone workers

The best time to address lone worker risk is at the planning stage – not in the field when the best that can be done is to react well to events. Choosing an appropriate system, selected and tailored with as much input from the end user as is feasible is utterly essential.

With this in mind many people assume that behavioural safety is all about measurement, observation and challenging, and that it can't be applied to peripatetic workers. However, as well as some psychological training I'd argue that although planning is king, one element of planning overlaps with the very best element of behavioural safety which is in an understanding of why people do what they do and this has often been applied successfully to peripatetic workers.

Risk perception training

Training can help in two specific ways. The first is in risk perception and many courses are available on spotting clues that all is not well. These might be technical courses in hazard awareness or psychology courses in 'spotting shifty behaviour'. Because of biological selection over the years we are all from 'risk aware' strains of DNA and already very good at spotting shifty behaviour if we're switched on! For example, have you ever walked into a pub with a sign over the door saying "a warm Irish welcome guaranteed here" and left straight away even though no-one as much as looked at you because the 'feel' of the place is all wrong – instantly, instinctively and accurately? Summarising this ability in his multi-million selling book 'Blink', Malcolm Gladwell explains that it's our instincts working at a sub-conscious level.

Why we take risks

I'd imagine most readers of this magazine will be quite health conscious. So try the following quick quiz. Have you ever: smoked, sped in your car, driven through traffic lights on amber actively accelerating, taken drugs supplied by friends rather than doctors, drunk your weekly allowance of alcohol in a single 24 hour session, driven the following morning after a heavy session, cheated on a partner you don't

want to split up from, promised yourself most years you'll definitely lose weight, get fit and take part in next year's London marathon; had unprotected sex with relative strangers because they look quite healthy and wholesome despite not knowing their sexual history? About 99% will be 'guilty' of at least one and some of you will be tempted to shout 'house'.

The list is designed to show that we all are tempted (from time to time) by the "soon, certain and positive" consequences of these behaviours. This, despite the fact that the delayed, uncertain and negative consequences can include fatal crashes, cancer, diabetes, heart diseases and HIV – which kill tens of millions worldwide annually. However, it's very often the consequences of actions that drive them more than the triggers (like rules and training). As Stephen Fry observes: "What I do with temptation is yield to it straight away to save on the faffing about".

With lone workers we find that wherever the safe way is slow, uncomfortable and inconvenient people will be tempted to find a way around it and, of-course, there's very little to stop them from doing so. From there, the number of unsafe behaviours multiplies and although people argue about the ratios, the Bird/Heinrich Triangle principle shows us that there's a direct relationship between the number of

With lone workers we find that wherever the safe way is slow, uncomfortable and inconvenient people will be tempted to find a way around it and, of-course, there's very little to stop them from doing so

unsafe acts and injury.

In factories when we are observing behaviours it's therefore vital that we ask "why?" curiously when we see unsafe behaviour. We can't do this with lone workers but we can pro-actively ask them, "anything slow or uncomfortable about doing the job safely?" when we have them in the depot or HQ. If the answer to that question is "yes" then it's a problem – guaranteed.

Behavioural methodology

An excellent way to address this and properly involve the workforce in safety is to set up a behavioural root cause analysis (BRCA) project team. The approach is to select some employees or elicit some volunteers who will receive some training that will prepare them to, typically, run a project part-time over four weeks or so. This involves the behavioural analysis of a number of items they select themselves as 'tempting' in the field. Their task is to come back with a number of 'high impact, low cost' (HILC) solutions – or even some 'high impact, high cost' (HIHC) solutions.

For example, almost any safety device (for example for fall arrest or respiration) that is cumbersome to use and combines with a task of short duration but high risk is one that should set alarm bells ringing. Making it less cumbersome to use (or even better, designing the task so it isn't needed) will reap substantial dividends. Management's job here is to implement the 'HILC' solutions as soon as possible and maximise the praise and publicity opportunities that flow from this! (Round table discussion of any 'HIHC' solutions helps set the right tone too regarding trust and transparency).

Often, the 80:20 or 'Pareto' effect (where 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes) works well and we find that we've addressed the majority of behavioural problems in an organisation right here and will achieve a 50% reduction in incidents with this alone. And because they are design solutions they are permanent. The good news is that this analysis technique, the most effective of the behavioural safety arsenal I'd argue, is fully applicable to lone workers!

Dr Tim Marsh is managing director of Ryder-Marsh Safety Ltd

62092

Tel: 0161 881 8471
www.hsmsearch.com/enquiry

