Education and Responsibility

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PAPER GIVEN ON 14 AUGUST 1986
SUMMARY

There is a widely held perception that more health and safety education and training is needed - but there have been remarkably few studies to support this view. Given the present health and safety climate in Australia, there is no doubt that more education and training is being undertaken. However, vital questions about the nature of this education and training and to what groups it is being targeted need to be asked.

Health and Safety education and training must adopt a long-term perspective to overcome the present situation in Australian workplaces where all too often inadequate design is followed by retrospective palliative action.

Pressure points in professional and educational institutions should be identified and targeted to achieve the input of health and safety into non-specialist courses throughout Australia. Safety representatives and managers are also vital target groups.

These safety representatives can underpin a more robust and effective health and safety organisational structure through their role as "questioners", and by releasing the wealth of stored knowledge that exists at the workplace which can then be harnessed to solve problems in cost-effective ways.

The scarce resources should be targeted to have the greatest multiplying effect to stimulate long term changes. The changes must concentrate on breaking the cycle of inadequate design and retrospective palliative action.
1. INTRODUCTION

As each State and the Commonwealth has studied its legislative and administrative arrangements for health and safety, conclusions have been drawn that there is a need to promote education and training.

Clearly there is a widespread perception that we need more health and safety education and training; but how will we know when we have sufficient? It could be a bottomless pit into which we could pour our scarce resources; what is the evidence that it does any good?

Remarkably few studies have been made of the costs and benefits of health and safety training - we seem to take, almost as an act of faith, that it must be a good thing.

My former colleague Professor Andrew Hale, from the University of Delft in Holland, recently published his analysis of research on safety training throughout the world (Hale 1984). His report, "Is Safety Training Worthwhile?" urges caution and concludes that:

"The works reviewed do not provide the solid framework and foundation upon which the current vast edifice of safety training can be confidently built".

The "vast edifice" of which he speaks is of course largely built on the training of the people at risk. Indeed the safety training industry was one of the few industries that did grow during the 1970's in Britain. The health and safety education and training industry is currently undergoing rapid growth in Australia. There is no doubt that more training is being done. But do we need more education and training; better education and training; or education and training more effectively targeted to those groups of people who can have the maximum beneficial effect on the total system?

2. THE NEED FOR A LONG-TERM NATIONAL STRATEGY

Within Australia many new workplaces and industrial processes are designed and implemented without adequate consideration of the health and safety implications at the design stage. Consequently, efforts to control the risks from accidents or occupational disease are taken ret-
rospectively and necessitate modification to existing plant and processes. Because action has to be taken retrospectively, the type of control measures adopted are often heavily reliant on the actions of people (e.g. the use of personal protection equipment), difficult to implement, difficult to ensure success, and often needlessly expensive to install and maintain.

The major thrust of initiatives in health and safety education and training must be to break this cycle of inadequate design followed by retrospective palliative health and safety measures. Longer-term perspectives must be adopted to ensure a change towards the inclusion of health and safety initiatives at the design stage.

It would be unwise to focus all the attention on the production of health and safety specialists during a period in which health and safety is a "lame light issue". Although health and safety is highly visible at the moment it is unlikely to stay as high on the agenda consistently over many years.

Market forces will encourage the production of health and safety specialists where the need exists but market forces are unlikely to put pressure on educational establishments to include health and safety at an appropriate academic level on the undergraduate courses.

Therefore, pressure points in the professional institutions (e.g. Institution of Engineers Australia) should be identified and targeted to achieve the input of health and safety into courses throughout Australia. As a practical first step all courses due for reaccreditation or initial accreditation should be required to satisfy State Post-Secondary Education Commissions that they have adequate coverage of health and safety where that is appropriate to the course.

Two of the target groups identified by the National Occupational Health and Safety Commission for development have been safety representatives and managers. The National Commission has funded these developments via the Confederation of Australian Industry (CAI), with their "Prevention Pays" training packages and via the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) with their safety representatives' courses.

3. THE CHALLENGE FOR SENIOR MANAGEMENT

Ian Thomas, Chief Engineer at Westernport Works of John Lysaght (Australia) Limited in 1982, captured the essence of the challenge faced by senior management over health and safety in his "Law of Diminished Responsibility". Simply this law may be stated as follows:

Within any organisation, the sum of the assigned or delegated responsibilities will never equal the total or absolute responsibility entrusted to the organisation".

In other words, although the Chief Executive ultimately carries the responsibility for all failures, as responsibility is delegated
down the line, more and more opportunities arise for the delegated persons to accept slightly less responsibility than has been delegated to them. "Responsibility gaps" creep into the system, gaps which will not be visible to the senior managers who may believe that all responsibilities have been covered. Thomas' analysis of major and minor failures pinpointed these "responsibility gaps" as the fundamental cause of most failures.

The "Prevention Pays" programme of CAI similarly emphasises the need to run tight organisational systems not only to prevent the pain and suffering caused by accidents and ill health at work, but also because it makes economic sense.

4. THE NEED FOR ROBUST SAFETY REPRESENTATIVES

It is within this context that the role and training of the safety representative should be explored. In my opinion the safety representative has two positively beneficial roles to play for Australian industry:

1. To be "questioners" of the adequacy of arrangements for health and safety to ensure that organisational systems stay robust and effective over time.

2. To release the wealth of stored knowledge that exists at the workplace and can be harnessed to solve problems in cost-effective ways.

The introduction of safety representatives into British industry appeared to bring these benefits quite quickly into larger unionised workplaces. Indeed, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) gave the following evidence to the House of Commons Committee, in 1982, which attempted to assess the achievements since the introduction of new health and safety arrangements in the U.K. eight years previously:

1. "The HSW Act has provided an effective umbrella of legislation covering all people at work.

2. The Act has stimulated the development of policies and procedures in industry for better occupational health and safety.

3. The responsibilities of employers and employees have been clarified.

4. Joint consultation on health and safety has been promoted.

5. Training has received an impetus."

By that time 90,000 safety representatives had been trained on trade union 10-day courses. The CBI did not argue against the role and training of safety representative after eight years' of experience of the implementation scheme. This was at a time of strong Conservative government which could have been expected to support employers if they had wished to change the system.
My personal experience is that having robustly trained safety representatives is beneficial for executives and senior managers because their presence and continual questioning helps to keep the responsibilities tied down throughout the organisation – in other words they help to combat Thomas's "Law of Diminished Responsibility".

I have also found safety representatives a valuable mechanism for tapping the wealth of practical experience that can so easily be overlooked when attempts are made to control hazards at the workplace.

5. SAFETY REPRESENTATIVE TRAINING

In order for safety representatives to take on this distinctly new role at the workplace they require training in skills which are different from those of supervisors. They have to be trained to be:

1. Effective questioners:
   a. what are the hazards?
   b. are the controls adequate?
   c. could the work be done in a more safe and healthy way and at a lower cost?
   d. are the proposed controls a wise way of spending money?

2. Capable of raising issues from a position of relatively low power (in terms of authority, credibility, education and qualifications, and lack of access to information).

3. Able to assess whether management has responded seriously to legitimate concerns about particular problems.

4. Able to encourage health and safety implications to be thought through in advance and tackled prior to implementation of new equipment and processes.

5. Able to audit health and safety at the workplace frequently e.g. by visual inspections.

Obviously, it is much easier to train people to ask questions than it is to train the people who have to answer the questions and implement technical and organisation systems to cope with legitimate problems that are raised.

The introduction of safety representatives in the numbers required under new health and safety legislation necessitates tapping in to a new group of people at the workplace who often have no experience of representing their fellow workers, raising issues with management, or gathering information to support a case. The full benefits of the new style legislation can only be realised if they are trained to be effective in this role.
6. THE ROLE OF JOINT TRAINING

I was involved in the development of a major joint training initiative for the Motor Industry in the U.K. in the 1970's. In the early days I was a great advocate of joint training because I naively thought that the joint training I had seen operating in Sweden could be applied in the totally different industrial relations climate of Britain. Practical experience forced me to recognise that in the industries in which I was working, joint initial training stifled the development of both supervisors and safety representatives - it just did not work because:

1. The supervisors and safety representatives in the U.K. were operating in a very different industrial relations climate compared with their counterparts in Sweden. In the U.K. the ethos was that it was management's prerogative to make the decisions whereas in Sweden the movement to sharing of decision making had been underway for many years. Both managers and safety representatives expected the workplace representatives to question and input to decision making in a whole range of issues much broader than health and safety.

2. Newly appointed safety representatives were apparently inhibited from asking basic questions whilst in the presence of supervisors/managers. Similarly supervisors and managers were loathe to admit openly to a lack of knowledge whilst in the presence of the very people who would be asking them questions in the near future.

3. The questioning role of safety representatives was difficult for many supervisors and managers to come to terms with because initially it appeared as though their "prerogative to manage" was being usurped - this was even more difficult to introduce amidst a combined group. They often needed reassurance from senior management that their responsibility was not being reduced by the introduction of the safety representative.

4. It was very easy for the two groups to descend into the discussion of past events and try to ascribe blame rather than to seize the opportunity to develop skills to prevent similar problems from occurring in the future.

Although I am convinced that the initial training of safety representatives and supervisors should be done separately I would welcome a second level of training at which they could jointly tackle hazards at the workplace. For example, control of noise or the control of airborne contaminants or assessing the permit to work systems being used for entry into confined spaces.

If both groups had had their initial training separately and had been exposed to colleagues from other companies or industries during that initial training, then when they come to tackle the particular problems together they should be able to tap into a much wider knowledge base and a fresher approach than would have been possible if the training had been done together.
The development of resource materials that can support this second level of problem solving is in my opinion a priority. For example, the sort of data available in the British Health and Safety Executive's "100 Practical Examples of Noise Control" should be gathered and made available to make sure that when the problems are tackled jointly the supervisors and managers have access to solution data which indicates what has been achieved in the way of control and at what cost.

7. TARGET GROUPS

So far I have concentrated on the groups who have vital responsibilities in health and safety and who will have to be educated and trained if we are going to effect the changes necessary to break the cycle of inadequate design and retrospective palliative action.

There will also be specific groups that will have to be targeted if we are going to address specific issues with some sort of priority.

Specific groups of people will require a greater depth of knowledge to ensure that cost effective health and safety is implemented. For example, one such target group would be the designers of extract ventilation equipment. Experience in Sweden, Canada and the United Kingdom has shown that the emergence of safety representatives at the work place coincides with a greater level of interest in exposure to chemicals. Consequently, money is spent on extract ventilation equipment, often this is expenditure for which the community gets very poor value because of the inadequate training of the designers. Such target groups should be identified and their educational requirements met.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Health and safety education and training could easily become a bottomless pit into which to pour our scarce resources.

In my opinion it is therefore necessary to target the health and safety education and training to ensure that the scarce resources are used in ways that have the greatest multiplying effects, to stimulate long term changes. These changes must concentrate on breaking the cycle of inadequate design and retrospective palliative action.
REFERENCES


2. HEALTH and Safety Executive (1983) 100 Practical Applications of Noise Reduction Methods, HMSO.
