

Language

Language & Cultural Factors in Workplace Safety

Effective Communication for Occupational
Health and Safety in a Diverse Workforce

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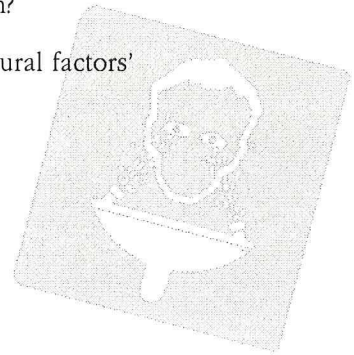


Key Questions

When your workforce comprises people from many different backgrounds, managing safety effectively requires a sharp focus on communication and training.

If you can't answer all of these questions to your own satisfaction, this booklet can help you.

- Are you really getting through with the health and safety message at work?
- Are you sure that people from diverse backgrounds understand each other - or are you just assuming they do?
- How many of Australia's 1,000,000 or more workers with poor English language or literacy skills are employed in your area of responsibility?
- What particular risks do these workers face?
- Where are the most common communication breakdowns happening?
- What does poor communication about safety cost the organisation?
- What can your organisation do to account for 'the language & cultural factors' in workplace safety?



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Language

Introduction

The facts speak for themselves; the South Australian WorkCover Corporation estimates that every year for the last ten years in South Australian workplaces, the 15% of the workforce who are from non-English speaking backgrounds sustain around 20% of the serious work-related injuries. There are no similar figures to tell us how many English speaking background workers have accidents because they can't read or write well. Nor are there any statistics to tell us how often an accident occurs because the written warnings and instructions that might have prevented a misunderstanding are written in complicated English. In these cases, all we have to go on are anecdotes.

What are the costs of poor communication about safety – in human pain and in dollar terms? Again, we don't have absolute figures but we do know the costs are high, often underestimated – and unacceptable. Identifying and dealing with some of the language and cultural factors that affect communication can save money through improved safety and reduced injuries and can also contribute to raising morale and productivity.

This resource kit has been developed to help you with this process. This booklet looks at a number of the issues and implications of recognising language and cultural factors and provides suggestions and examples but it is not a prescription. You and your colleagues will have to apply what you learn from these materials to your own workplace situation. Separate sections of the accompanying binder provide detailed notes to trainers, workshop resources and information on where to go for further advice and materials.

Trainers and safety officers will find this kit useful as a training resource. Managers, supervisors and team leaders can use the checklists and action planning guidelines in developing OHS policies and strategies. Safety consultants, rehabilitation agents, worker representatives and the staff of other agencies assisting industry will find the material useful in presenting the case for recognising and meeting the OHS needs of diverse workforces.

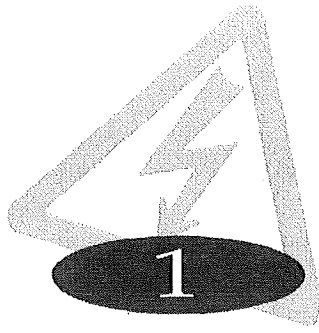
Finally, in adopting any of the suggestions or strategies outlined in the Language & Cultural Factors In Workplace Safety resource kit, it is important to make sure that your efforts are integrated with the organisation's total OHS policy and procedures.

A Note on Acronyms

There are a few acronyms in the text which are explained as they occur. The most commonly used acronyms are NESB - Non-English Speaking Background and ESB - English Speaking Background. They are used to distinguish between people for whom English is a first or other language.

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Cultural



Language & Cultural Factors in Workplace Safety

The Risks

What kinds of workplace safety risks do factors of language, literacy and culture contribute to? How big is the problem?

A supervisor in a textile plant, wanting to check the operation of a carding machine, called out to the non-English speaking background process worker cleaning the machine on the other side; "Stand clear, okay?" "Okay," the process worker replied, but without moving away. When the machine was switched on his arm was trapped and so badly injured that it later had to be amputated. Investigation revealed that he had understood "Stand clear, okay?" to mean "Stay there; is that understood?"

There are over forty expressions in English using the word 'stand'. Other expressions such as 'Watch out', 'Hold on' or 'Mind your head', are also confusing to people with limited English. But language factors were not the only cause of this accident.

Incorrect assumptions were made; the supervisor assumed that the worker understood him and the worker assumed the supervisor knew what he was doing. There were also cultural factors at play, the main one being that the worker, who was from South East Asia, came from a culture where a subordinate is not supposed to question a superior's orders.

Language and cultural factors combine to make written communication more difficult. For example, signs such as '**No Horseplay**' or

'**Unauthorised Entry Prohibited**' can be incomprehensible. Many workers of non-English speaking background or with poor literacy skills find even simple signs like **EXIT** or **ALARM** difficult or impossible to read.

A cleaner who had attended two fire safety courses in his 8 years on the job was asked to identify the two extinguishers on the wall of a lab. One, he said, was for electrical fires, the other for wood and paper. Both were clearly marked CO2, (carbon dioxide - for use on electrical and flammable liquid fires) but in his course he had "learned" that where two extinguishers were mounted together, they were for different purposes. He could not read the identifying discs or match their colours to the types of extinguisher.

Asked to read the EMERGENCY EXIT sign in his workshop, another long-term employee paused and said, "Mery entry?" One worker interpreted DANGER: DO NOT START as "Department: Do not Smoke". Best guesses.

Only 15% of 125 NESB workers given a standard safety sign comprehension test understood DANGER: LIVE WIRES or DANGER: CONTACT WITH OVERHEAD WIRES WILL CAUSE DEATH. At least half had been in Australia for around 20 years. The average score on the 25-item test was 40%.

There are also many English speaking background (ESB) workers with limited reading skills who are unable to understand many signs and written instructions.

An English speaking packer who could not read or write had been stacking boxes of product according to colours. When the company changed all of its packaging, he had to admit he was no longer able to tell one product from another. When asked how he had coped so far he said he just watched the others and used his common sense.

Lack of numeracy skills can also be a risk factor. Whether the worker is mixing herbicides or adding chemicals to an industrial process, the potential dangers are enormous.

An ESB worker in a foundry was used to pouring a full container of a chemical into a standard process. A new, more concentrated product was introduced, clearly marked with the new ratio. Unable to understand ratios, the worker almost added the full container. If he hadn't been stopped, there would have been a major explosion.

Cultural Factors

There are also cultural factors that prevent dialogue, such as the assumption, mentioned above, that the employer or supervisor must not be questioned or disagreed with. Out of fear of losing their jobs, often unaware of the OHS laws in place to protect them, many choose to say nothing about perceived hazards or worrying developments such as rashes or aches and pains. Others don't want to appear 'weak' or too demanding.

A Vietnamese worker whose wrist had been badly injured in the war refused to discuss a change from painful heavy lifting duties with his supervisor - an approachable man - because, as he explained, he and the other Vietnamese men in the factory had already "made trouble" by asking for smaller face-masks.

Negative attitudes to health and safety matters among NESB workers can range from apathy to anger, from cynicism to fear of ridicule if they express concerns. Common concerns among NESB workers who are employed in the higher risk industries are that they are not given adequate information about safety, that their complaints or reports are ignored and that they often get the blame for accidents caused mainly by inadequate communication systems.

In South Australia, the WorkCover Corporation estimates, by analysing the ethnicity of claimants as a proportion of ABS statistics on the SA workforce, that while only 15% of the workforce are from non-English speaking backgrounds, they sustain around 20% of the lost time injuries. These figures have not changed significantly in the last ten years. The concern of NESB workers is justified.

Communication in a culturally diverse workplace is complicated by the presence of many different cultural groups. The NESB workforce in Australia represents around 140 different ethnic and cultural groups - some authorities say the figure is more like 240. Applying general solutions to workforces representing several cultures doesn't always work.

Another aspect of culture is what is commonly known as Organisational or Corporate Culture. Of course Australian companies reflect the values and attitudes and procedures of mainstream Australian culture. But they also have developed their own

Factors in

particular way of seeing and doing things; we've all heard the phrase "That's just the way we do things around here".

When you add other differences that exist between people - age, gender, educational background, beliefs and attitudes, and so on - it is clear that workplace cultures are incredibly complex. Solutions to problems therefore have to be worked out for each organisation, recognising the influence of communication systems, languages, cultures, literacy and numeracy.

The Size of the Problem - The National Figures

Almost half a million Australian workers of non-English speaking background experience communication difficulties at work. According to the 1991 census, around 120,000 NESB men and women rate themselves as having 'poor' English and cannot adequately comprehend or pass on spoken instructions and information in English. A national survey of adult literacy in Australia, *No Single Measure* (DEET, 1989), estimated that there were approximately 400,000 NESB workers who experience difficulties with English.

Although many of them have learned sufficient English to 'get by', they are generally incapable of communicating well in emergencies or non-routine situations and have great difficulty reading even the most common signs and notices.

To the general surprise of the *No Single Measure* researchers and the public, even more English

speaking workers are thought to have serious problems with reading and writing. The study estimated that there could be up to 600,000 workers who, while fluent in English are unable to read or write beyond the most basic levels. They too are at risk on the job.

The non-literate English speaker has the advantage of better day-to-day verbal communication but also has to compensate for the inability to read or write. Many workers develop brilliant screening strategies which make it almost impossible to detect that they are coping by memorisation, imitation and clever guesswork.

Working mainly in manufacturing, construction and basic service industries, they face risk situations which are complicated and intensified by factors of language and culture. In the world's most ethnically diverse workforce, language, literacy and cultural factors also play a large part in preventing or distorting communications.

The national figures indicate that 1 in 7 workers, or around 15% of the workforce, have language and literacy problems. But what are the figures at the enterprise level?

The Size of the Problem - The Workplace Figures

How many employees in your organisation have adequate language and communication skills for their current and anticipated duties? This is not an easy question to answer. (See p 15-17 Training Needs Analysis)

Your organisation could have a much higher proportion of workers with inadequate communi-

Workplace Safety

cation skills than the 15% national average. In some industries such as textiles, clothing and footwear or food processing, it is common for over 60% of employees to have poor language or literacy skills. In some workplaces the figure is even higher.

Over the last twenty years, workplace language and literacy education programs, unions, employers and other researchers have conducted needs analysis surveys in hundreds, if not thousands, of workplaces. Based on their findings, a very rough guide is that between ten and twenty per cent of NESB workers in a manufacturing, construction, transport or services organisation will fall into the basic proficiency range, characterised by poor listening and speaking skills and very poor reading and writing ability. This segment constitutes the main "at risk" population.

A further ten or twenty per cent of NESB workers are at an intermediate level, able to cope quite well but displaying some serious gaps in safety awareness and the ability to fully benefit from training. Of the ESB workforce, approximately five to ten per cent will not have sufficient literacy skills for their current duties. Possibly fifteen or twenty per cent will find it difficult to comprehend written instructions and basic technical information. From five to fifteen percent of all workers will have very poor mathematical skills.

The details of assessing the need are discussed later on but it should be obvious that whatever the findings, they will be significant. Given the risks and the need to strive for the highest standards, organisations can't afford to overlook the needs of even a very small number of workers.

Conclusion

In the anecdotes above, the immediate supervisors were usually unaware of the problem. The workers themselves were usually not sufficiently aware of the potential danger to take steps to eliminate the risk. To a certain extent these employees are capable of overcoming such language-related hazards through observation, with common sense and by drawing on past experience. However, this can't always be assumed.

Another problem is that because it is harder to train people with limited English or literacy skills and because of fears that they will not be as safe or effective in a new role, many workers are kept at the same tasks for long periods. These workers face a higher likelihood of overuse-related injuries, accidents caused by inattention due to boredom and a range of health problems associated with low morale.

NESB employees with poor English understand little of what is presented in standard safety training or briefing sessions, largely because no attempt is made to actually ask them for comment or involvement. Lack of social contact further isolates them from the informal mainstream networks so that they either get no message or the wrong one. English-proficient workers with low literacy levels are also isolated to a certain extent from the information flow.

The costs are enormous, not only in terms of injury, illness or death, but also in terms of the underutilisation of skills, lack of participation and consultation, poor employment opportunities and job flexibility - all of which adversely affect productivity and quality. There are several ways of reaching "language poor" workers with the safety and development messages. First, however, we must address the fundamental issues of English language and literacy proficiency and the effectiveness of organisational communications.

It is essential to realise that immigrant workers with poor English and functionally illiterate English-speaking workers are not “The Problem”.

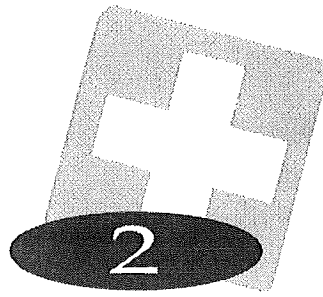
The problem is the failure of most workplace systems to take language, cultural and communication factors into account.

Very often, there simply aren't the systems in place to ensure that every worker gets the same information. It is assumed that the existing system suits everyone. It is the habit of assuming understanding, as we saw above, that has caused many an accident. However, it cannot be assumed that workers with poor language or literacy skills know what they have been told.

Key points

Key Points

- 1 Workers with limited English language, literacy or numeracy skills can be at greater risk of injury.**
- 2 Cultural factors play an important part in communication.**
- 3 Organisations tend to underestimate the number of workers whose safety is affected by language and cultural factors.**
- 4 Organisations need to analyse their OHS communication systems and workforce communication skills carefully.**
- 5 The work of solving problems related to communicating safety in a diverse workforce has to be shared.**



Dangerous Assumptions

It cannot be assumed that non-English speaking background workers know what they have been told.

It cannot be assumed that they have been told what they need to know.

At the core of many language, literacy and culture-related occupational health and safety problems is the habit of making assumptions about how people understand situations. Incorrect assumptions are the basis of countless industrial accidents. Any assumption of understanding or performance can create problems, but in Australia's multilingual workforce assumptions can be particularly dangerous.

Dangerous Assumptions in Person-to-Person Communication

An example of this was reported in an article on high industrial court fines. The company had been fined several thousand dollars for its negligence in the following incident;

Case Study

"A worker, Mr A, 59, had suffered deep lacerations and severe bruising to his left leg when a large steel drum he had been cutting with an oxy-torch exploded.

"He had been instructed by a leading hand to cut some drums in halves. However, instructions by the supervisor, through two leading hands, to punch holes in the bottom

of the drums to allow vapor to escape had not been conveyed to Mr A.

"A leading hand told (the magistrate) that he would have expected Mr A to realise the need for holes.

"The drum had contained vapors of Alcorez, a highly flammable liquid. The magistrate found the drum had ample signs on it that it had contained the substance but that the employee had not been aware of the potential risk."

The Adelaide Advertiser 23/6/89

In a later report on this accident in the S.A. Occupational Health & Safety Commission's monthly Bulletin, it was confirmed that the man's English was poor, but it is immediately apparent, even without knowing the English language proficiency levels of the injured worker or the leading hands, that several incorrect assumptions were made;

- 1 The supervisor assumed that the leading hands would pass the message to the worker.
- 2 The leading hand assumed that the worker realised the need for holes to be cut.
- 3 The worker assumed that his instructions were complete.
- 4 The presence of 'ample signs' on the drum was assumed to constitute adequate warning.
- 5 It was assumed that the worker could read the signs.

6 It may also have been assumed that, going by the worker's age and probable extensive period of employment in industry, he was an 'old hand' with full understanding of his duties.

For another example of how person-to-person communication can go wrong if the parties assume too much, take a typical, short exchange in a workshop where solvents are used.

Case study

A supervisor on his rounds asked a worker with limited English, "You haven't had that mask adjusted yet, have you?"

"Yes," replied the worker. ('Yes,' he was saying, 'I haven't.')

"Okay. Carry on," said the supervisor, and moved off down the line.

The NESB worker lacked the language ability to understand the question properly. 'Have you' and 'isn't it' are question forms that don't appear in most languages. He also lacked the confidence to call the supervisor back and correct his misunderstanding. In many cultures it is not acceptable to question a superior's judgement, commands or actions. He decided to let it go and later attempted to adjust his respirator mask by inserting folded tissues in the gaps.

A day or two later when the supervisor noticed the tissues he got angry. "What's the matter with you? Why didn't you tell me you hadn't had that mask adjusted? You're supposed to have adequate protection on this job. I could get into trouble over something like this!"

At this point the poor employee felt obliged to apologise!

The problem was that the supervisors had assumed the worker understood the question. The worker, influenced by his own cultural values regarding superiors, assumed he shouldn't question or 'inconvenience' his supervisor. The mask was properly adjusted but damage had been done to relationships and morale.

Dangerous Assumptions in Organisational Communications

Organisations are just as likely as individuals to assume that their communications have been effectively structured and accurately received. Examples of this readily spring to the mind of anyone who has been involved with getting messages across to diverse workforces.

Time and again organisations trying to involve people in changing procedures experience very poor shopfloor responses. Management assumes that worker apathy is to blame. "We've gone out of our way to present this to everyone - big meetings, a video, posters - what's wrong with them? It's for their own good."

Take a typical example of assumption-laden communication in the area of housekeeping.

Case Study

A manufacturing company introduced a major drive to improve housekeeping. Two of the production managers conducted a series of large group meetings to get the message across to the several hundred employees, over half of whom were from non-English speaking backgrounds.

The managers knew that most of the NESB employees had been on the payroll for many years and seemed to have few difficulties with English. The presentation included a half-hour talk backed up with overhead transparencies of pages of the new rules and incident charts and graphs showing the potential benefits of reduced housekeeping-

related accidents and wastage. Few people could see the overheads, let alone read them.

The managers assumed the message had been received mainly because a few workers asked a couple of questions, there were one or two predictable objections and no one else said a word. On the way out, many of the NESB workers were puzzled. Said one: "What right have they got to tell us how to keep our houses?"

The new rules and a poster went up on noticeboards everywhere. After several weeks, however, they found that only superficial changes had been made. Worse, there had been two falls and a striking against objects accident, one resulting in serious injury, as a direct result of poor housekeeping. Out on the shop floor, supervisors reverted to the previous practice of policing housekeeping, preferring that to the seemingly impossible task of creating a climate of worker involvement in what one senior manager had referred to as The Tower of Babel.

What went wrong?

Basically, the management team assumed that everyone would understand the presentation. They overlooked cultural and language barriers and failed to recognise possible employee difficulties in understanding the actual concept of systematic housekeeping as expressed by managers of an engineering, English-speaking background. As far as the management team is concerned, the workers are just downright stupid or stubborn or both.

On the other hand, having lived and worked for years with less information than their English-speaking workmates, many NESB workers 'get by' knowing and understanding and expressing less. Another largely incomprehensible address to the troops was not a major event. They simply went away and waited to see how things might change later on.

For one young non-English speaking worker, incorrect assumptions that had been made across an organisation put him in danger on his first day.

Case Study

A young man with very limited English was hired by a large manufacturing company and exposed to the standard induction morning.

The induction process, conducted by a trainer, confused even some of the English speaking recruits. The operation and dangers of the machines were explained in rapid, jargon-laced, almost technical language, with emphasis on maintaining line speed. The trainer flipped through the company handbook, flashed up overheads of key sections. Various forms were thrust into their hands, then off they went on a plant tour which included observation of their new work stations.

Demonstrations were conducted for the group, explanations being shouted over the noise of the shop.

After lunch they were put to work. Within hours the young man had trapped his hand in his machine, sustaining injuries likely to render the hand useless for the rest of his life.

case
study

Again, incorrect assumptions directly contributed to the accident;

- 1 The company assumed that its induction program was adequate
- 2 The trainer assumed that everyone could understand him
- 3 The trainer assumed that everyone could read the materials he presented
- 4 The employing officers assumed that basic English was enough for a job on the line
- 5 The new worker assumed that his instructions were complete and that he was not at serious risk.

In all these cases the most easily identifiable factor was the ethnicity and language proficiency of the workers.

The least identifiable but most significant factor was the degree of blind assumption present in the system and in the organisation's key representatives.



Dangerous Assumptions in English Language Training Programs

In the past, along with the common 'blame the victim' mentality, it was thought that all that was needed was a sort of information campaign; let's tell 'these people' what they need to know. Short English as a second language (ESL) courses, variously titled 'Safety Language Training' or 'The Language of OHS' were conducted in several factories and hospitals. Some excellent materials were developed and adapted which can still be very useful in improving safety-specific language proficiency.

The danger in relying only on ESL or literacy classes is that this approach is commonly based on the assumption that the intended participants

know little about safety. This lack of knowledge is seen as the root of the problem. To a certain extent this type of training did raise safety awareness and enabled NESB workers to make contact with accident prevention officers, trainers and medical staff. But the gains were limited.

Case Study

Thirty hospital cleaners, in groups of 10, were given six hours' training with ESL support on the subject of manual handling.

Management brought in the ESL support because they had recognized that NESB staff were not understanding the standard half-hour talk being given by physiotherapists. Without help, they wouldn't be able to sign a statement that they understood the principles of manual handling and recognized their obligation to follow correct practices.

The physiotherapist and the ESL teacher presented the topic with plenty of supporting language material and demonstrations. Over four sessions the subject was 'covered' and an evaluation followed. Six months later the ESL teacher did a second evaluation. One of the cleaners, asked what she remembered most clearly as new information from the course answered, 'Squat'. I never heard that word before."

Others were better able to remember the manual handling information but several complained that the real issues had not been addressed. For example, there was the difficulty of getting a heavy floor polisher up a step and through a door without putting strain on the back. Another problem was caused by nurses leaving talcum powder on just-cleaned floors in ablution areas after drying patients. There was also the pressure to get the same amount of work done with a dwindling, ageing workforce.

Once again, incorrect assumptions had been made about the situation in which it was deemed necessary to provide such courses:

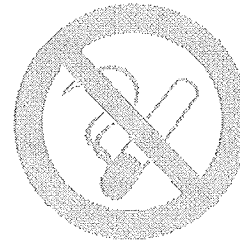
- 1 The hospital management assumed that their perception of safety issues was accurate.
- 2 The training was based on the assumption that the workers have nothing to contribute except to recognise and obey the rules.
- 3 Management assumed that workers knew little or nothing about safety
- 4 Management assumed that by providing training they were doing a good job and meeting their obligations under the OHS Act.
- 5 The teachers and managers assumed that overcoming 'poor English' was the solution to the problem of low safety awareness
- 6 The teachers assumed that the courses were meeting workers' needs.

Of course, the teachers gradually changed their assumptions when it became apparent from talking with NESB workers that without addressing the real situation, 'safety language' courses could only go a small part of the way to improving safety and health. Certainly there is a body of safety-specific language that can and must be taught, but the real problems lie in the wide range of assumptions that are made and in the communication systems that allow those assumptions to go unrecognised and unchallenged.

Conclusion

In all these cases, everyone is either assuming that everyone else knows what they're doing or they're assuming that one group knows everything and another knows nothing. It could be said that a large number of accidents, the majority of miscommunications and the high degree of risk associated with multilingual workplaces are caused by false assumptions.

If you analyse a few accidents or incidents from your own experience it should be possible to see reflections of the particular assumptions listed here. A few common ones emerge.



Dangerous Assumptions in Workplace Safety

- 1 Assuming that messages and instructions will be accurately (if at all) passed on
- 2 Assuming that instructions are complete and understandable
- 3 Assuming that signs, labels and notices are readable and adequate
- 4 Assuming that training and induction programs are comprehensive, relevant and understandable
- 5 Assuming that the responsibility for understanding instructions, systems and procedures lies with the workers alone

Of course, these same assumptions are often made for and by the entire workforce, but it is the non-English speaking and barely literate workers who face the greatest risks because of them.

Before real solutions to workplace safety can be found, the assumptions that are being made at all levels must be challenged. In most cases, a long hard look at these assumptions will show that changes must be made to current practices and systems of communication.

Individuals alone cannot overcome the problems caused by assuming that 'everyone knows' what's going on and what to do. After challenging our assumptions and thinking through the language and cultural factors that might affect communication in our own workplaces, we need

to look at the systems in which people communicate and work.

Perception of a miscommunication can be slower in coming at the organisational level than at the person-to-person level. Providing training for individuals is vitally important but it is truly effective only when parallel changes occur in the system. Adjusting workplace communication systems that have been in place for many years is more difficult.

Providing translations and English classes, for example, are really only band-aid measures because they address only the symptoms and are often applied in isolation. They are much more effective, however, as part of an overall strategy.

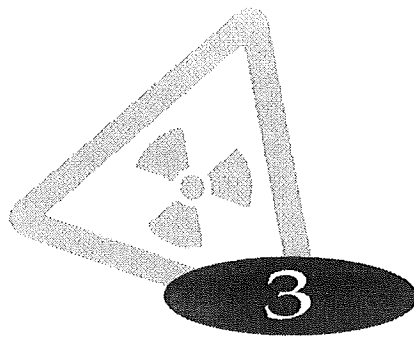
We need to ask questions. How is information transmitted between sections? What signs or notices confuse people? Why don't people report problems? What can be done?

The answers to these questions can form the basis of planning for necessary adjustments and changes that include the particular needs of workers from 'different' backgrounds.

Key points

Key Points

- 1 Incorrect assumptions by workers, co-workers, supervisors and managers cause many workplace accidents and injuries.**
- 2 Organisations and individuals make incorrect assumptions about how to communicate safety information.**
- 3 Training measures such as English courses are not the sole solution.**
- 4 Before deciding what to do to improve OHS, we need to identify and challenge our assumptions and ways of communicating.**



The OHS Communication Checklist

Organisational communication systems are extremely complex. The best way of making sure all of the language and cultural factors are addressed is to break the task of improving the system into components that can be directly managed. This checklist is a suggested framework for tackling OHS problems across the whole organisation.

Checklist

All members of the workforce, including people with limited English language and literacy skills, benefit when organisations take action in the following areas:

- 1 Develop an OHS Communication Plan
- 2 Conduct a Training Needs Analysis Survey
- 3 Review Induction, Orientation & Placement
- 4 Evaluate Signs, Notices & Instructions
- 5 Use Translations & Interpreters
- 6 Choose Training Options
 - English Language and Literacy Training
 - OHS Induction Training
 - OHS Training Support
 - Specialised NESB OHS Training

1 OHS Communication Plan

All OHS legislation requires consultation and the dissemination of information in accessible ways to all employees. Organisations need to define their OHS objectives and ensure that employees can reach them. This requires a specific, planned approach to information sharing, training and day-to-day communication.

An OHS Communication Plan can be part of a company's overall information and communication policy or it can stand alone. The plan should include these basic elements.

Key Elements of an OHS Communication Plan

- A list of procedures for providing OHS information to all workers
- An official recognition of workforce diversity and the need for language and literacy strategies
- An outline of preferred communication and training strategies
- An OHS Communication budget for interpreting, translations and training programs
- A policy on the provision of information in languages other than English
- A review schedule to account for changes in the make-up of the workforce

First, identify the nature of the problem in terms of the organisation's OHS obligations to provide information and training. The plan should recognise the cultural and language diversity of the workforce and say how information and training will be managed and provided. It should clearly budget for such strategies as translations and training.

The communication plan must allow for changes to work practices and safety standards. Most importantly, it needs to be kept on the agenda for safety committee meetings to ensure that, after the multilingual posters and signs go up, for example, the other issues aren't forgotten or delayed for a few months.

If you start with a good, practical commitment to improving the flow of communication, it is much easier to work through the following steps.

2 Training Needs Analysis Surveys

How many employees have inadequate language and communication skills for their current and anticipated duties?

How is their safety and welfare affected?

These are not easy questions to answer. In most cases, unless the workforce is quite small, organisations will need professional assistance to conduct a comprehensive and accurate assessment of language and literacy skills.

A study on literacy in the workplace (*Literacy for Productivity*, Australian Council for Adult Education, 1989.) showed that while over 90% of employers and unions saw literacy as crucial to industrial survival and progress, less than half of those surveyed were actually aware of any individuals in their workplaces with literacy problems. The low awareness reported is often a result of a lack of contact and consultation. More commonly, adults with literacy problems successfully hide them. NESB workers with poor English learn to 'get by' in other ways.

When surveys are conducted properly, organisations are often very surprised to discover just how many workers do have communication problems.

Let's look at a few statistics first.

- 170,433 South Australians speak a language other than English at home.
- 26,972 are not fluent in English
Parliamentary Research Service, Background Paper #34, 1994/1995
- 1 in 7 workers (around 14%), both NESB and ESB, are not functionally literate in English.
No Single Measure, National Report on Adult Literacy, 1989

In which industries are these workers employed? Here are some figures from another national study estimating distribution of NESB and Australian born workers by industry and occupation:

Comparative Distribution of Employed Persons of NESB and Australian Born Employed Persons

	NESB Workers	Australian Born Workers
1 By Industry		
Manufacturing:	29%	14%
Construction:	9%	7%
Transport:	8%	9%
Commerce:	17%	18%
Sales/Rec/Other:	24%	32%
Finance:	9%	12%
Agriculture:	<u>4%</u>	<u>8%</u>
	100%	100%
2 By Occupation		
Trades:	19.5%	15.5%
Labour:	22%	14%
Plant Operators:	14%	7%
Managers:	10.5%	12.5%
Professionals:	10%	13.5%
ParaProfessionals:	4%	6.5%
Sales & Clerical:	<u>20%</u>	<u>31%</u>
	100%	100%

Office of Multicultural Affairs, Dept of Prime Minister & Cabinet, 1989

Workplace English Language and Literacy Surveys

Over 200 South Australian companies and government departments have run English language and literacy programs in the workplace in the last twenty years. Each program began with a survey to determine how many employees needed such training. It would be safe to say that the results of most surveys surprised management and unions.

While the national figures say around 14% of the workforce have such problems, industry concentrations mean that your organisation could have a much higher proportion. Some textile, clothing and footwear, food and metals manufacturing companies found that 60% to 80% of their workforces had poor English language and/or literacy skills.

For example, before one Adelaide company conducted a survey with the help of a TAFE workplace education unit, management and unions estimated that perhaps 30 or 40 of the 300 shopfloor staff would come forward. As it happened, over 120 people came for interviews and nearly all of them were in need of English or literacy training. It came as a shock to the company but everyone agreed that it was better to find out before introducing new safety training, teams and quality programs than after.

What is a language and literacy survey of your workforce likely to find?

Getting an accurate analysis of the language and literacy skill levels of a particular workforce requires a sensitive approach and usually some professional assistance. ESB workers with poor literacy skills often prefer a discreet approach and off-site assessment and assistance. Assessing NESB employees' actual English levels according to the Australian Second Language Proficiency Rating scale also requires trained assessors. As part of the assessment, the worker's first language and level of first language literacy should also be identified.

In a typical manufacturing, construction, transport or services workplace;

- **10-20% of NESB workers have basic English skills**

They have poor listening and speaking skills and very poor reading and writing ability. They are the main "at risk" NESB workers.

- **10-20% of NESB workers have intermediate level English skills**

They cope quite well but often display some serious gaps in safety awareness and tend not to apply for training or participate in meetings.

- **5-10% of ESB workers have minimal or basic literacy skills**

They find it difficult to comprehend written instructions and basic technical information. They avoid writing anything and have developed ways of disguising their problems.

- **5-15% of ESB and NESB workers have minimal numeracy skills.**

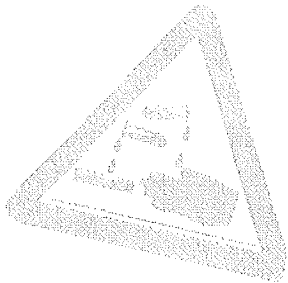
They lack basic mathematical skills and can't read formulas, graphs, charts and instructions involving ratios or proportions.

Company concerns about safety awareness and safety practices may be the first reason for checking the language and literacy levels of the workforce but these skills impact on the whole job. Therefore, it is a good idea to survey the workforce for abilities across the range of duties but with a focus on OHS issues. A good way of getting this focus is to ask questions such as;

- **What literacy, numeracy and English skills are required to operate safely on every job?**

- **What are the existing channels for communicating safety matters? Do they work for everyone?**
- **What languages are spoken? Is everyone literate in their own language?**
- **How well do NESB and ESB workers understand verbal or written safety information?**
- **Do supervisors and safety staff know how to communicate with people from other cultures?**

Once the results are in, it is up to the workplace consultative and training committee and management to design a program that recognises the needs of all employees. Strategies may include any of the other items on the checklist.



3 Induction, Orientation and Placement

For workers from other countries and cultures and for those with limited language and literacy skills, ensuring that induction is effective is extremely important and requires a few different approaches.

As with the young NESB worker mentioned in Section 2 who was injured on his first day on the job, many new staff get the traditional 'basic model' induction. In rapid order, they get: The Company, The Job, The Forms, The Tour and occasionally, The Handbook (which isn't usually in plain English). Safety rules and regulations,

which are often complex and lengthy, are usually included in this 'information overload' approach.

Many workers, particularly NESB workers, are concerned that they have never adequately been informed of their rights, obligations, available resource and support systems, health and safety matters, safety representatives and so on. Too often, organisations assume that everyone has got the message.

In the demanding worklife of a typical supervisor, where the deceptively simple job description of 'Planning, Organising, Leading and Controlling' screens a complex shuffle of over forty separate duties, inducting new people can often be given a low priority, especially where labour turnover is high.

It is a vicious circle effect. If people are not properly and effectively introduced to their jobs, are not kept informed and safe and involved, are not deployed to maximise their utilisation and development, they get hurt, or see others hurt, or feel wasted, and leave.

Case Study

The induction check-list for supervisors in a medium-sized factory listed several important safety items: emergency stop buttons, tripwires, guards, hazardous procedures, danger signs and notices, correct lifting method, fire and accident procedures and more. All of this information had to be transmitted to new employees within their first week.

In reality, items were being ticked off in the first day or two. After that, 'experienced' workers were given the task of on-the-job induction - in addition to their own duties. Accident reports and employee surveys revealed that large sections of such information had never been transmitted effectively.

To improve the induction process of all workers, several steps can be taken to modify the approach to make sure OHS information is understood and that the responsibility for induction is shared across the organisation.

The OHS Induction & Orientation Process

Design the process to provide orientation and instruction in ways that recognise the language and cultural factors. Allocate more time for people with basic English. For most NESB inductees a half-day, one-day or ad hoc induction process is inadequate, so the induction should be staggered over a few days in the first week or two on the job. The supervisor or team leader can review vital information during this time and check that the new worker can demonstrate safe working procedures.

If you separate the elements of induction the new employee doesn't suffer from information overload. With OHS, it's important that the new worker understands not only their detailed safety job instructions but also the broader issues and their legal responsibilities.

Clearly outline employer and employee responsibilities under the state OHS Act. Emphasise employee responsibilities. Make sure that everyone understands the importance of understanding and following instructions (and asking if in doubt!) and reporting accidents, near-misses, hazards and damage.

Explain the role and functions of OHS representatives and committees and medical staff. Introduce key people. Ideally, they should conduct their part of the induction personally.

Provide information on hazardous substances and procedures, care and use of safety equipment, material safety data sheets and the safety signs related to the employee's first placement. Allow time for discussion. Demonstrate as much as

possible and ask the employee to repeat the demonstration.

Carefully explain the purposes and procedures of fire drills. To spring a surprise evacuation alert on people recently arrived as refugees from war zones can create panic, leading to injury. Give out translations of all evacuation procedures that include an explanation of the vocabulary and the concepts of 'drill' and 'practice'.

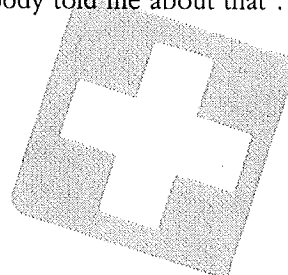
Simplify Presentations

It is possible to improve the way induction material is presented by simplifying it. A lot of the information usually presented isn't necessary for the initial orientation needs of a new employee and it is better to concentrate on the major issues, providing more detail and written material later.

Presentation style is important. A factual, structured, point-by-point presentation with built-in checking points and time for questions works a lot better for diverse groups than does a rambling or 'inspirational' address to the troops.

New employees with limited English or from cultures where one doesn't question authority may not ask questions directly so be prepared to check for understanding. Be careful about the use of slang, in-house jokes and unnecessary jargon. (One new employee in a Sydney organisation was told to report to the 'Opera House' in the morning. While his supervisor waited impatiently in the ramshackle shed so nicknamed, the luckless new boy stood worrying on the famous steps.)

Assuming that nothing is clear until the intended receiver has said it is will help overcome that familiar phenomenon of the new worker saying later, "But nobody told me about that".



Support for Supervisors

Supervisors, team leaders and managers need to understand how important it is to provide support for new employees from NESB during the first weeks on the job. They should be given some training in managing and communicating with culturally mixed workteams.(see Training Options, p.25). As long as what is said in safety induction is reflected in shopfloor practice, new workers stand a much better chance of avoiding those all-too-common early injuries.

Placement

Carefully consider the positioning of new and transferring NESB employees. Some workplace layouts isolate workers, physically or due to noise levels. The lack of regular contact with co-workers and supervisors can be a significant barrier to the development of English skills and a sense of belonging.

Case Study

One of about twenty newly-arrived Polish workers starting at a metals company was placed in a simple one-person job requiring very little contact with others. A few months later, when many of the workers were progressing in their use of English and learning other jobs, this man still had very poor English. As a result, he could not easily transfer. He had higher than average absenteeism and never attended meetings. A heavy-machinery mechanic by trade, he remained in the same limiting job for over two years before he was able to find another job elsewhere.

Placement with an experienced worker who shares the same language can be a very valuable induction tactic but there are a number of inherent problems. One of them is the danger of acquiring wrong information, bad habits or negative attitudes from the veteran worker. Are you sure he or she knows and understands the whole OHS picture? Another problem is the isolation and potential miscommunication that can happen when one employee acts as interpreter for another.

A third danger is the development of mono-lingual workgroups. Members of mono-lingual workteams rarely develop good English skills. While the deliberate creation of same-language speaking teams and sections used to be standard practice in Australian industry, it is now widely seen as limiting, counter-productive, divisive and discriminatory. The use of other languages is an important and valuable contribution to the communication of vital information, but English has to be the language of work, for many valid reasons. By allowing whole sections to operate in another language you may be creating a risk situation for them and for others.

Racism and sexism are often facts of industrial life. Organisations need to recognise this when placing or transferring employees and consider the welfare of new employees when placing them. Safety isn't the only reason for managing these tensions but it is undeniable that racial and sexual harassment can cause stress related problems and contribute to reduced attention to the work at hand.

case study

Improving OHS Induction for NESB Workers

- 1 Allocate extra time to OHS induction. Extend over 2-3 days.
- 2 Prepare information in Plain English and in translation.
- 3 Separate general induction and OHS induction.
- 4 Clarify employer and employee OHS responsibilities.
- 5 Introduce key OHS officers, representatives & medical staff.
- 6 Demonstrate all procedures & observe employee demonstrations.
- 7 Assist supervisors/leaders to check employee performance.
- 8 Placement should ensure contact with experienced workers.

4 Signs, Notices, Posters and Written Instructions

Safety signage has traditionally been over-complex, colloquial or jokey. For example, there are dozens of ways of saying "Keep Out", such as "Unauthorised Entry Prohibited" or "Admittance to Authorised Personnel Only" and so on. Posters using phrases like "Never Monkey Around" or "Don't Be A Wires Guy: Leave it to the Electrician" are far beyond the comprehension of basic learners of English.

Accident prevention regulations and many warning signs are written in the passive voice; "Hearing Protection Must Be Worn". People hardly ever talk like this. We usually say "You must wear ear plugs" or "You have to wear ear muffs". Notices and written instructions tend to be complex and verbose, prime examples of the need for a "Plain English" movement.

Signs

How clear and unambiguous are your safety signs?
Are machine safety instructions open to interpretation, such as this one?

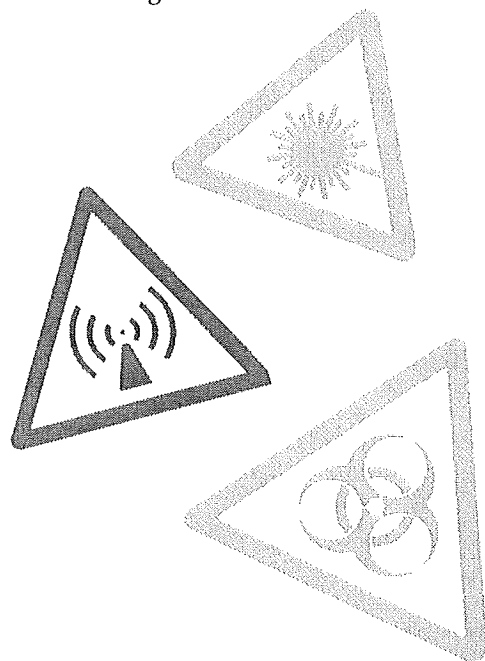
*Before Switching on Machine
Ensure Guard is Closed*

A NESB worker may confuse the words 'before' and 'first', and logically expects instructions to be sequential. This sign reverses the desired sequence and may very well lead someone to switch on the machine then close the guard, risking an accident.

Even apparently clear symbolic signs such as this one need an initial explanation for some workers.

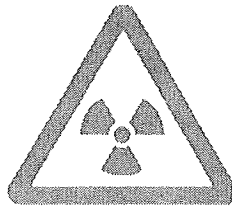


One NESB worker interpreted this as 'No Smoking'. When asked to explain the walking figure he shrugged and said, "No smoking when you are walking."

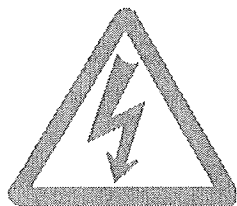


Other signs have been interpreted with equal and potentially more dangerous inaccuracy.

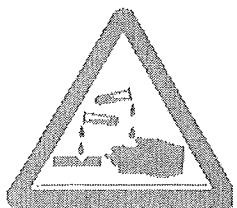
A few examples:



'Risk of ionizing radiation'
interpreted as "Fan - Keep Clear"



'Risk of electric shock'
interpreted as "Danger of Lightning"
(Keep away during thunderstorms).



'Risk of Corrosion'
interpreted as "Wear Gloves"

These and many other recorded inaccurate interpretations have been given by both NESB and ESB workers during training needs surveys and assessment interviews. Obviously, symbolic signs are not always self-explanatory. Explanation and education are essential.

Signs must also be consistent across a workplace, using the same design, same colours and same wording. Where necessary, signs can be bi-lingual or multi-lingual but there is the danger of creating a confusing sign. It may be better to provide translations of all signs in a handbook or

a separate notice prominently displayed around the workplace.

Utilise existing translated signs and booklets as much as possible and go over every sign during the induction period.

Notices

Notices, such as fire evacuation procedure, are often written without regard for clarity or logical sequence. As many workers never look at the noticeboards anyway, why turn them off with language like this?

"In the advent of fire it is incumbent upon all employees to observe the following procedures."

Notices are often written in the same way year after year because 'it's always been like that'. The old language of industrial relations influenced personnel departments and unions to write in a very legalistic manner; "Pursuant to Section 26a of the XYZ Award..."

Most notices are put up as typewritten sheets, dense with information and hard to read. Apply a few advertising and plain English principles. Use bigger type, more spacing, coloured paper and pictures or logos. Show the notice to a few workers to get feedback on its readability before putting it up all over the place.

Posters

Many safety posters are confusing or culturally inappropriate. For example, 'A Wise Owl Wears Safety Glasses' may not seem inappropriate until you learn that in Southeast Asia, Polynesia and parts of eastern Europe, owls are symbolic of misfortune or death. Other posters use catchy slogans and graphics which can obscure the message. Cultural references like "The Thong Is Ended but the Malady Lingers On", a parody of a song title used to warn workers to wear proper

footwear, are even obscure to Australian born workers who weren't around when the song was popular.

The best posters use direct language and clear illustrations. If a large segment of the workforce speaks the same language, it may be worth producing posters in that language. It is better, however, to aim for high impact, easily understandable visuals with the message in English.

Written Instructions

Signs, posters and notices are easier to analyse and change than written instructions because there is less material to work through for one thing. A major problem with longer written instructions is that they are usually written by people who have been through the Australian education system and then the 'school' of writing workplace jargon. We tend to write 'upwards' to an imaginary teacher or boss who will judge our work. Trying to sound serious and intelligent, we often lose our way.

Look at this example from a company handbook:

"Within our company the safety of each employee whilst performing his daily tasks or any other person who may be affected by Company operations is the establishment of and observance of safety rules and regulations to ensure the safety of all concerned."
42 words

Translated into plain English, this becomes:

"Safety rules and regulations must be strictly followed to ensure the safety of all employees and the safety of visitors, contractors and any other person affected by Company operations ."
29 words

You haven't saved much space but you've certainly saved a lot of confusion, spelled out who 'any other person' might be and avoided 'talking down' to anyone. (You've also saved yourself an argument about sexist writing by avoiding the exclusive 'his' in the original).

Handbooks are notoriously badly written and many companies are now engaging plain English specialists to rewrite them to be "Reader Friendly".

Manuals present other problems because of the need to use technical English but even they can be improved with the use of illustrations and plain English.

The danger in attempting to 'plain English' a document is that you end up 'writing down' to your audience - making it so simple it's insulting. As one supervisor commented about plain English; "It's easy to read - but it's not that easy to write." Providing training in plain English for staff who do have to produce general communications is an option well worth considering. It is also important to evaluate and ensure the readability of such documents as Material Safety Data Sheets and job safety instructions

instructions

5 Translations and Interpreters

Translations

The South Australian OHS Act requires employers to *“provide information (in such languages as are appropriate) in relation to health, safety...”*

(Section 19). A key part of an organisation’s OHS Communication Plan is deciding why and when to use translators and interpreters.

(A simple definition of these two terms is that translators work with the written word, interpreters with the spoken word. Both sets of skills are tested and accredited separately.)

A training needs analysis will give you a clear idea of which languages are spoken by how many employees and which individuals are not literate in their own languages. Some large companies report having over 50 languages spoken among the workforce. In such cases, it may not be feasible to translate entire handbooks and OHS policies and regulations but it is essential that key sections be provided to everyone.

For the main language groups in the workforce, it is cost-effective to have the majority of induction and safety material translated. Where there are very few speakers of a language, it may be better to utilise general translated material from government and other sources and to provide workplace specific information in individual and small group sessions, perhaps with the aid of an interpreter. For NESB workers who are not literate or only partly literate in their first languages, arrange for a bilingual co-worker to take the non-reader through the information in detail, or bring in a qualified interpreter.

Having identified the need and decided what to have translated, the next stage is making sure you get the best translators and translations for the task.

Case Study

A manufacturing company commissioned translations of its accident prevention policy and regulations. During the preparation, one of the translators rang the training officer to check a few things.

“Now ‘horseplay’, “ he said, “that means “acting foolishly” right?”

“Correct.”

“And this one; ‘Warning signs, tags and lock out systems must be obeyed’. I’ve got ‘lock out’ as when the employer shuts the factory to keep striking workers out, but that doesn’t seem right.”

Said the training officer; “I’m glad you called.”

Ready-made Translations

There are several government leaflets and booklets in multiple languages explaining symbolic safety signs, OHS legislation, safety committees, rehabilitation schemes and so on. Ask translation agencies to show you materials which they have prepared for other companies.

You may also be able to get help from a bigger organisation in your industry which has already had standard accident prevention regulations and information booklets translated professionally. If you have an agreement with the larger company to supply high quality components, they should be interested in helping your company in any way they can.

Employer organisations, industry associations or unions may also be able to help.

Engaging and Working with a Translator

In engaging a translator from one of the numerous agencies, make sure they are qualified and have relevant experience. Most, but not all, translators and interpreters are accredited at various levels by NAATI, the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters. Some hold overseas

qualifications. A translator who is to be responsible for working on OHS materials should have a NAATI Level 3 accreditation.

Working with Translators

- Decide on materials to be translated
- Choose an accredited and qualified translator
- Brief the translator thoroughly: material, purpose, target audience
- Involve bilingual employees to assist in briefing the translator
- Ensure original material is as brief as possible and in "plain English"
- Bilingual employees to check final translation

A good translator will want to consult with the organisation about their needs and the target audience. Involve employees who speak, read and write the languages fluently. They are familiar with the situation and can check that the translation is accurate and, most importantly, written in the equivalent to 'Plain English' and culturally acceptable. Some translators may be 'academic' people more interested in a technically perfect translation than a document that is accessible to even a poorly-educated speaker of the language. Cross-check everything. Some mistakes are just funny - others could be deadly.

Interpreters

The second strategy for providing OHS information in other languages is through interpreters. Some companies use professional interpreters to assist in presenting information to large groups of employees from the same language group or when dealing with individual cases of a legal or technical nature, such as in the rehabilitation process.

Working with Interpreters

In person:

- Brief the interpreter beforehand
- Sit in a triangular arrangement; you, the other person and the interpreter
- Address the other person directly, person to person, not "Ask him if..."
- Speak clearly, slowly, in separate sentences
- Maintain eye contact and full attention
- Avoid private discussion with interpreter
- Be sensitive to social, political, gender or religious factors

By telephone:

All of the above, except for seating and visual contact with the interpreter

- Talk a little louder than usual to be clearly heard over the telephone when using phone conference facility
- Sit facing non-English speaker to watch body language, expressions
- Pause after each sentence to allow telephone interpreter time

As with translators, organisations should engage professionals with NAATI accreditation or other genuine credentials. Being aware of the NAATI classification system will help you decide which level of interpreter you need for a particular task.

In situations where technical, procedural or legal matters are at issue, professional interpreters should always be brought in. But for day to day communications, the multilingual workforce is a commonly-used resource.

Bi-lingual Employees

A common practice in multilingual workplaces is the use of employees as interpreters. While this can certainly solve many communication problems, it can also create others. As discussed above, interpreters are trained and accredited

professionals fluent in both languages. Many bi-lingual workers may be just as fluent but they aren't trained and shouldn't be used as if they were.

The disadvantages of using a bilingual worker as an interpreter are that the supervisor, manager, trainer and so on has limited personal contact with the NESB worker. He or she also loses a certain degree of authority and can't be sure that the messages - both ways - are being accurately or fully conveyed. Where the message concerns safety practices, the potential dangers are obvious and supervisors often worry about their liability in case of an accident.

For NESB workers with little or no English, having to rely on a bilingual co-worker to interpret for them places them in a dependent and at times humiliating position. Nor can the worker, like the supervisor, be sure his or her messages or views are being faithfully transmitted. Relying on bilingual workers to interpret for them also hinders or prevents their learning of English.

For the bi-lingual worker, usually untrained in interpreting and rarely fully bi-lingual, there are also problems that go beyond the misinterpretation of messages. There may be historical, religious or political conflicts which work against helping the other worker. The bilingual worker may wield undue influence over interchanges, possibly preventing the development of good working relationships. Worse, the bilingual worker may neglect or misinterpret a vital piece of information that could have prevented an accident. In this case, who is liable for the consequences of a miscommunication?

There are also the possible legal and industrial relations ramifications of regularly requiring an employee to perform what are really professional duties.

Bilingual workers, supervisors and managers can play important roles but they must be supported. They may need some training to improve their interpreting technique or to upgrade their English skills. People who are working with them need to understand the process. Their skills need to be recognised, ideally through payment for their services and certainly by making sure they aren't disadvantaged by taking time away from their own jobs to assist with communication.

options

6 Training Options

None of the preceding strategies will be entirely effective in reducing safety risks without a training program that makes sure that all the necessary skills, knowledge and awareness are present where they count - on the job.

Your training needs analysis will have identified who needs what. In most diverse workforces, these needs usually fall into five categories:

- **English Language, Literacy and Communication Skills Training**
- **OHS Induction and Communication Skills Training**
- **OHS Training Language and Literacy Support**
- **Specialised OHS Training for NESB Workers**
- **Management Training and Development**

These areas do overlap and they all include elements of all the other strategies mentioned so far but they can be looked at separately.

English Language, Literacy & Communication Skills Training

Along with making improvements to workplace communication systems, the next most effective and reliable strategy is to upgrade the English language and literacy proficiency of individuals. (Note: the term 'literacy' includes mathematical, or numeracy, skills.)

If your training needs analysis indicates that your organisation needs to introduce a workplace language and literacy program you'll be in good company. Thousands of other organisations have run English and literacy programs in their workplaces - and you'll be able to benefit from over 20 years of Australian industry experience in such training. There are also numerous good training materials and several government assistance schemes to help you to introduce a program.

There are a couple of critical points to keep in mind as you launch into workplace literacy.

Have Realistic Expectations

Firstly, the communication needs of workers from non-English speaking backgrounds or with limited literacy skills are no different from those of any other workers. There are only differences in the degree of need and the methods required to meet those needs. And "English" is not the solution to safety problems but a tool for improving communication. Enhancing the communication skills of both NESB and English speaking employees leads to the discovery of better ways of reaching everyone.

Secondly, it is unrealistic to expect that a few weeks or months of part-time English or literacy lessons in isolation will result in noticeable improvements on the job.

Integrated Training Approaches

Stand-alone English or literacy classes are often a waste of time and effort. Such isolated courses send a negative message to the learners that, because of their lack of language skills, they are the problem. This message is also heard by their co-workers.

Make sure that language and literacy courses tie in to the organisation's whole training and development program. This not only helps to get the most value out of the courses but also legitimises them in the eyes of the workforce.

Involve Key Personnel

The most effective way to ensure that the language and literacy learning process is directly related to the workplace situation is to directly involve key personnel, such as supervisors and accident prevention officers, with the students and the teachers. Well-designed English and literacy courses reflecting real needs and leading to training in other communication skills such as contributing to meetings and report writing can result in greatly improved safety awareness and motivation to participate in hazard control. For ESB workers the development of literacy skills also eliminates risks associated with the inability to read warnings, training materials or notices or to make written reports on hazards and accidents. A further benefit is that participants can then join other training programs, thus continuing to improve independently.

A good guide to introducing workplace language and literacy training is the *Just Step Forward* kit (see Part 2 for details). The kit describes. In the *Just Step Forward* video training program participants, managers, supervisors and union representatives talk about their experiences.

The Workplace Education Service Approach

Conduct Introductory & Planning Workshop

Stage 1: Training needs analysis

- Establish the organisation's objectives
- Form a support group/training committee
- Conduct a language and literacy task analysis
- Promote the program and interview applicants
- Produce report and training proposal

Stage 2: Training program design

- Negotiate program objectives
- Plan format and configuration
- Design the workplace curriculum
- Prepare instruction materials
- Prepare evaluation plan

Stage 3: Training program

- Confirm support group/training committee roles
- Confirm arrangements: attendance, facilities
- Start training program
- Provide course progress reports
- Maintain liaison and feedback
- Involve other trainers and support staff
- Present certificates

Stage 4: Program evaluation

- Involve support group members
- Survey all involved in program
- Measure progress against objectives
- Produce final program report
- Plan further action

from *Just Step Forward: A guide to introducing English language and literacy training in the workplace*, C'wealth Dept of Industrial Relations & DETAFE S.A. 1992

There are alternative approaches, some involving a complete integration of language and literacy support within industry certificate training programs. Larger workplaces are now beginning to employ or fund full-time enterprise-based teachers who perform a wide range of roles within the workplace.

A number of ESB workers with literacy/numeracy difficulties may prefer to study away from the workplace because of embarrassment. Off-site courses can be arranged as well, although this presents problems of transport and reduced relevance to the actual worksite.

Many recently arrived employed immigrants and refugees attend ESL courses in the evenings at colleges but in every state there are lengthy waiting lists for classes and eligibility is often limited to the first two or three years of residence in Australia. These classes are also not job-specific.

Workplace-based and -designed courses are the best option. They deliver results in many areas of communication skills development. Without these skills in the workforce, introducing new work practices, technologies and training programs would be extremely difficult and far more expensive.

OHS Induction and Communication Skills Training

The need for adjusting the induction and orientation processes to cater for language, literacy and cultural factors has been discussed earlier. To make that adjustment work, some training is needed for the staff responsible. To a large extent, that is the purpose of this kit.

Training is necessary to ensure that OHS issues are effectively included in the induction process for NESB workers and ESB workers with low literacy levels and are communicated well on the job. The training should be made available to personnel managers and officers, health and safety officers, administration staff responsible for OHS

documentation and processing, supervisors and teamleaders, health and safety representatives, union and other workforce representatives.

A good starting point is to conduct a 3-hour workshop based on this kit. See the accompanying *Notes to Trainers* in this kit. (You may also need to conduct a 1-hour briefing for senior management. Their acknowledgement of the need to address the language factors can pave the way for acceptance of the broader training programs.)

Most supervisors, managers, team leaders and so on are not going to take the time to read this booklet or related materials. Summarising the issues and giving participants a chance to reflect on how things happen in their sections in a half-day workshop can be an effective way of getting the message across.

Key people need to recognise that efforts are being made to ensure the safety of workers with limited English or literacy skills and that they have a part to play, from the induction phase onward. The main purpose of running a "Language Factors" workshop is to alert all concerned to the areas that need attention. It is a way of encouraging a sense of responsibility that goes beyond the safety officer, trainer or representative.

It is this sense of responsibility that can play the most effective role in creating safer workplaces.

OHS Training Language and Literacy Support

A most effective way to ensure that OHS training programs work with trainees from diverse language and educational backgrounds is to provide language and literacy support.

One form of support is to involve a workplace English language and literacy trainer. She or he can help the safety trainer to design the course according to the principles outlined in this booklet. She/he can then provide English or

literacy support to the trainees themselves during the program, either within the sessions or before or after them.

Another form of support is to brief and train the safety trainer in ways of ensuring that all participants understand the material and apply what they have learned. This begins with training in issues of language and literacy learning and cross-cultural communication. It could include Plain English training for trainers writing or adapting materials.

An alternative is to include the OHS training materials in the curriculum of a workplace English language and literacy course so that the participants are familiar with the vocabulary and the concepts before they attend a standard OHS training course. This can be effective if it is not seen as the alternative to safety training, as illustrated in Section 2, where dangerous assumptions were the basis of a well-meant stand-alone English-for-Safety course.

Specialised OHS Training for NESB Workers

A far more realistic and effective alternative to English language-based safety training is to design and conduct specialised OHS courses for NESB workers. These courses incorporate strategies to not only inform NESB workers but to involve them directly in the management of safety. One course which has been run successfully in several workplaces by the South Australian United Trades and Labour Council's safety training centre has resulted in the establishment of groups of NESB Safety Assistants. Their job is to help in getting OHS information to other NESB workers, to advise safety representatives and officers of hazards and areas for improvement and to represent the interests of workers from similar language and cultural backgrounds.

Supervisor and Management Training

In the booklet 'Managing Health & Safety At Work' (WorkCover, S.A. 1989), managers are called on to "ensure that supervisors are made responsible and accountable for the identification, evaluation and control of hazards."

For supervisors to meet these obligations training is obviously a requirement. Managers too need to be equipped to recognise what needs to be done to identify and eliminate hazards created by poor organisational communication skills and systems as well as by low levels of English and literacy skills among workers.

The first step is to incorporate the "Language Factors" material into existing supervisor and manager training programs in team-building, interpersonal communication, committee and meeting procedures, presentation and dissemination of information and in networking across organisations.

Cross-cultural communication training is an essential part of managing safety in a diverse workforce. At the very least, supervisors, managers, team leaders and safety representatives need to be aware of the nature of culture and how it operates at individual and group levels. Ideally, they need training to help them develop practical skills in communicating across cultural and linguistic barriers for many reasons, not the least of which is to ensure worker safety.

A component of train-the-trainer instruction is required. When it comes to instructing non-English speaking background (NESB) workers or

non-literate English speaking background (ESB) workers, supervisors, team leaders and managers need help and the resources to understand and work more effectively to overcome language barriers, literacy and numeracy problems and cultural differences. Some of these differences can be very difficult to identify and understand.

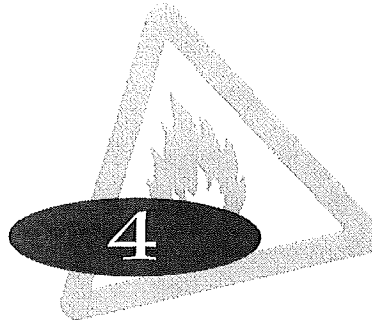
Supervisors and managers may have been giving safety training, regular talks and day-to-day instruction for years, but have they ever been helped to look at the underlying assumptions of such approaches? In some cases, the communication is all one-way and fails to cater for cultural differences in consultation style or the different ways in which speakers of different languages structure information to report or discuss problems.

Consultation with employees is going to play an increasing part in OHS management. Supervisors will need training in facilitating meetings of diverse groups to ensure that all members have a say and are involved. While the leadership styles required by traditional production processes have rarely had to take cultural and linguistic factors into account, the new emphases on safety, quality and involvement demand improved 'people skills'.

Not all of the strategies described so far will be required in every workplace but the OHS Communication Checklist can help you decide what to do. The following section reviews the key points and briefly presents an approach to action planning based on the checklist.

Key Points

- 1 Take a systematic approach to language and cultural factors in OHS.**
- 2 Choose from the range of strategies and tailor them to your organisation.**
- 3 Professional assistance is needed for some strategies.**
- 4 Involve representatives of the whole workforce.**



Taking Action

One of the most difficult things to accomplish in any organisation is effective action planning. Too many pressing tasks get in the way. It's easier, we think, to have a change dictated from above than to plan a course of action that will lead to the desired or necessary change.

The OHS Communication Checklist makes several recommendations for action but that is just the beginning. Your next step is to plan a course of action that will result in practical changes and improvements across the workplace.

Case Study

Thirty managers and supervisors from a manufacturing company attended a two-day seminar to examine teambuilding and quality assurance strategies. One 2-hour session addressed the question of involving workers from non-English speaking backgrounds in the new programs.

At the end of the session they were asked to discuss the situation in small groups and to come up with practical actions to improve communication, training and safety.

One group said job applicants should be given English literacy tests before being employed. Another group recommended forming monolingual work teams with interpreters as go-betweens. The three other groups all recommended the purchase of a multilingual safety signs poster. One of the three also

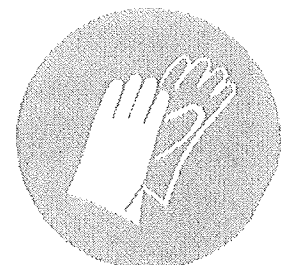
suggested translating all other signs into the 7 or 8 major languages spoken by the workforce.

These were their main recommendations. The manager responsible for the seminar was pleased the groups had come up with any practical suggestions at all.

Back in the factory, nothing changed - except that some copies of the multilingual safety signs poster went up here and there.

Unfortunately, it didn't cover all the languages spoken and only a few of the signs on the poster were actually in use in that factory.

The point made here is that workplace language and cultural factors are too complex and too intertwined with other issues to be simply dealt with in a morning's workshop. The range of factors is too broad to be covered by one or two small changes. If your organisation is to make a serious attempt to improve OHS communication and systems along the lines suggested in this booklet, some serious preparation and planning has to be done. And, as with any other workplace program, it must have senior management support and committed resources.



Where to start

A logical place to start is with the OHS committee or training committee. With the group's approval and management support, the next steps would be to conduct a "Language & Cultural Factors" workshop in preparation for the action planning process. Participants should include the safety committee members, representatives of senior management and the workforce and all other staff responsible for aspects of health, security and safety.

Raising issues of literacy, culture, race and ethnicity with a work team often results in heated discussion. This subject is tied up with several other issues: migration, cross-cultural conflicts and stereotyping, the role of the schools, the responsibilities of companies, government agencies, unions and so on. The focus must be on directing the group's energies towards action planning.

In a half-day session, you can't expect major outcomes from any group. The aim is to identify objectives and agree on further action. The primary objectives are to raise awareness of the situation and to provide information about what can be done to address problems in workplace-specific terms. The development of actual skills will occur in the implementation of any recommendations from the group.

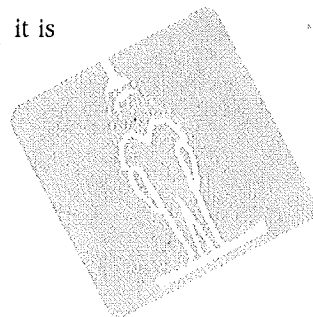
The "Language and Cultural Factors" workshops and follow-up activities should be planned into the organisation's general OHS training program. It may be valuable to introduce the subject in a stand-alone session first but making sure that it is seen as part of the total context of workplace

safety. It would be counter-productive to isolate the Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) or the English Speaking Background (ESB) worker with low levels of literacy as 'the problem' and present a program as a stand-alone effort to address it. There is certainly a place for specialised OHS training courses for these workers but organisations also have to consider the whole communication system if they are to improve safety. Ideally, the issues and strategies raised in the kit should be addressed at each stage of the 'mainstream' OHS program.

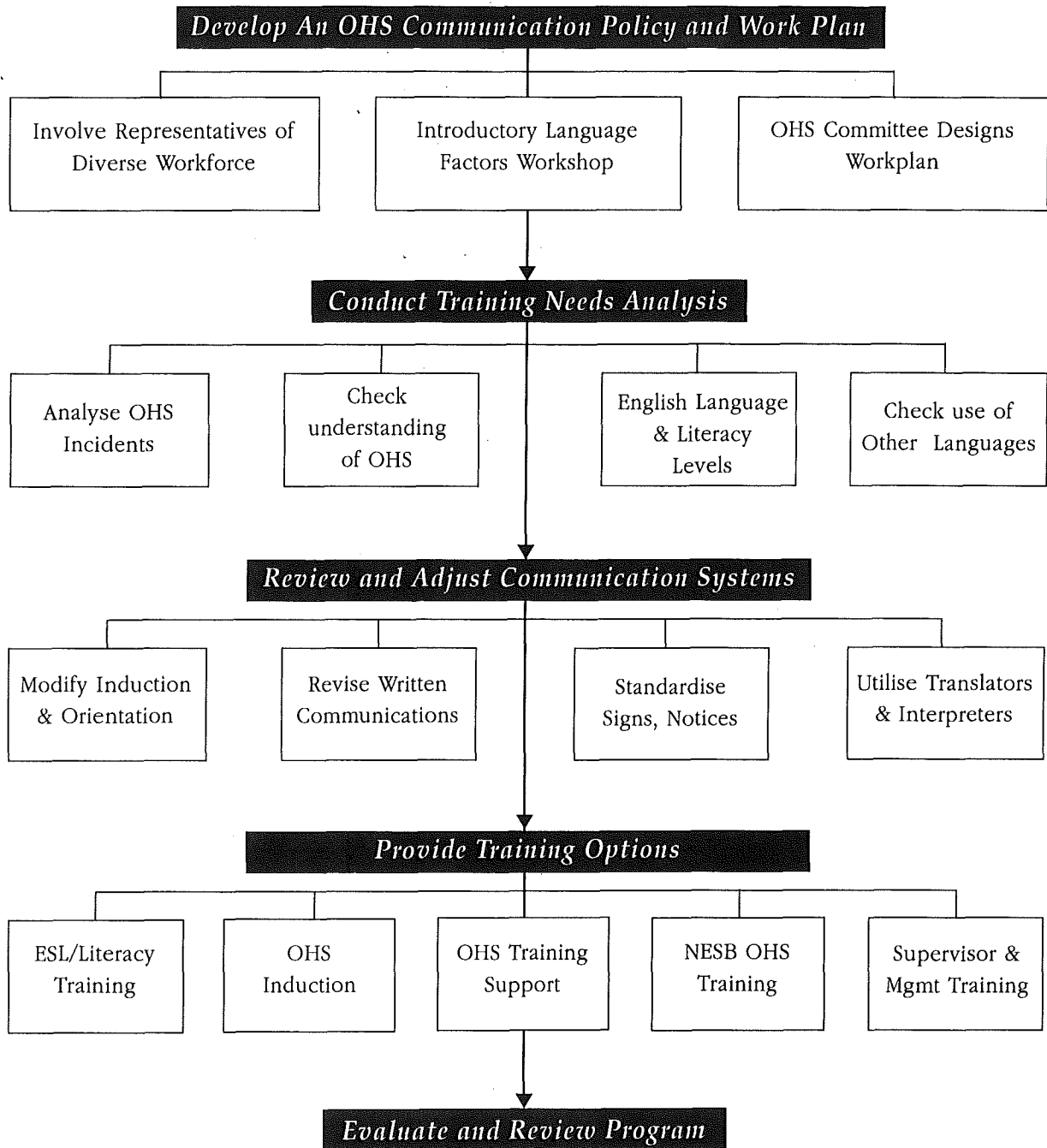
Follow-up to a 'Language and Cultural Factors' workshop is absolutely critical. Many workers are cynical or apathetic about efforts to improve NESB worker safety. To run a briefing or workshop and then do nothing would be worse than not running the session in the first place. Before the session, agree with key managers on a budget and resource strategy to follow up some if not all of the recommendations arising from the participants. There's nothing like a few visible results to keep the momentum going.

Whatever approach you choose to take, keep in mind the key points at the end of this section and apply the Action Planning flowchart on the next page to your OHS strategies.

Taking Action



The Language Factors Action Planning Process



Conclusion

This booklet has briefly described the occupational health, safety and welfare problems which, although not unique to multilingual workforces, are made more severe by language, literacy and communication difficulties. Several possible solutions have been proposed, many of them within the capacity of organisations to effect without external assistance. There are also numerous avenues of external assistance, which are listed in a separate section of the kit.

The increasing interest in addressing safety issues for all sections of the workforce coincides with a nation-wide drive to improve work methods, technologies and workforce skill levels. There is also a growing recognition that the NESB workforce represents a largely-untapped pool of talent. Many of these men and women have unrecognised qualifications, higher than average levels of previous education, broader work experience and strong motivation to succeed. There is still a danger, however, that "migrant workers" needs will continue to be neglected because of the misperceptions that the cultural and linguistic barriers are insurmountable and that, anyway, we're "coping". The fact that over half a million English-speaking workers also have difficulties with reading, writing and maths has come as a shock.

If Australian industry is to ensure the future development and safety of all these workers, something obviously must be done. The "Language Factors" kit can be included as one part of a possible campaign to address OHS issues at all levels. Trainers, safety representatives and other OHS professionals will find that adding awareness of language and cultural issues to their programs and plans enhances their effectiveness and acceptability across the workforce.

Solving the communication problems outlined in this booklet is a relatively straightforward task. The result is a workforce more committed to change, more aware of ways in which language and culture can affect communication and more capable of tackling health and safety problems successfully.

Taking 'the language and cultural factors' into account at each step will ensure that everyone in the organisation participates in and supports the OHS program and benefits from every course of action.

Key points

Key Points

- 1 Identify the language and cultural factors that affect occupational health, safety and welfare**
- 2 Challenge assumptions about communication**
- 3 Develop an OHS communication policy**
- 4 Use the OHS Communication Checklist to design your program**
- 5 Plan your "Language Factors" program in consultation with the workforce**
- 6 Adjust systems of workplace communication**
- 7 Provide the necessary training and materials**
- 8 Evaluate the results and plan ahead**