

# THE FRONTIER PSYCHOLOGIST

**HOW CAN WE REVITALISE EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION AND INTEREST IN WORKPLACE SAFETY?  
ANDREW SHARMAN BELIEVES HIS NEW RESEARCH SHOWS THE WAY FORWARD**

**T**raditionally, companies, around the world and across international borders and industries, have focused on building effective safety-management programmes to reduce workplace accidents.

However, now that the safety performance of many companies has levelled off, they're wondering what to do next.

## **DYING FOR THEIR JOBS**

The International Labour Organization (ILO) reports that almost 2.8-million fatal accidents occur at work every year. This means that every day almost 7 700 people die of work-related disease or injury. By the time you've finished reading this article 80 people will have lost their lives at work.

In addition, there are around 374-million non-fatal, work-related injuries and illnesses each year. Many of these result in extended absences from work. It's certainly a sobering picture of the modern workplace – where workers have the potential to suffer serious consequences as a result of simply "doing their job". It's quickly apparent that the way we're doing things isn't working.

In a bid to understand why, we conducted research interviews with more than 60 safety directors, CEOs and operational vice presidents from leading multinational blue-chip companies based in Europe, Asia, North and South America, as well as the Gulf region and across Africa.

The findings are indicative of views from a diverse range of industries, with over 30 different industry sectors represented, including food and beverage production,

power generation and supply, automotive, oil and gas, aviation, public transport, chemicals, mining, heavy engineering and fast-moving consumer goods.

The questions posed reflected four strategic themes: Drivers for and challenges to great workplace safety; Safety innovation and inspiration; Confidence and competence; and Future focus.

By assuring the participants' anonymity, the ensuing dialogues provided a rich source of thought and opinion from some of the most influential international safety practitioners and business leaders around the world.

## **CURRENT WORKPLACE SAFETY MOTIVATORS**

A number of important themes emerged from the interviews. The first was that safety performance in around half (49 percent) of the companies is driven by the desire to reduce injuries and fatalities through a "zero harm" campaign or initiative.

A third of respondents see this as their moral duty and feel the need to meet stakeholder and industry peer expectations.

The same percentage (34 percent) also believes that good safety performance is necessary to protect corporate reputation. Penalties in the form of regulatory fines and also the fear of enforcement action are a relatively small motivator, being cited by only around a fifth (18 percent) of interviewees.

However, the proportion of companies to have enshrined safety in their organisational values (as opposed to simply

reciting a slogan of "Safety First!") is equally small at just 17 percent.

### THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES

Asked what their top three challenges were, 65 percent of safety leaders cited the lack of sufficient capability of senior leaders to take on a guiding role in safety, or their inability to provide middle management with the right tools for safety improvement.

Interestingly, this picture was reflected by the operational leaders, too. Without doubt, there's a massive opportunity here for forward-focused safety practitioners.

Approximately half of all organisations interviewed struggled to maintain consistent levels of safety performance across a large, multinational organisation.

Further down the scale of common challenges came the ability to keep safety at work fresh, inspiring and interesting (31 percent) and influencing behaviours (31 percent). An ageing workforce, governance and relevance of safety initiatives were also named, each by 20 percent of respondents.

The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) featured occasionally in the operational leaders' feedback, with an underlying concern and a fear of "not knowing" what AI might mean for their businesses.

### THE CUTTING EDGE OF SAFETY

How do organisations feel they can use the motivators that they are aware of, and tackle the main challenges they face?

Among the innovative solutions named in the survey, the one that was cited most frequently was the psychology of safety and a focus on proactive behaviours. Various approaches were mentioned, including nudge theory, heuristics and our own perspective, "cultural safety".

More than a third (35 percent) of companies listed gamification, app-based mobile technology and other novel approaches as a good way to enliven communication, as well as conducting mindset assessments (or attitude surveys) to truly understand what their workers are thinking.

Other innovative solutions named were predictive analytics to forecast the likelihood of the next accident (30 percent), rolling governance programmes (20 percent), balanced, integrated, leading key performance indicators (20 percent), competency building to improve personal judgement capabilities (20 percent), and driver safety risk programmes (20 percent). Six Sigma and Lean methodologies were also mentioned, but, surprisingly, by only ten percent of respondents.

### NEW INSPIRATION

Companies have learned about these new developments by various means. More than 60 percent of respondents use informal networks and peer-to-peer forums to find new inspiration for workplace safety.

More than half (53 percent) read online blogs, articles and use *Twitter* for information from thought leaders such as Andrew Hopkins, Daniel Kahneman, Leandro Herrero, Daniel Pink, Dominic Cooper and Sidney Dekker. (Full disclosure: the author's name did occur in several feedback sessions on this topic.)

Approximately a third of interviewees attend executive-

level safety conferences – such as those held by Saioosh, the American Society of Safety Engineers, the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health and the Institute of Leadership and Management – for their professional networking as much as their technical knowledge base.

As one respondent remarked: "Benchmarking and networking with peers is the best way to see where challenges are, and how people are handling them in new and unique ways."

### CONFIDENCE IN SAFETY SYSTEMS

The survey interviewers asked leaders about their views on different areas of workplace safety in their own organisation. Despite recent push back against the merit and value of lagging indicators, around 50 percent of those surveyed continue to judge their company's safety performance by its injury and fatality rates.

Formal reviews and independent audits give 35 percent of respondents the confidence that their systems are effective, while safety observations and perception assessments provide around a third with good insight into the effectiveness of current safety efforts.

Several respondents mentioned their expected confidence in the new ISO 45001 standard as a way to bring about a robust structural framework for managing workplace safety risks.

However, more than half of the safety directors questioned believe that their senior leaders and managers lack workplace safety competency. They also cited a lack of internal capability in process safety, governance and competency among themselves as health and safety professionals. Interestingly, both of these positions were supported in the views from operational leaders. It's time to raise the game, isn't it?

A third of respondents said that the philosophy behind safety required attention. They see the need to further develop the safety culture in their organisation through the consideration and incorporation of employee attitudes, decision-making in safety, behavioural influences and organisational thinking.

Taking these points together, there's a very clear sign pointing in the direction of better understanding of the cognitive psychology behind workplace safety.

### CHALLENGES TO FUTURE OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH RISK MANAGEMENT

As a result, when asked about planned future efforts, 40 percent of the safety directors mentioned the intention to focus on psychology, new behavioural safety models, human-error reduction and culture, while 35 percent said safety leadership is also a key area.

However, the same percentage believe that a change in safety culture and behaviour is held back by a reluctance of front-line managers to "own" safety, while more than a quarter also said that senior leaders do not demonstrate commitment to leading the safety effort.

Geographical, cultural and behavioural diversity also play a role in making a company-wide change in safety culture difficult, according to a third of interviewees. Clearly, there's more to be done to engage operational leaders everywhere.



### WORKPLACE SAFETY: WHAT MORE CAN WE DO?

All of the companies interviewed have invested in building a strong safety culture in their organisations, yet all believe that their culture needs an invigorating impetus to help maintain and further improve it. They are, almost without exception, casting around for inspiring, innovative ideas that will appeal to employees and give them a fresh approach.

As one safety director put it: "Our safety maturity has changed. We're better and stronger – though we still have more to do – but there isn't really anything available for us at this advanced stage."

Another said: "We need some leading-edge innovation in modern safety philosophy. Something from occupational psychology that will help people to know what to do in the face of workplace risk – because it is 'the right thing to do.'"

Respondents said they believe that innovative offerings are lacking in the safety industry. One interviewee said: "Very little is innovative right now in safety to be honest. This is an area that gets overused and overthought. What else could we do?"

A similar reaction came from another respondent, who added: "We don't see much that is innovative or leading edge in safety anymore."

What the companies surveyed want is "real, helpful, practical, experienced and well-focused advice, as there is a dearth of this available from regulators, standard setters, researchers, academics, consultants and professional bodies. We don't want to just reuse or recycle something tried in the 1980s (for example behavioural-based safety, human factors, safety training), we want to find new, novel and inventive solutions to culture change, through care and belonging, for example".

### A BRAVE NEW WORLD

Although behaviour is still integral to changing workplace safety performance, safety professionals now want solutions that take into account the psychology affecting worker behaviour to achieve continuous improvement.

They are also ready and willing to try innovative ideas, such as new technologies to detect the mental state of employees pre- and post-accident, and are keen to find ways to influence not just the hands, but also the hearts and minds of workers and make organisational safety fresh and appealing for everyone involved.

This is where psychology-based approaches to safety come in. Using a blend of holistic psychology and cognitive science – to bring about a focus on the intrinsic motivators that determine behaviour, affect decision-making, and build risk literacy – is key.


In order to build sustainable safety improvement, we need to engage people through three different psychological aspects of safety: the cognitive (how we think), the affective (how we feel) and the behavioural (what we do) to help companies understand what drives employees' risky actions and allow them to approach safety from a new angle.

Although the research shows that some safety professionals are, indeed, aware of new approaches to influencing workers, many are not yet embracing or understanding how these might truly benefit their own organisations.

While they cite a lack of safety improvement tools as one of the main challenges facing their organisation, commitment to safety by senior leaders is another – and perhaps of more major significance. This may be the biggest barrier preventing many companies from trying a new approach.

With the research concluded, what is clear is that a new impetus is needed to break through the performance plateaux and achieve sustained safety improvement for organisations around the world.

Safety practitioners need to think outside the box to understand what triggers unsafe actions in their workplaces and to find solutions to engage employees in order to improve risk literacy and positively change behaviour.

An awareness of the cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects of psychology could well be key to future approaches. This is the new frontier of safety. Are you ready? 



Professor **Andrew Sharman** is Chief Executive of RMS – consultants on leadership and cultural excellence to a wide range of blue-chip corporates and non-government organizations globally. He's an international member of SAIOSH; Vice President of the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health; and Chairman of the Institute of Leadership & Management. Contact him at [andrew@RMSswitzerland.com](mailto:andrew@RMSswitzerland.com)

# MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS

## What your MBA should have taught you about workplace health and safety

This month SHEQ MANAGEMENT readers can purchase Sharman's best-selling book: Mind Your Own Business: What your MBA should have taught you about safety, with a 50-percent discount – but only if you order within the next 30 days. Go to: [www.fromaccidentstozero.com](http://www.fromaccidentstozero.com) and enter the code **FRONTIER50**

