

CUTTING CORNERS ON HEALTH & SAFETY - HOW TO SEND YOUR COMPANY TO THE DOGS

Currently, many service companies are cutting staffing levels in the area of operational control – the very area responsible for meeting Health & Safety requirements. Yet cutting corners on Health & Safety is a sure fire way for a company director to ensure that they endanger the employees concerned, put the entire business at risk and face the penalty of a hefty court fine – or worse!

Pól Sweeney of Vidus argues how organizations can meet the demands of rigorous Health & Safety requirements while still running a cost effective operation...

Turning a blind eye to Health & Safety (H & S) issues can seriously damage a company's well-being. The Government has estimated that H&S failures cost Britain's employers up to £6.5 billion per annum or 25 million lost working days, with serious injuries typically costing companies between £17,000 and £19,000. The figures could be a lot higher in future: the Government wants stiffer penalties for H & S breaches, with £20,000 fines becoming commonplace. The Government also plans to encourage investors to scrutinize companies' H & S records as an indicator of corporate "social responsibility". So failure to demonstrate a sound H&S record could spell corporate disaster in more ways than one.

Bosses, too, could pay a heavy personal price for corporate shortcomings. Last year, a company and its general manager stood trial for manslaughter after a young man died in an accident on his first day at work. That jury acquitted, but others may not – and there's talk of a new law on "corporate killing". Clearly, responsibility for H&S can no longer be handed over to H & S specialists and forgotten.

THE INFORMATION MOUNTAIN

The issue has been the amount of information required to make informed decisions about Health & Safety matters – particularly in the case of companies with a sizeable mobile workforce, where employers' responsibility for H & S extends beyond their own premises to wherever workers are sent.

Reducing the risk of accidents means making sure that the right people are allocated to the right jobs, and given adequate time to complete them. That entails, first and foremost, being able to compare training and personnel records with job profiles. If the job requires special equipment, that information too has to be pulled in, in order to ensure the person assigned to the job is qualified to handle that equipment. Certain jobs, such as erection of telegraph poles, may require two employees – yet another piece of information that must be to hand when jobs are assigned to people.

Then there's information about the customer site. If there are, say, low-hanging electricity lines or dangerous dogs where the job has to be done, you, as employer, need to know about it and take the necessary steps to ensure workers' safety. At the very least, the worker must be informed of the hazards. In some cases it may be necessary to assign only workers with relevant safety certifications, entitling them for example to work on-site at a power station.

The need for information doesn't stop there. It's also important to know the characteristics of the areas to which staff are being sent. Employers are duty-bound not to put their people at risk of personal violence, which means being able to identify districts where someone carrying valuable equipment after dark is liable to be attacked. With that kind of information to hand, it becomes possible to spot jobs that demand several staff purely for safety's sake.

The employer has a duty of care to ensure the well-being of staff, which requires up-to-the-minute information about jobs currently in progress. If someone doesn't report a job finished when expected they should be contacted promptly to check they're all right. That implies always knowing who's where, what they're doing, when they're due to finish and when they last checked in.

COST-CUTTING - THE ENEMY OF H & S?

Tracking this information may be easy enough for a two-person business, but it becomes very challenging where there's a large mobile workforce, far-flung customer locations, and a variety of equipment types.

Currently, many service companies are cutting staffing levels in the area of operational control, yet these are the very people who normally look out for the safety of the mobile workforce. If, in addition, there's a lot of pressure to get jobs done fast, it's tempting to send along the first field engineer who comes free, without checking their qualifications for that job, site and equipment. But that's exactly the type of shortcut that can jeopardize the worker's safety.

AUTOMATION DELIVERS COST-EFFECTIVE COMPLIANCE

Is it possible for companies with mobile workforces to satisfy all their H & S obligations, statutory and moral, without bankrupting themselves? The answer is “yes”, provided they automate.

An automated system can manage all the information an employer needs about workers, jobs, locations and customers, bringing it instantly together as needed. And the right system won't stop at information management. It can actively enforce good practice through process automation.

Process automation technology won't let operational controllers allocate someone to a job unless that someone has the right qualifications to do that job, with that equipment. It won't give a mobile worker the information needed to begin a job until they've reviewed the relevant safety notes. When a job requires two people, it won't let the job start until both are present (a cost-effective alternative to the traditional method of sending people around in gangs of two “just in case”). If the area's dodgy from a personal safety point of view and the job's being done at night, the system automatically assigns extra people. Supposing someone doesn't report in on time at the end of a job, the system prompts operational staff to call and check they're OK. In effect, the system does your worrying for you.

Automating these processes delivers big savings in terms of effort and costs. More importantly still, process automation provides an auditable, repeatable and dependable method for complying with H & S obligations - and for showing that you've complied.

ENDS