Driving safety performance in the construction industry through safety induction and training – as a leading measure

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Abstract

Employee training and development in the construction industry is key to ensuring safety performance, also as a means of creating both competence and growth for employees working in the sector. In developing employees, management will be able to assess their employee's performance, develop their skills towards being a productive workforce. Management at all levels need to be able to coach and counsel employees towards desired outcomes in order to prevent injuries and accidents in the workplace. By nature , the construction involves high risks , therefore employees need to be enagaged on all levels and hence need training that is designed to correct observed eficiencies in employee knowledge, skill, and attitudes. Although training alone cannot gaurantee that the workplace will be risk and injury free, it can guide employees towards safe behaviours that can become more consistent and desirable. The importance of health and safety training cannot overlooked, especially when times are tough, simply because the cost of inadequate safety training could be catastrophic to construction companies from small contractors to global corporations.

High performing organisations boast in their development of their "*people*" through training, performance management and recruitment. For a sound safety culture within the organisation, training has to be tailored to challenges faced at each level of the organisation. – The study focuses on the benefits of training and development in the construction industry.

Keywords: Training, development, safety performance, commitment, employee engagement

1. Introduction

The Occupational Health and Safety Act, Act 85 of 1993, requires that employers provide a workplace that is free of known or recognised hazards that are causing or that have the potential to cause injury or death. A variety of solutions are offered to manage training in the workplace to accommodate learners on all levels. The availability of online or web based instruction is becoming increasingly more accessible to companies and employees. According to [1], blended learning mediums such as online courses, mix mode blended learning, multi media interactions presents benefits when the learner has access to multiple learning platforms. Researchers such as [2], [3] has shown that face to face training cannot replace certain learning objectives, as in the case of fall protection or climbing training in the construction sector, these cannot be met by using online technologies exclusively. In other studies by

[4], the effectiveness of hands on training on learning retention has been validated as well. [5] agrees that blended learning, which includes simulated learning, can be more engaging and effective than classroom learning alone, learning is maximised when classroom and online learning are combined on a blended learning platform. [6].

In 2001, the International Labour Organization, published a document entitled 'Guidelines on Occupational Safety and Health Management Systems'. The aim of this document was to assist organisations with the introduction of occupational health and safety (OHS) management systems. These guidelines encourage ongoing improvements in employee health and safety which may, in turn, be achieved through a constant process of policy development, organisation, planning, implementation, training, evaluation and action aimed at improvement, all supported by constant auditing to determine the success of the OHS actions. [7]

2. Literature Review

2.1 Management commitment

Sound health and safety management requires commitment on all levels of an organisation, particularly top management. Management leadership and employee involvement go hand in hand for safety success, especially in a high-risk environment such as construction. In order to enable employees both to perceive and to experience that safety is a 'value' and not a priority as regards performing and delivering on demand in the workplace, it is essential that management visibly demonstrate its commitment to improving safety performance as a behavioural expectation. The maintenance of safety as a value requires the continual reinforcement and assessment of key communication processes, particularly in view of the fact that obstacles to trust and miscommunication constantly arise.

For example, providing employees with adequate training, which is, in fact, a legal requirement, is one of the methods of demonstrating commitment to developing and promoting safe working practices. Leaders encounter numerous obstacles in maintaining safety as a priority, as the work environment has become increasingly aggressive and competitive and with greater focus on short-term financial success rather than on the long-term welfare and safety of employees and the environmental impact. [8] found that maintaining safety, as a priority requires a continual reinforcement and assessment of the communication processes because obstacles to trust and miscommunication constantly arise.

3. Employee engagement

Training may contribute to altering the attitudes, knowledge and skills of employees by ensuring that all employees are made aware of the potential hazards to which they are exposed before they find themselves in potentially harmful situations. [9], affirm that organisational commitment, especially on the part of management, predicts work variables such as employee turnover, organisational behaviour and job performance. This, in turn, is closely linked to employee safety performance. Ideally, employees should be committed to their work because this may be contrasted to their attitudes such as job satisfaction. In addition, if employees are not totally committed to the company's safety vision and goals, there is likely to be little buy-in the part of such employees with regard to safety-related interventions in the workplace with this resulting, in turn, in the occurrence of injuries.

While health and safety (H&S) is the responsibility of everyone at work [10], it is essential that construction companies become aware that they are responsible for managing and improving the issues related to H&S on construction sites. By its very nature construction work is labour intensive, especially in view of the fact that manual labour, tools, machinery and equipment are used. Construction work depends on the availability and wellbeing of employees as regards completing both current and future projects [11]. Proper safety equipment such as harnesses and guardrails, together with sound procedures, for example securing ladders and inspecting scaffolding, can reduce the risk of occupational injuries in the construction industry. Failure to ensure the health and safety of employees, as well as failure to comply with construction requirements relating to H&S, may have significant adverse effects for both employees and the construction organisation.

In exchange for remuneration employees provide hard labour, time and skills, while they also sometimes leave their families to work in harsh circumstances away from home. The industry has the potential to employ numerous skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled employees and to be a catalyst for the growth of many other industries, for

example human resources, safety management programmes, plant and equipment hire and the manufacture of iron and steel. In addition, the construction industry may contribute to the growth of the transport industry (large numbers of employees often have to be transported from one place to another), the field of training and skills development, the service industries, hospitality and tourism. Other areas in which significant improvement may be observed include the upgrading of roads, as well as hotels and other secondary accommodation.

4. Employee training and development

One of the key issues in the construction industry is the lack of training provided for support services and blue-collar workers. Safety training is paramount to the success of any safety programme. [12], argue that effective safety leaders are characterised by a high commitment to safety, excellence in leadership and, hence, a good attitude toward safety. This may be achieved through various training interventions.

Individual needs assessments must be conducted to address individual development requirements and the training delivery methods should reflect the preferred learning styles of trainees. Aside from differences in language, aptitude, literacy or pertaining to skill levels, how trainees view the training programme in terms of improving their job performance or self-efficacy may dictate variable approaches.

It is important to involve line management and employees in determining the training content. Given that line management is responsible for safety, it also helps if line managers and employees are highly involved in the delivery of the safety training. Potential benefits of such employee engagement include addressing their relevant ideas, gaining their buy in and strongly influencing their peers via their participation. This engagement is another key to connecting training to performance. Recent research by [13], [14], showed that safety management practices and employee perception constructs ‘work” to improve objective safety performance by engaging employees (e.g. employee engagement acts as an important mediator between safety predictors and safety outcomes). The following guidelines are critical for the successful implementation of a safety-training programme:

- Knowledgeable persons conduct health and safety training
- Training is properly scheduled, assessed and documented
- Training covers all necessary topics and situations, and includes all persons working on the construction site (hourly paid employees, supervisors, managers, contractors, part time and temporary employees)
- Employees participate in site induction
- Employees are training in hazard and risk assessments and
- Employees are trained in reporting near miss and incidents

[15], provides guidelines to employers with instructions needed for employees to work at minimal risks to themselves. These guidelines includes the following:

- Determine whether the worksite (safety) problem can be solved by training
- Determine what training, if any, is needed
- Identify goals and objectives for the training
- Design learning activities or outcomes
- Conduct training
- Determine effectiveness of training
- Revised training based on feedback from employees, supervisors, and other employees.

5. Discussion

Training is an effective leading indicator that empowers employees. Construction employees must be trained in the safe work plan. All team members must be undergo site induction and training specific to their hazards exposed and controls. If the safety culture is to permeate the entire organisation it is vital that safety be incorporated into the overall business strategy, objectives and goals. Thus, safety will have to be integrated into the business as a whole, including the finance, procurement, human resources and training department, if it is to be viewed as a priority.

According to [16], for a valid adoption of safety as a goal, safety must be viewed as part of the organisation's top priorities as regards shaping policy. Employee involvement in safety, team building and promoting organisational commitment to safety are all characteristics of a supportive safety culture. Examples of employee development in this regard may include the identification of training needs based on the results of the incident and accident reporting systems and/or individual feedback. An innovative safety culture is flexible and is characterised by changes being made to the job design, reward systems and work procedures in order to improve safety and based on employee feedback and incident and accident reporting. A goal-oriented safety culture has clearly defined safety goals, expectations and corresponding rewards. On the other hand, a policy-oriented culture focuses on the evaluation of safety performance and the consequences of failure to comply with the established practices and procedures. [17].

6. Conclusion

Commitment and leadership, demonstrable senior management commitment to health and safety and a participant approach, a strong legislative steer towards proper consultation and communication between employees. Safety training that holds potential solutions for meeting challenges to training and can ultimately serve as a new route to increasing safety performance and strengthening safety cultures.

The key conclusion that emerged from the study is that employee skills training programmes for employees, who have a significant role to play in improving health and safety in the workplace, need to improve significantly. This should be done by soliciting inputs from employees in order to improve the programme through ongoing consultation. The findings of this study confirm that there are certain conditions for effective training and implementation that need to be put in place in order to achieve improved workplace safety and safety performance, for example adequate representation and consultation in all aspects of the programme.

The study suggests that existing legal measures pertaining to such matters as training, the right to make representations to employers, to receive information, to engage in risk assessments, to be consulted prior to workplace change that might affect employees and to liaise with management and OHS professionals are all implemented to a certain degree.

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Biography

Natalie Skeepers is a seasoned risk, compliance and governance specialist, an independent consultant and motivational speaker and has a wide range of industry experience that stretches across the public and private sector. Natalie has held various senior and executive positions over the last decade. Natalie has also presented safety leadership seminars and conferences locally and abroad, in her field of expertise including at institutions like GIBS, University of Johannesburg, University of Pretoria and Henley Business School. She has two Masters degrees in Health and Safety and is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Johannesburg. Natalie serves as a Non Executive Director on the following boards: Rail Safety Regulator, Johannesburg Water, Film and Publication Board and the Construction Industry Development Board's respectively. She holds professional memberships with the American Society for Safety Engineers (ASSE) in the USA and the Institute of Occupational Safety (IOSH) in the UK.