



HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMUNICATION

Your Practical Guide



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Contents

• Introduction	4
• Consultation	4
• Duty to Consult	5
• How to Consult	6
• Employee Representatives	6
• Communication Sources	7

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Introduction

Safe working is essentially a collaborative effort, involving all levels of your company. It hinges critically on effective health and safety communication.

It is sometimes suggested – with some justification – that communication for health and safety purposes is especially difficult, because health and safety information usually needs to be exceptionally clear and comprehensive.

You also need to make a special effort to ensure that your health and safety information is interesting – to counteract the unfortunate but fairly widespread view that it is a dull subject.

Consultation

Health and safety education relies mainly on good communication, and consultation with employees on health and safety matters can be very important in creating and maintaining a safe and healthy working environment. Through consultation, your company can motivate the workforce and increase awareness of health and safety issues, and in turn your operations should become more efficient with a reduced number of accidents and work-related illnesses.

Duty to Consult

Current legislation requires you as an employer to consult with your entire workforce on health and safety matters. Consultation involves not only giving employees information, but also listening to and taking account of what they say – particularly when they report problems – before making any health and safety decisions.

If a decision involving work equipment, processes or organisation could affect the health and safety of your workforce, you must allow time to give them, or their representatives, the chance to express their views, and take account of these views before reaching a decision.

Consultation must be carried out on all matters relating to their health and safety at work, including:

- any change which may substantially affect their health and safety at work, for example in procedures, equipment or ways of working
- your company's arrangements for getting competent people to help them satisfy health and safety laws
- information about the likely risks and dangers arising from their work, measures to reduce or get rid of these risks, and what they should do if they have to deal with a risk or danger
- plans of health and safety training, and
- the health and safety consequences of introducing new technology.

(See also: Health & Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations and Safety Representatives & Safety Committees Regulations.)

How to Consult

You need to decide how to consult your workforce. This can be done directly with individuals – for example, by way of team briefing meetings – or it can be done through elected representatives. In larger companies, consultation normally takes place through a process which will involve a safety committee and elected representatives.

Alternative methods of communication should also be considered, however, and these include safety bulletins, newsletters, posters and notices, films and slides, and talks and discussions.

More effective communication can be achieved if a combination of these is used rather than adopting one method in isolation.

Employee Representatives

If you decide to operate through a system of elected representatives, they must be provided with the facilities and assistance they may reasonably require to carry out their functions. (This is stipulated under current legislation.)

Communication Sources

Safety Bulletins or Newsletters

These can be used to provide factual information on health and safety performance. They can include case histories of actual events and can serve as a platform for emphasising particular safety points.

If they are to be used they should be succinct, well written and to the point, distributed widely and placed on notice boards alongside the more dramatic safety posters.

A problem is that people will tend not to read them. To overcome this, they should be linked with a continuous programme of talks and discussions so that employees can relate the written word to points made during a meeting.

One way of increasing interest in bulletins and newsletters is to introduce an element of competition. You might for example include league tables showing how different departmental safety records compare. Alternatively you could publicise the results of safety competitions and suggestions.

Posters

These can make a more immediate and emotional impact. They can appeal more to the instinct for self-preservation by giving graphic illustrations of what can go wrong and how to avoid accidents.

The effectiveness of 'horror' posters is a matter of debate, but shock tactics are sometimes useful, as long as they are not indulged in too frequently.

Films and Slides

These are most useful in training programmes, but they can be included in more formal communication sessions as a basis for discussion. The advantage of films is their visual and dramatic appeal but it is essential to avoid treating them simply as light relief.

Some films available on hire are accompanied by discussion notes, which should always be used to emphasise the lessons learned from the film.

Face-to-Face

Talks and discussions – for example 'tool box talks' or 'team briefings' – are the most direct means of communication and are, potentially, the most effective.

Talks and discussions can be given, or led, by senior management and this is generally a good way to get a particular message across. But they will be even more useful if they can be conducted by departmental heads as a normal part of their supervisory duties.

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