Health and Safety Industry Insight: What long term threat is currently being ignored?
INTRODUCTION

Seeking to better understand the long term threats to our workforce, the Institute of Occupational Medicine (IOM), as part of the Safety Health and Wellbeing Live conference, explored what long term threat to worker safety is currently being ignored.

This report aims to give an insight into the realities faced by the profession. With suggested actions to take to improve worker health and protect workers. Progressing the industry from where it is now to one in which working environments support and develop staff to be effective, productive and healthier.

“This report gives us a snapshot into the challenges facing the industry. The themes offering greater context and food for thought to those committed to improving the safety and health of staff.” Tim Else, Director, Safety, Health and Wellbeing Live

THEME 1 – THE IMPACT OF FLEXIBLE, TRANSIENT AND LONE WORKING.

Work has changed. From the predictable environments where a high degree of control could be exercised to one where it is a lot more dependent on self reporting. As a result these environments could be damaging health if not set up or monitored correctly.

There is real concern for the mental health of these workers. A lone worker is much more susceptible to working longer hours, not taking breaks and lack of two-way communication. All of which lead to feeling disconnected and putting them at higher risk.

The mental health and wellbeing of staff was a core concern for attendees. Seeking more advice as to what they can do to mitigate both the long and short term impact of the change in working environment on staff.

“Home and remote working creates environments where the rigorous regulations are hard to apply. We recommend an educational programme to clients so that their staff are aware of the risks and are able to address those with the support of H&S managers.” Ross Clark, Head of Workplace Protection, IOM

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THEME 2 – SICK BUILDING SYNDROME AND RESPIRATORY ILLNESS

On the other side, for those that need to be in workplaces, there are concerns around sick building syndrome. Sick building syndrome is where the working environment causes symptoms such headaches, lethargy and respiratory issues. There’s no single cause and that’s what makes it such a concern for the health and safety professionals we spoke to. As we have shifted to hybrid working, it is also more difficult to control the working environment within employees’ homes.

Due to the ambiguous nature of the symptoms in staff, sick building syndrome is often overlooked. After all, who reports a headache? The long term impact of these micro exposures may be dangerous, leading to future health concerns. This is particularly prominent if there is dust or mould in the environment.

“Should a risk be identified within a building it’s often difficult to retroactively make substantial changes to the ventilation or redesign the workplace. Given that these potential risks may be present increases the worry of sick building syndrome presenting itself. We’ve found that a comprehensive workplace analysis reveals the core factors and small changes can easily improve the health and morale of staff.”

David Flower, Senior Occupational Hygienist at IOM

THEME 3 – CULTURE

Many expressed a view that it wasn’t possible to answer the question of this report properly due the voice of the workers being ignored. This combined with different agendas, differing perceptions of risk and poor working habits created a toxic culture.

This was exacerbated by the gaps between corporate policy and the reality of the work. Often corners were being cut, policy and procedure being ignored and control measures not being used properly. The reason given was that this was due to time and budget constraints as well as increasing pressure to perform. As a result, new policy being developed was uninformed and ineffective.

To address this open and honest discussions were needed throughout companies. Leadership actively listening to and acting on the concerns of their staff. With greater visibility then, and only then, would they be in a position to address the culture and instil behaviours which benefit both staff and clients. From that would stem greater autonomy for the workforce, allowing them to make minor adjustments which would improve their health.

“To enable more meaningful conversations, a psychologically safe culture environment needs to be created throughout a company. By doing so everyone feels enabled to step forward and contribute to the solving of problems and continued enhancement of process and practices. This in turn will improve working practices and environments as well as benefiting workers, businesses and end users.” Rebecca Canham, Principal Scientist in Human Factors, IOM

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WHAT LONG TERM THREAT IS CURRENTLY BEING IGNORED?

The biggest threat to worker health, at the moment, is a lack of understanding in leadership. By informing leaders about how initiatives deliver value and improving internal communication it would give them more information. Knowledge about the threats their workers face and how those workers perceive those threats. Armed with this awareness, better decisions around people can be made.

To get there, Health and Safety needs to play their part. Supplying them with an understanding of the threats and the benefits of addressing them early. Slowly at first with existing information and then by conducting surveys and analyses to fully understand them. Only then can we build to a future where we are proactively solving health challenges rather than just reacting!

“People are any organisation’s most important asset. The cost of not looking after them far exceeds any short-term financial benefit. Placing worker health at the centre of a people management plan sees improved productivity - at this very moment the construction sector has a huge recruitment gap so the more we do to support those in the sector already, the better.” Nathan Baker, CEO, IOM

CONCLUSION

The data collected for this report summarises a focused survey relating to informal discussions with attendees and engagement in our panel discussion, as well as individual conversations with the live scribing at the event.
Committed to making the world healthier and safer at work, IOM is a trusted advisor for organisations such as the NHS, HSE and AECOM. We investigate issues, offer independent guidance and provide informed solutions. Talk to IOM and find the solutions to your challenges today.

www.iom-world.org
iom@iom-world.org

**IOM Head Office**
Research Avenue North, Riccarton, Edinburgh, EH14 4AP
Tel: 0131 449 8000

**IOM Stafford**
Brookside Business Park, Cold Meece, Stone, Staffordshire, ST15 0RZ
Tel: 01785 333200

**IOM Chesterfield**
Tapton Park Innovation Centre, Brimington Road, Tapton, Chesterfield, S41 0TZ
Tel: 01246 383110