Good communication is vital in all fields of the construction industry, not least with regard to health and safety. All staff must be fully aware of their obligations and of procedures for health and safety. In addition, construction is a business in which many different trades meet and work together on single projects; they will have their own particular health and safety needs, and concerns and clashes can occur.

Health and safety policy must be established at the outset of a project and lines of communication must be clear. It is a requirement of ISO 9000 that communication routes are set up and clearly recorded.

This topic guide will cover:

- general requirements for good communication
- methods of communication
- warning signs and notices.
1 General requirements for good communication

Good communication is especially important when employees are carrying out hazardous tasks such as:
• working in confined spaces
• lifting
• working at height.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) states the following:
• Discuss health and safety regularly.
• Be ‘visible’ on health and safety.

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require every employer to provide employees with information on:
• the potential risks to their health and safety
• preventive and protective measures for those risks
• emergency procedures
• the identities of those who have a role within the organisation’s health and safety management system.

This includes giving employees information on any process or task that might involve particular risk. This information must be:
• comprehensive – it must make sense to those it affects; if the regulations are difficult for staff members to understand then Codes of Practice and other guidance notes should be made available, as well as the organisation’s own interpretation in the form of policies and procedures
• relevant – to avoid ‘information overload’, only the information directly relevant to a staff member’s area of work should be provided. This also means that information should be constantly reviewed and revised according to current working practices.

Construction sites are a meeting point for numerous trades, many belonging to a collection of different companies. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations require cooperation between these employers. The regulations state that the main contractor should take all reasonable steps to inform the other employers of the risks to their employees’ health and safety arising from work on the site.

Change of shift or personnel requires good communication so that any health and safety issues are passed on. This can be achieved by a handover meeting. The method statement, particularly one which includes some form of risk assessment, can be a useful communication tool in this case.
Case study: Health and safety first
An electrician was sent to install the supplies for extra equipment in a small industrial unit producing specialised agricultural equipment. Wanting to carry out a safe isolation procedure in order to make final connections, he set about tracing out the relevant cable runs to ensure he isolated the correct circuits. The manager of the manufacturing company, on seeing the electrician painstakingly tracing wiring, became impatient and concerned about the amount of money this might cost; he angrily demanded that the electrician make the final connections and finish the job. The electrician tried to explain why it was important to switch off the correct supplies. Exasperated, the manager went to the main incoming supply point and pulled the main fused switch from 'on' to 'off'. The unit was plunged into darkness, and silence, apart from the outraged shouts of machinists and welders. The electrician switched on his torch and set to work. One of the workers, now angry at losing the supply to his welder, located the main switch and turned the supply back on. The electrician received a fatal 400-V shock.

1 What does this say about the communication channels within this manufacturing company?
2 What does this say about the health and safety culture at the manufacturer’s premises?
3 What is the safe isolation procedure?
4 How should the electrician have responded to the manager’s impatience?

2 Communication methods
Communication methods include:
- induction training
- formal training
- signs
- notices and posters
- face-to-face communication
- emails, and other letters and handouts.

Induction training
Many companies carry out some form of induction training. This is usually an introduction to the company, its key personnel and a description of how it works. Often this is not a formal session but there is a need for all staff to understand the structure and main roles of the organisation they work for, particularly with regard to health and safety.

Nowadays, health and safety induction training is often compulsory for anyone new to a particular construction site. This will be informal but it will be recorded as having taken place. This type of induction should be taken seriously and not seen as an irksome formality. Every site has its individual hazards as well as those general to all sites.

The locations of fire escape routes and exits, as well as alarm buttons and fire extinguishers, must be described; how to contact a first aider and the items of personal protective equipment (PPE) to be worn should be explained.

Activity
Carry out a survey of people who have received a health and safety induction. The survey should focus on what each respondent remembers of their induction session, their understanding of its purpose and any suggestions they might have for improving the process.
Unit 6: Maintaining systems for health, safety, welfare and environmental protection in the workplace

6.2: Communication of health and safety in the workplace

Portfolio activity (3.1)
1 Investigate how on-site safety induction is organised and recorded within your organisation. Are there any records at all? Are the operatives who are given induction provided with proof of their induction?
2 Carry out an audit of site personnel and find out if they have all been given health and safety induction on arrival at the site. Write a brief summary report of your findings.
3 Devise a method for recording induction and providing proof to operatives that they have received health and safety induction.

Portfolio activity (3.2)
Either carry out a site health and safety induction session yourself or organise others to do so. Locate an appropriate safety film as part of the induction. Record the induction and reflect on how it went. Use a feedback form. Try a number of different methods, for example:
- a straightforward talk
- a film
- a short talk, then a revision exercise to confirm learning has taken place
- a group discussion.

Formal training
As well as the on-site ‘toolbox talk’ type induction session, formal training is sometimes necessary. Again, this takes many forms, from a qualification such as those offered by an organisation like NEBOSH, to part- or one-day sessions on subjects such as basic first aid and correct manual handling. For anyone wishing to take on a health and safety role there will be some form of formal training, in many cases, with refresher training taking place at regular intervals.

A method currently gaining ground is the online course. This takes the form of information, short films, scenarios, etc., followed by a multiple choice assessment at the end. An advantage of this is that it can be completed whenever the staff member has time to do it. A disadvantage is that it can take a long time for people to get round to completing the training.

Portfolio activity (3.3, 3.4)
Investigate the training records and procedures for personnel within your organisation.
1 Are there records?
2 Do they cover informal training such as on-the-job training for specialist tools and activities?
3 How is this type of training organised and carried out?
4 What are the competencies required for the various roles within the company and how are personnel assessed against those competencies?
5 What improvements can be made to this system, particularly with regard to ensuring the right people are employed for the right job and that any training, whether formal or informal, is being carried out?

Signs
According to the Health and Safety (Safety Signs and Signals) Regulations 1996, employers are obligated to provide safety signs if there is no way of completely controlling a particular risk and the workforce needs to be warned of the
presence of that risk. Some safety signs actually instruct the workforce to take certain protective action, such as wearing particular types of PPE; others prohibit dangerous acts which could precipitate an accident, such as smoking in an area where flammable materials are stored or in use.

Any signs used on site must be easily seen and understood. Many use pictograms to convey their message; the regulations encourage the use of supporting text if necessary to clarify a sign’s meaning. Signs should be placed in strategic locations so they can be seen and read easily. They are usually placed at the entrance to the site. Those relating to a specific area need to be at the entrance to that area. If there are staff who have difficulty in seeing or understanding the sign, audible warnings should be used.

The signs should be constructed of a durable material that will withstand the weather and the rigours of the construction site environment.

If there is traffic on the site, and all medium to large construction sites will have vehicle movement of some sort, then traffic signs must be erected that conform with the Road Traffic Act 1984.

There are standard warning sign colour schemes and legends which must be employed. These are shown in Figure 6.2.1. Standardised signage means that anyone moving from site to site will always see the same signs and understand their meaning and the hazards they represent.

Figure 6.2.1: Standard warning signs.
Portfolio activity (3.2, 4.1, 4.2)

Carry out an audit of warning signs used on the sites operated by your organisation. Your audit should cover the following issues.

- Are there sufficient signs to cover all requirements, prohibitions, etc. on the site?
- Are they displayed in a prominent position?
- Are people heeding the signs?
- Do personnel understand the purpose and meaning of the signs?
- Could provision of signs and positioning be improved and if so, how?
- Where are the signs stored and what system is used for selecting the required signs, making sure they are utilised? What is the recovery procedure at the end of a project?

Write a report of your findings and suggest any improvements, along with target dates, actions and responsibilities.

Produce a photographic blog as part of this activity and use it to comment on good and bad practice and the efficacy of the signs. Be aware that permission may be required to use photographs and other images on the blog.

An example form is included below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audit point</th>
<th>Finding</th>
<th>Corrective action (if applicable)</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adequate signs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distribution and position of signs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectiveness of signs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storage and provision of signs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notices and posters

All organisations that employ anyone must clearly display the health and safety law poster. Alternatively, they can issue everyone with a pocket card. Information is presented as a list which shows both employers and employees their responsibilities. The key here is that the poster must be clearly displayed. If a health and safety notice of any sort is used, then it must be placed in a position where people will see and read it.

Other notices required for the workplace are the contact details for first aiders and fire emergency instructions. The fire emergency instructions will often include a map or diagram showing the route to the nearest fire assembly point.

Posters can be an effective means of communicating health and safety issues to staff. Posters are often eye-catching, using a few, well-chosen words, and are designed to make the observer think about what they show.

It is a good idea to keep all notices and posters in good condition. Worn and tatty notices can give an impression that health and safety is of little importance and that notices are displayed as a formality. Compulsory notices should be laminated and hard-wearing; posters should be changed regularly to renew their impact.
Activity
Conduct a small survey to assess the effectiveness of health and safety notices and posters. The purpose is to ascertain if staff notice the posters at all, if they read them and whether they have any impact, and if so, which type in particular. Use your findings to write a brief proposal to improve the effectiveness of health and safety notices and poster use within your organisation.

Face-to-face communication
There are times when individuals simply have to be given information face to face. This can be an instruction or word of advice provided by someone who has noticed an unsafe working practice. It can also be difficult, such as a reprimand. Here are a few basic points about face-to-face communication.

• Be specific – keep to the subject and be direct (without being rude or aggressive).

• Don’t ask ‘why’ – this can lead to opinions or defensiveness. It can sound aggressive and back people into a corner. It is better to ask ‘what’ or ‘how’. For example, if there is a difficult conversation about a health and safety incident, then the first step is to find out what happened, then try to work out how it happened. This will lead to why it happened.

• Repeat back – repeat, in your own words, your understanding of what the other person has told you. This can have two benefits.
  • It helps you pinpoint the facts or meaning of what you have been told.
  • It helps the other person focus their thoughts by hearing their own statements and explanations stripped down and repeated back to them.

• Ask for clarification – as soon as you lose the thread of a conversation ask the other person to go back and explain what they have just told you. This is vitally important if an instruction is being issued. A task can only be carried out safely if all those involved understand exactly what they are expected to do and the correct way to do it.

• Avoid clichés, buzz words and management speak – not only are they usually meaningless, they can also be very irritating and can present you as superior and ‘in the know’.

• There is nothing wrong with silence – if you have asked a question, give the other person a chance to answer. The answer may require consideration and the person asked will become agitated if pressured for an answer.

Emails, and other letters and handouts
Email has become one of the main methods for communicating information within an organisation. It is a paperless, and therefore environmentally friendly, method of communication. However, there is a tendency to swamp staff with emails and for people to ignore them because there is no time, or inclination, to read them all.

While not wanting to encourage excessive use of paper, there are times when a physical letter or memo delivered directly to a person is more effective than an email that can easily be ignored or even deleted unread. This should only be done when necessary to avoid overload.
To be effective, a letter or memo must be to the point, as short as possible and clear. Use direct language, avoid clichés and management speak. If email is used, only send if absolutely necessary. Avoid email overload.

Finally, impress on staff the importance of reading health and safety related information.

**Activity**

When is a traditional letter more appropriate than an email? Should there be an email etiquette as there is for letters (e.g. Dear Sir, Yours sincerely, etc.)? Have any points of email etiquette been established already?

What makes an effective memo, one that people will actually take notice of and read?

**Checklist**

At the end of this topic guide you should be familiar with:

- the safety warning signs
- the hazard warning signs
- where the signs are in your organisation (and if they are current and adequately placed)
- whether the organisation keeps records of proof of competence for each task that staff are undertaking
- whether the health and safety induction process in place is current.

**Further reading and resources**

Safety critical communications: [www.hse.gov.uk/humanfactors/topics/communications.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/humanfactors/topics/communications.htm)

Effective design of workplace risk communications: [www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrpdf/rr093.pdf](http://www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrpdf/rr093.pdf)

Effective communication in the workplace: [http://fmlink.info/article.cgi?type=How%20To&title=Effective%20Communication%20in%20the%20Workplace&pub=BOMI%20International&id=31179&mode=source](http://fmlink.info/article.cgi?type=How%20To&title=Effective%20Communication%20in%20the%20Workplace&pub=BOMI%20International&id=31179&mode=source)


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