



Good business = Good safety

IT'S PRETTY hard to knock anything to do with safety – it's a bit like burning the flag or mugging little old ladies. But taking a "hands-off" approach to safety management raises the risk of spending dollars and time on actions that are misguided, misdirected, ineffective or wasteful.

This is not a "oh well, no harm done" type of situation. It can be dangerous if people believe they are safe when they are not.

In this area, for certain, you can have too much of a good thing. Overly long inductions, or reams of paperwork, can have the opposite to the intended effect. People have limited attention spans, and there's the danger when working with long checklists for boxes to get ticked semi-automatically, just another task that has to be done before getting on with the real work.

At the end of the day, safety is not a series of ticks on a piece of paper – it's an attitude. Perhaps when we consider safety performance the same way we consider performance against cost and time benchmarks, we will have got there.

There are a lot of good initiatives, among them moves to develop a Voluntary Code of Practice and Safety Competency Framework. These related projects recognise workforce mobility between projects and the need for consistent approaches to safety across differences in types of work, locations and personnel.

They also recognise safety needs to be in the culture of the industry. People in key positions need to have the attitudes and competency to drive safety.

A recent report by a major construction industry body identified the pressure points that affect performance on major projects, and where there was scope for improvement. The five key issues were:

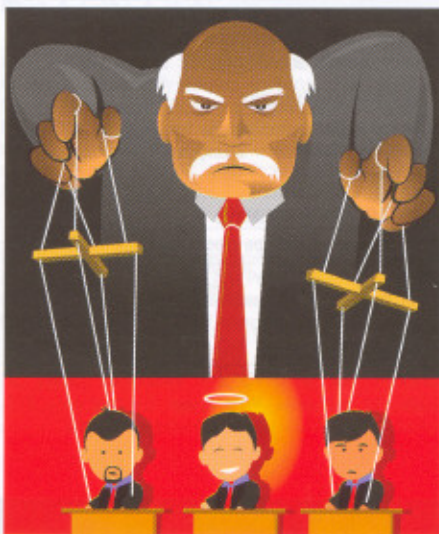
- Shortage of skilled resources
- Inadequate scoping
- Inappropriate delivery methods
- Poor risk allocation
- Unrealistic time and cost objectives

It's obvious they significantly affect whether a job finishes on time and budget. However, I suspect they also affect safety.

The cyclical nature of the construction industry almost guarantees there will be shortages of skilled resources during peak activity periods. While the rising cycle draws new entrants, it will probably take until the market is on the wane for them to feel experienced. How many will hang around for the next boom?

We talk about attracting school leavers and keeping experienced people in the industry longer, but what if good intentions are not enough?

We can bring people in from overseas, but at best that's a short-term solution. We used to play this game before, letting the public sector train apprentices before poaching them for the private sector. When the private sector insisted on getting access to public work, and the government departments' day labour forces dropped to insignificance, the private sector did not fill the training gap.



Government financing of construction projects is being used as a less than subtle means of enforcing industrial policy by making bidders jump through various hoops. Should a company's performance on training new entrants to the industry form part of pre-qualification for government-financed jobs?

Getting people in is possibly easier than keeping them in the industry. And it is keeping experienced people in the industry that will have the greatest positive effect on safety.

Something has to be done to overcome the boom and bust problem. More formalised long-term planning in the public sector could help to even out cycles, in addition to its intrinsic public benefit.

Too often, the need has been apparent long before infrastructure expenditure is scheduled and the disruption of an over-capacity public asset is compounded by construction-related disruption. This makes life harder for contractors as well, with additional traffic control issues, longer cycle times for moving materials in and out of the construction site, and safety issues onsite and on surrounding roads.

Bundling projects and timing them to provide continuity of work helps to keep together project teams that have developed harmony and skill

from working together, and saves mobilisation and recruitment costs.

Inadequate scoping on jobs creates friction between principals and contractors, and potential safety hazards. Playing catch-up on issues that should have been sorted in the planning stage allows confusion and errors, which can have a human cost.

The link between inappropriate project delivery methods and safety risks is less direct, but any strained relationship between contractor and principal in turn puts pressure on safety.

Poor risk allocation indicates the contractor is being asked to bear risk on factors over which it has little or no control, and which should more properly be borne by the project principal.

Unrealistic time and cost objectives again impose pressures that can lead to a short-circuiting of safety management.

These five problem issues do not exist in isolation; they often arise as a consequence of each other. The short answer is that contractors should walk away from bad deals.

That's easy to say, but not so easy to do in the real world. What if the principal is a government and the problem is a minister determined to retain political credibility after shooting his or her mouth off about price and timing before all the facts were known – a potential accident or two is the contractor's problem, not the politician's?

Perhaps it's not the minister but a department that controls a large slice of expenditure and is in a powerful position to pass the buck when the pressure is on. It's hard for a contractor to walk away from substantial investments in expertise and plant.

Getting the business aspects of contracting right doesn't guarantee safety, but it sure lays a good foundation. A lot of people try to save time and money at the front end, when all experience shows that properly investigating site conditions and thoroughly planning the job is the cost-effective way.

If governments want to talk the talk on safety, let them walk the walk when they are project principals. By playing King Jerk at the end of the puppet strings, they jeopardise not only the livelihood of contractors but also the safety of workers. **C**

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