
Remain vigilant: The health and safety is primacy.

A copy of this abridged article first appeared in the Construction Times.



Keith Brandt and Rachel Turner from Hammonds, who between them have many years of practical experience, gave a presentation for construction engineers, project managers and other professionals on the theme of health and safety, including how health and safety measures are implemented in practice in Hong Kong and the United Kingdom. Their practical understanding of health and safety draws on the views of site management and of domestic construction companies.

The construction industry is a high-risk industry data from the first three quarters of 2008 shows nearly 3000 reported construction site injuries in Hong Kong with 28 deaths. In the UK construction industry, about 6,000 people are injured every year and in 2008 63 people died. In addition to the injury and loss of life, such incidents also have a wider impact, for example, equipment damage, loss of labour productivity and the need for resources required for investigation, as well as the loss of company reputation. Therefore sites are a dangerous working environment with labour working in dangerous conditions, in some cases with hazardous materials in cramped spaces. The result is that health and safety laws and regulations are very important.

For people who work in the construction industry, there are two essential health and safety aspects: First, that the actual engineering and construction process is undertaken in a safe way; second that the overall safety and health management of the business. A manager of a project site needs to understand responsibilities set forth in laws and regulations and needs to implement all measures to avoid accidents. In addition workers on site need to understand their duties and obligations to protect themselves and their co-workers. After an accident or a near accident a manager needs to understand his responsibilities to report. In addition to timely reporting of incidents it is also necessary to understand the punishment due to failure to comply with such obligations. Legal practice in many countries has provided for the health and safety requirements, which are very strict.

Hong Kong's "green card" system

There is an extensive legislative framework involved in the health and safety in Hong Kong including more than 30 laws and regulations. 10-15 years ago Hong Kong's Legislative Council started to attach importance to the protection of health and safety in the workplace. The Factories and Industrial Undertakings Ordinance was amended in 2002 and required contractors or owners to develop their health and safety management systems. As a result the health and safety accident rate has since decreased rapidly. This amended regulation imposed obligations related to the safe operation of equipment, obligations and responsibilities relating to training and management. It stated that contractors

employing between 50-99 workers on site should establish a safety management system, including: specifying security policies, setting up an organization to ensure the health and safety policy implementation, provide health and safety training, establish internal security rules, develop a set of procedures for the inspection of dangerous sources, to provide suitable personal protective equipment, to carry out an accident or incident investigation, and to implement emergency measures plans.

The existing safety management system in the Hong Kong construction industry, uses a "green card" system, "green card" also known as "safety card". This is issued by the Hong Kong Construction Industry Training Authority after workers receive safety training. This system provides that access to the construction site will only be given to workers who hold a "green card". Failure to comply results in serious penalties. In this way it ensures workers have access to training prior to starting work in the workplace, improves the awareness of safety and health issues and generally it improves the safety of construction. In order to ensure the implementation of the system and to supervise the conduct of the construction company, the Labour Department has various inspection rights and uses spot checks from time to time. In addition to the "green card" requirements, only construction workers who have registered with the Construction Workers Registration Authority and thereby hold a valid "blue card" can be employed to work on construction sites. Hong Kong's construction industry is separated into public and private construction industry. In order to work in such special industries and special operations, workers in need special training and will receive a "silver card" before they are entitled to enter the site.

Hong Kong's legislation provides that the Contractor has to notify the authorities that it is undertaking the work, unless the construction work is completed in six weeks or uses less than 10 workers. The contractor must also report any changes to its notification. In the event of death or serious personal injury the Contractor must notify the officers of the Department of Labour Occupational Safety within 24 hours. In addition, the Contractor must also report any dangerous occurrence.

The importance of health and safety and good experience

Failure to pay sufficient attention to health and safety on a project not only will result in large sums of compensation for staff, it will also have an enormous impact elsewhere. For example sick leave, materials or equipment may also be damaged in the accident; the project may face issues finding replacement staff, which may put pressures on the delivery or quality of the project. Management may also have to spend time dealing with accident investigations. After the accident investigation the company or the management may also face punishment, and have to take the responsibility for damage caused to employees or to the public by the accident.

A company which is successfully managed and experienced in health and safety matters usually implements a series of initiatives: first of all, through assessing the project to find and identify the risks and potential for accidents, second they assess the risks; third they establish policies, including those related to people, objects, machines and other factors, even including the selection of employees, equipment, materials, and working methods to safeguard the safety of workers and staff.

In order to have a good record with health and safety it is necessary to implement management policy to organize personnel including the selection of qualified staff and allocation of responsibility for safety. It is also important for such persons to receive appropriate instructions, management, and training. Also in each company the establishment of a health and safety committee is recommended to concentrate on health and safety at a high level and to ensure the health and safety information allows people across the company to communicate and understand issues. Comprehensive planning of all health and safety obligations required by regulations is important. Some companies also set itself goals, the goals serving the purpose of guiding them to achieve a more healthy and safe working environment during the implementation of the project. It is also important that these criteria are measurable, achievable, and realistic.

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