



A Communications Strategy for the HSC/E

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Introduction

The new strategy for the Health and Safety system which went to the Commission on 23rd September 2003 called for Communications to become a major Health & Safety intervention in its own right.

This paper builds upon the foundation provided by the three-strand ASC (Augmentation, Standalone and Communicating through others) high-level strategy developed by Star Alliance (May 2003) and draws together various channels of work undertaken since then to amplify and detail the agreed overall approach to communications to realise the aforementioned objective.

Deliberately, it is a short document. However, as the product of a wide-ranging investigation led by Star Alliance it is supported by a number of reports and presentations that stand in their own right to inform the direction towards a better communicating organisation. These include the results of the benchmarking study, the review of current processes in DIAS, a review of research assets, a proposal for further market research and a parcel of individual inputs.

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Current situation

In essence communications within the HSC/E does not stand comparison with best practice of comparable organisations and can be seen as:

- Peripheral to the achievement of the organisation's mission, vision and corporate goals and lacking of a culture where there is a common belief in, understanding of, and commitment to the value of communications activity
- Fragmented, reactive and reflective of the ambiguity of the organisation's position on whether it is an informer or an enforcer

It should be emphasised that the review demonstrated evidence of pockets of very good work being undertaken ; in the press office; within DIAS; through the Infoline, and within the individual Directorates. Nonetheless, it amounts to tactical rather than strategic communications activity; lacking central direction and therefore cannot be significantly or cost-effectively contributing to the organisation's overall goals.

However, there is already a consensus within the HSC/E leadership that, far from being peripheral, communications needs to be central to the organisation's activity. This is based upon the assumption that it can make an increasingly cost-effective contribution to the achievement of the organisation's goals. To deliver this goal for communications within HSC/E we have recommended a number of Communications Building Blocks combined with a range of activities within the three-strand ASC high-level communications strategy.

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Communications Building Blocks

Building Block 1 - Develop a model for stakeholder behaviour

The organisation's first major challenge is to develop a more sophisticated model of stakeholder behaviour. No strategy, whether for communications, or for any other form of intervention, can be effective if it is other than rooted in a profound understanding of the basic thoughts, needs and expectations of stakeholders. To improve focus and effectiveness per se, the Health & Safety Executive and Commission need current intelligence about the understanding, attitudes and motivations of different groups to health and safety and, as a corollary, the identification of ways to influence those perceptions and - of course - behaviour. It also needs to be rooted in up-to-date and sophisticated stakeholder segmentation.

For this purpose a nationwide study of attitudes towards Health & Safety is being commissioned.

Building Block 2 - Resolve the HSC/HSE branding and reputation conundrum

The second challenge is to resolve the HSC & E's branding and reputation issues. On the assumption that they will remain the bodies responsible for Health & Safety within the UK for the foreseeable future, it is essential that they are appropriately positioned in the minds of stakeholders as authoritative bodies for so doing – combining as an effective world-leading regulator. At present, there is some evidence, not only that Health & Safety is a 'tarnished brand' but that the role, respectively, of Commission and Executive are confused and confusing.

Certainly, the HSE organisation itself seems sometimes uncertain as to whether it is an enforcer or an informer. Accordingly, alternative positionings for the HSC/E are being explored with stakeholders to ensure that there is

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greater clarity and consistency in the manner the organisation is portrayed, and consequently perceived. The result is likely to be a much clearer statement of the desired respective positions of the HSC and HSE .

In turn, these will inform communications and behaviour – from Commissioners through the HSE’s staff and combine to make an authority that is confident of its role and stance towards the outside world. This will inevitably take some time and determination to achieve.

In the meantime, developing a communications culture, professionalism and new activities in the HSE will need support and external signals. This will require clearer guidelines for the manifestation of the HSE identity in all communication activity and would herald an era in which the current leaflet culture of ‘publish on demand’ gives way to central, strategic planning for all communications material emanating from HSE. In that context, work will be undertaken in the new year to apply greater consistency and discipline in style, presentation and branding across the full range of HSE material.

Building Block 3 – Leadership support for communications

The third challenge lies in the area of leadership. At one level, this means the recruitment and effective installation of communication professionals within the organisation. A Communications Directorate is being created, and a recruitment process is in place for a Communications Director reporting directly to the Director General. The Directorate will balance the existing press and corporate affairs background with a clear marketing orientation. This is to address the current, relative strengths and weaknesses of the HSE and to place more emphasis on ‘customer’ (stakeholder) focused strategic campaigning as opposed to a tactical or reactive regime.

The Communications Directorate role will be to plan communications in a way that integrates and sometimes leads other interventions and events; to import and apply creative judgement that is currently lacking in the HSE; and to proselytise the role, practises and standards of communications in a modern influencing and enforcing HSE.

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At another level, for communications to make a rapid impact, as an intervention and as a means of projecting a new face of Health & Safety it must be given appropriate money, resource, attention and support. Accordingly a new budget for communications will be developed to ensure adequate focus on developing a strategic approach to communications.

Building Block 4 – Culture supported by structure and processes

The fourth challenge lies in the creation of a structure and the processes and ways of working that will actually deliver communications-centric activity on a day-to-day basis; in short, creating a communications culture. Given that, as currently organised, the HSE really comprises a series of semi-autonomous Directorates and Programmes, the challenge lies in inculcating that culture, thinking and appropriate ways of working into those groups.

A central structural pillar is the Communications Directorate, providing a nucleus of communications professionals in a small department at Rose Court, taking responsibility for central support services.

In support, the requirement is for each of the Directorates, Programmes and FOD Regions to appoint a communications network partner, and for the activities of these people to be centrally - and indeed nationally - co-ordinated by the Communications Directorate. The role of the network will be to act as the 'eyes, ears and mouth' of the Communications Directorate across individual Directorates, to liaise between the centre and Directorates on both communication planning and delivery. The Communications Director will perform that role, personally, for the Executive, Board and Commission.

One of the tasks for the network will be the creation of a single, HSE wide, annual plan of communication activity based on the programmes and other strategic initiatives.

The effect would be an HSE in which operational and policy initiatives and communications activity are working in harmony.

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ASC – Three strand Communications Strategy

Strand 1- Augmentation

The evaluation of the HSE activities revealed some good practice in combining direct intervention and communications e.g. sector blitzes in co-operation with GNN and LA EHOs. The criticism, if any, is that the activity is all over the place – literally. Fragmented, regionally inspired, varied in the focus, degree and nature of the activity. The primary requirement here is for National and pan-HSE planning and coordination. A good model exists in the Construction Industry Priority Programme and Agriculture. Factors that indicate why Construction should be singled out, include: focused (and passionate) leadership, dedicated resources in the FOD regions, a strategic plan, a national attitude, a communications budget, an attempt to target communications. (NB To date an impact assessment has not been carried out to date here but there are some clear indicators of conditions that might underwrite success).

An annual plan, as mentioned above, geared to Operational, Policy and Programme priorities and planned initiatives will be an essential bedrock in the move to communications as an intervention.

As part of this the Executive will make a clear policy determination upon when, if ever, the strategic and central priorities of HSE communications should over-ride local level communication driven by interventions. Without such a determination, the organisation will be permanently hostage to unplanned events.

The benefit of coordination through a plan will ensure that maximum effectiveness will be achieved across the range of the HSE's targets and there will be a scheme to measure the effectiveness of different forms of activity.

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A start has been made with the suspension of new projects e.g. leaflets, unless they are signed off by senior management, as a strategic priority.

Lessons have been learned from episodes such as Condon/Stevens and the HSE is generally more alert to 'preparedness planning' both in pre-emption mechanisms for the legal department to get involved and for press managers to play a role. These aspects will be further strengthened by the communications network structure mentioned above and the emphasis placed on communications by leadership as part of the 'Through' process.

Part of that change should be a willingness to see communications as an opportunity rather than a threat or nuisance; more openness to help rather than 'gifted amateurism' and an essential consideration in almost all decision processes.

Strand 2 - Stand Alone

Stand Alone is the strategic, positioning element of the future programme. It is in this domain that the vision for Health & Safety and the reputation of the HSC and E as the authority on the topic should be nurtured, developed and defended.

The emerging strategy provides clear direction in the call to help small firms and to develop parallel advisory systems alongside the regulator's enforcement activity. Again the nucleus exists within the HSE's own current repertory. The Info-line system is a good model upon which to build an 'independent' HSE service to employees and small firms. It is limited by the lack of awareness and the hitherto lack of commitment to a freestanding advisory system. Consideration will be given to:

- positioning Info-line clearly as a 'safe' source of advice and assistance;
- publicising it as an HSE service

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Priority will also be given to developing and promoting web-based services as the preferred source of information and advice. Dependent upon agreement to the Strategy and to further development of the communications strategy and budget, these services could receive advertising support, both to underpin the development of the advisory stance and to position HSE in that context.

The implication of these recommendations is significant new investment in Web development, advertising, brand creation, (out-sourced) back-office and internal support. This is a positive move, wholly in keeping with the strategy for 21st Century modes of delivery.

Strand 3 – Communicating through Others

The strategy flags up the intention to re-examine the current boundaries and working relationships with Local Authorities and other institutions within the Health & Safety system. The Strategy is radical in the intention to respond to the law of diminishing returns. This principle is just as much as (say) putting more effort behind communications and advice will be controversial. Staff understanding and support of this strategy will be vital. For the leadership to get effective traction in implementing the Strategy, powerful messages must reach the staff and be followed through by line-management.

Accordingly a strategy road show will take place in the new year to roll out the key proposals of the Strategy and of this communications strategy with the objective of enrolling the commitment of the majority of HSE staff to new ways of achieving the Health & Safety effect. The road show itself will presage a new approach to internal communications in HSE, which will be critical to building on the New Ways of Working aspects of the change programme.

Consideration will also be given to extend the road-show approach to LA EHOs and other key influence groups.

To an extent the medium is message – the very act of the Commission and Executive leadership coming out to put the message across, professionally,

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face to face will win the attention of these critically influential groups. However, the follow-through in terms of the new role of the communications partners in (say) re-launched team briefing along with other visible signals of a new standard of communications will help to win hearts and minds.

In time, consideration will be given as to whether support would be given to other Health & Safety groups and institutions through dedicated Web access as part of the Health & Safety service .

It is not difficult to see how co-ordination, planning, investment and management focus in communications can quickly establish the direction of the new strategy. The other process that will reinforce the desired change will be education.

The strategic communications module in the Leadership programme is designed to help SCS members appreciate communications and, ultimately, put a value on it that is higher than currently placed within the HSE.

This is an important first step in transforming a system where success will come from exerting greater influence over and giving greater focus and meaning to the activities of others.

Next steps

Summary of strategy implementation plan