

Saving Lives

not stopping them



WHEN DONE WELL, HEALTH AND SAFETY MANAGEMENT PROTECTS PEOPLE FROM RISKS THAT CAUSE THEM SERIOUS HARM AND SUFFERING; BUSINESSES TELL US THAT IT ALSO SAVES THEM MONEY IN THE LONG TERM, SAYS GEOFFREY PODGER, HSE CHIEF EXECUTIVE.

But when done badly, it can result in work grinding to halt under a mass of paperwork; whilst everyday activities are needlessly stopped.

I am very clear that what we need is a sensible approach to risk management – saving lives, not stopping them. Unfortunately, that is not always what happens in practice. That is why the Health and Safety Commission and Executive have launched a campaign to get the focus firmly onto practical steps to protect people from the real risks and away from bureaucratic back-covering. It has been very heartening to see many others joining this campaign – including insurers, lawyers, business organisations and health and safety professionals.

Popular stories abound about health and safety banning everything from ladders to school trips. Many of these stories are no more than urban myths (we run a ‘myth of the month’ feature on our website at www.hse.gov.uk/myths), but others have some basis in fact. Sometimes a well-meaning,

but poorly-informed manager has gone beyond what the law, and common sense, dictate. On other occasions health and safety is used as a convenient scapegoat to justify an unpopular decision taken for other – usually financial reasons.

There are also stories of voluminous paperwork being required for even the most mundane activity. Once again, a good deal is myth, but there is again a grain of truth, with some regarding health and safety as a bureaucratic rather than practical issue. Appropriate records can help manage risk, and businesses that employ 5 or more people have a legal duty to keep health and safety records. But on its own paperwork never saved anyone – it is a means to an end, never an end in itself. It should be fit for purpose and in proportion to the risk involved. At the end of the day, it is action that makes the difference.

Amidst these stories, it is easy to forget that the great majority of decisions taken are proportionate and sensible, and that we have to protect those in the workplace and the

public at large from real risks. As the law requires them, businesses look to manage the overall risk to a level that is ‘reasonably practicable’. The important thing is that businesses address their risks – abdicating responsibility will not make them go away – and then arm themselves with the facts so they can manage those risks effectively.

As part of our campaign we developed 10 principles of sensible risk management. We aim to live by them and want others to do the same. Our principles are:

SENSIBLE RISK MANAGEMENT IS ABOUT:

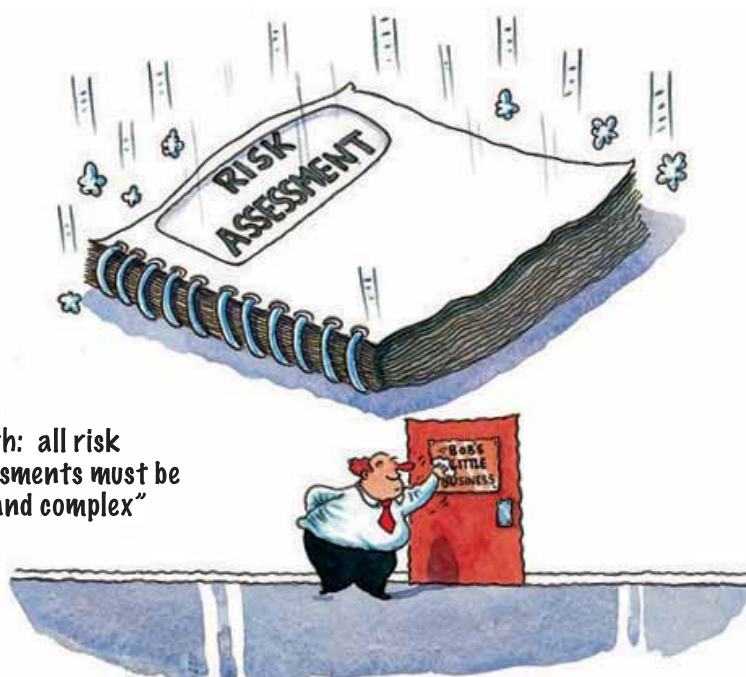
- Ensuring that workers and the public are properly protected
- Providing overall benefit to society by balancing benefits and risks, with a focus on reducing real risks – both those which arise more often and those with serious consequences.
- Enabling innovation and learning, not stifling them.
- Ensuring that those who create risks manage them responsibly and understand that failure to manage real risks responsibly is likely to lead to robust action.
- Enabling individuals to understand that as well as the right to protection, they also have to exercise responsibility.

SENSIBLE RISK MANAGEMENT IS NOT ABOUT:

- Creating a totally risk free society
- Generating useless paperwork mountains
- Scaring people by exaggerating or publicising trivial risks
- Stopping important recreational and learning activities for individuals where the risks are managed
- Reducing protection of people from risks that cause real harm and suffering.

I would urge anyone with an interest in health and safety to apply these principles. If you are seeking external support with health and safety management – look to see how they measure up to the principles of sensible risk management. If you are managing health and safety yourself, use the principles as a reality check and make sure you are armed with the facts – not folklore. ■

“What we need is a sensible approach to risk management - saving lives not stopping them”



“Myth: all risk assessments must be long and complex”