

Ensuring a holistic health and safety culture at Stortford Interiors



Key successes:

- The workers' engagement levels have increased since June 2013; they are more focused in following and adhering to the required health and safety practices and procedures, and thereby facilitating improvements in Stortford Interiors' organisational health and safety culture.
- There is a shared understanding of workers' and managers' respective responsibilities in controlling risks.
- Workers are more confident in taking the initiative to stop work on safety grounds.

Who is Stortford Interiors?

- Stortford Interiors is a specialist interior architectural contractor that offers a wide range of services for diverse clients including BAE Systems, Sir Robert McAlpine and Zurich Finance.
- The company was established in 1991, employs 50 core members of staff, and an additional 300 sub-contractors as needed.
- The company has achieved various accreditations, including the BSI Management Standards for Quality (9001), Environment (14001) and Health and Safety 18001 and also Contractor Health and Safety Assessment Scheme (CHAS).

Why Stortford Interiors used the Leadership and Worker Involvement Toolkit (LWIT)

Stortford Interiors' senior managers are very committed to the health and safety (H&S) of their employees. This is shown in the initiatives that were introduced in the company. These include:

- the near miss reporting card system;
- two sets of monthly H&S audits, one of which is carried out by an external auditor;
- disseminating messages to workers on site that they should not take any H&S risks to facilitate project delivery;
- providing workers with the correct personal protective equipment (PPE) and checking that these are worn;
- confirming that all workers have the required training and qualifications before being allowed on site and
- conducting start right meetings at the beginning of each work day.

Start right meetings occur at the start of the day and allow the site managers to reinforce safe ways of working and assess risks throughout the day. Overall, the company wanted to strengthen its H&S culture, i.e., all workers having similar beliefs, attitudes and values towards safety.

Stortford Interiors wants to ensure that H&S remains high on its agenda in order to guarantee that its workforce is protected consistently. In addition, it wants to work more proactively with clients to communicate its H&S commitment in its approaches to work. Stortford Interiors used the LWIT toolkit to:

1. Improve on how it managed its H&S procedures and to ensure consistency in its H&S practices across the organisation, and
2. Engage staff to a greater extent in H&S practices and thereby improve its organisation H&S culture.

HSE/HSL and Sir Robert McAlpine supported Stortford Interiors in using the LWIT over a 13-month period as part of a research programme to explore how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) were using the toolkit.

Which steps from the LWIT did Stortford Interiors use and why?

■ Step 1: The Health and Safety Diagnostic Tool (HSDT)

The managing director and the health and safety manager completed jointly the HSDT in June 2013 to allow an initial assessment of Stortford Interiors' overall approach to H&S. The results reflected the company's commitment to H&S, as illustrated in various positive practices to strengthen the high standards of safety that the company has in place (e.g. having the H&S committee meetings on site with allowance for one worker on site to attend to raise any site-specific issues that s/he perceives as relevant).

The results showed also that worker engagement was an area that could improve. While the supervisors and team leaders reinforced the message that safety is a priority and worked with contractors to devise safe practices, formal worker engagement practices within the organisation had not been implemented. The participants noted that collaboration with workers occurred in some situations, such as discussing with some teams the various options that could be used to proceed with a specific H&S issue.

■ Step 4: Lead this in your company

Stortford Interiors used the information in Step 4 of the LWIT to increase the visibility and accessibility of leaders in the company. This involved the managers, including the managing director, being seen more often on all of the sites and actively encouraging the workers to approach them and raise issues. At the health and safety committee meetings all of the workers' suggestions were recorded as part of the official minutes and all of these were actioned. In order to increase visibility further, a presentation from the managing director was included as part of the new workers' induction.

Another initiative involved the site managers having a greater role in the handover meetings before the operatives started work on the various sites. The handover covered the scope of the work and what the workers would be doing. These actions served also to encourage worker engagement thereby allowing the workers to feel more comfortable in approaching leaders to discuss H&S issues.

■ Step 5: What's in it for your team

Step 5 provided Stortford Interiors with various approaches to communicate to a greater extent with its workers on the support that they would receive from the company and the good practice that was expected of them. This 'buy-in' allowed the workers to appreciate that the management was committed to the process of improving H&S practices and the overall organisational culture. One of the company's initiatives included, a dust awareness campaign, i.e. 'ditch the broom'; to increase workers' awareness of the dust risks on site and improve their management. The campaign included the training of site managers in the face fitting of masks to support the success of this particular initiative.

How else did the LWIT assist the company?

By allowing it to assess and adjust its H&S electronic management system

Stortford Interiors uses an online Integrated Management System (IMS). This system contains all of the tools, forms and processes that are necessary to manage its H&S policies and procedures. Due to the knowledge gained over the course of the 13 months of the company using the LWIT, Stortford Interiors was able to streamline its IMS to ensure that it related to a greater extent to staff's needs as detailed. The changes over the period are as shown:

June 2013

The head office staff are responsible for maintaining the IMS, and for giving access to the site managers.

January 2014

The IMS contains 37 tool box talks that were available in English only. Stortford Interiors has an increasing migrant workforce, with 35-40% of the workforce having a mainly Eastern European background; most of these workers are site employees, while a few are foremen. One of the ways that Stortford Interiors felt would engage staff was to have relevant work-related material in the worker's own language. In this respect the 37 tool box talks were translated into the four languages of these workers - Russian, Lithuanian, Polish and Bulgarian.

Additionally, one of the operations that the head office administered, the production of a safe system of work, was transferred to the work sites, as it was felt that it was not necessary to have this operation run from the main office.

July 2014

After reviewing its IMS, the company realised that the system could be made much leaner, but be just as effective. It therefore removed 10 forms and reduced the length of others. The H&S manager stated this activity of assessing what was essential in the system, was influenced by using the LWIT.

Other initiatives: Increasing worker engagement and implementing best practice

Worker engagement

Taking responsibility

Generally, the workers have been encouraged to take responsibility for their own H&S and to be aware of any unsafe practices. They have been advised not to do any work that they feel is not safe and to report these instances. Employees are assured that reporting H&S issues is not a factor in getting fired. As one of the interviewees noted, while the programmes of contracted work should be delivered, the staff should not take any risk in facilitating delivery.

Reporting unsafe practices

The company introduced a *near miss recording card system* in the early part of 2013. The near miss recording cards allowed the workers, including any sub-contractors, to feedback on H&S issues as they arose during the day and was one way to support workers in reporting any unsafe practices that they observed. All of the information circulated as part of the cards were assessed and addressed.

Once completed, the cards were sent to the company's human resources (HR) department as well as to the main construction contractors for which the company is working. This allowed the information to be made available to all parties in order to determine improvements that could be made. The cards could be anonymised or the person filling out the card could choose to include his/her name.

In January 2014, Stortford Interiors upgraded the *near miss cards* to *site safety observation cards (SSOC)*. At this time, the latest version was the third iteration of the card system to improve its 'freshness' and usability, and to keep workers 'seeing' it. As the company noted, it wanted a recording system that the site operatives use and that would provide necessary H&S data. In June 2014, the fifth iteration of the card was in place, with a smaller size and additional graphics. Since the different designs have been used, the SSOC is viewed as a more positive tool by the workers and has been used more extensively.

Getting involved

The site operators have been invited to join the H&S committee meetings and to give feedback on site specific issues at these. The company has organised H&S surgeries for its sub-contractors as it believes that these are a useful way to spread the H&S message; while the company's H&S bulletin has been sent to all staff. Further, the site managers have been encouraged to use 'out of the box' thinking to inspire site operatives, i.e., using different ways to engage staff.

Best practice

Face fit training for all site managers

In January 2014, the company surveyed its workers, office staff and operatives about risks. The results identified that the company's top four risks were access equipment, slips, trips and falls, cuts, and dust. The risks due to dust were relevant, especially, due to the type of work in which it is engaged. The initiative in respect of controlling the dust risks was to purchase new respiratory personal equipment (RPE) for staff and to train two managers in face fit testing.

In July 2014, the company had progressed with its dust awareness. It introduced a "Ditch the Broom" campaign to control the dust on site. As part of the campaign, it decided that all of its site managers would be trained in face fitting and would have their own kits once they had received the training. By July 2014, eleven site managers had been trained in face fitting and had received their own kits, and further training for the remainder of the site managers will be undertaken over the next six months.

What has changed in Stortford Interiors since using the LWIT?

■ Health and safety practices are becoming second nature to workers

The attitudes of workers towards H&S in general have improved and they have a stronger focus on safety practices. Workers are wearing PPE for the duration of a task and equipment, such as goggles, hoisters or hats, is not being removed during the task; even during the summer period when temperatures increase. The workers are getting more involved in creating method statements and are taking ownership, as training has increased their awareness and they understand to a greater extent the implications of following safe practices.

■ Site managers are given more autonomy for their respective sites

Site managers have been given greater responsibilities for their sites. They run the start right meetings and once trained, provide training on site as required. They are responsible for devising a site specific safe system of work, an operation which has been devolved from the main office. The onus is on site managers to close any faults in operating procedures that might arise.

One site manager decided to carry out an operation to reduce three-quarters of the cutting that was done on site and thereby reduce the dust generated, especially as the site was a hospital. The operation involved cutting the 500 metres of board, required for the job, away from the hospital and then bringing the final beams on site to be fitted. This reduced the amount of dust that was generated as well as the amount of vacuuming that would have needed to be done.

■ Workers are more engaged with site as well as senior managers

The workers are more relaxed about approaching directly both site and senior managers and raising H&S issues. They highlight practices they believe to be unsafe as they know their concerns will be addressed. They provide feedback as required and interact in the H&S monthly meetings. Workers are more proactive in asking for specific PPE, as required, rather than waiting for these to be offered by their supervisors.

How has the use of the LWIT benefited the business?

■ The organisational health and safety culture has improved

One of the main reasons that the company gave for taking part in this present project was to improve its organisational H&S culture. As noted in July 2014, the managing director felt that this had been accomplished. The reasons for this perception were that workers were more engaged, they were challenging unsafe practices and they were working with the company to maintain healthy and safe work practices.

■ Improvements in safety practices

The company has worked diligently to increase engagement with its workers, not only to improve on work relationships, but to guarantee that the workers understood the importance of maintaining a high standard of health and safety practices. The outcome of these initiatives might be reflected in its improved safety practices. For example, at the start of the project, in June 2013, the company stated that three accidents had occurred the previous year. At the end of the intervention, in July 2014, it was noted that no accidents had occurred during the 13 months of the research project.

How does Stortford Interiors plan to maintain these high standards?

■ Continue to increase worker engagement

Stortford Interiors plans to continue its worker engagement initiative. This will extend to its sub-contractors, i.e., its supply chain, so that all staff across the company have H&S at the forefront of their minds. As it wishes to get workers to 'stop and think', it is considering a video format to introduce scenarios of the 'right' way and the 'wrong' way to engage in work and get things done. It will continue also to update the SSOCs so that the workers continue to 'see' them and thereby use them

■ Improving measurement of H&S

Stortford Interiors wishes to get more data to show the impact that its various initiatives are having on H&S. It intends to increase its data collection processes. This is especially as the number of sites on which it is working has increased by 100%, from 8 to 16. The organisation is aware that the numbers of staff for which it is ultimately responsible is increasing and would like to guarantee that all of its staff are protected when at work.

A final word from Stortford Interiors' Managing Director

As MD of SIL I am delighted that we took part in the HSE/HSL initiative over eighteen months. I feel we have benefitted greatly from our involvement and we have achieved our objective of raising Workforce Engagement within the business as a cornerstone of effective H&S management. We have thereby altered our cultural engagement with the subject, whereby we now ask everyone in the business, employee or subcontractor, to think and act on issues about their own safety in an open and supportive environment. We have taken positive steps where our staff and workers take responsibility for their safety and will stop work in an unsafe environment and are vigilant for others. I would encourage other businesses to get involved if given the opportunity.

(Brendan O'Riordan, Managing Director)

The Leadership and Worker Involvement toolkit is aimed particularly at small and medium sized businesses and is designed to help improve your health and safety and bring additional benefits to your business and productivity.

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