

AMEC/Welsh Water Asset Management Alliance

Worker engagement case study 12

This case study is part of a series of case studies, which give examples of best practice when engaging workers to improve health and safety in the workplace.

The challenge

Working from the project offices in Treforest, Pontypridd, the project team is responsible for maintaining and improving the water service infrastructure over an area covering several counties. About 70 directly employed workers and teams of subcontractors are responsible for projects lasting from one day, to several months.

Typically the workforce is widely dispersed, in teams of three upwards, and communicating with the teams from the centre is a core challenge. Three main risk areas for workers have been identified:

- Protection for lone workers – delivery drivers and workers dealing with domestic customers often work alone.
- The construction work often involves deep excavations, confined spaces, contamination, and sometimes having to work in live treatment plants.
- Road traffic management is a constant high-risk complication on many of these works.

The response

Bob Gibson, AMEC Site Agent on the project, describes the progress made since AMEC were first involved with Welsh Water over six years ago:

‘The journey from six years ago to now has seen a lot of positive improvement. Now the whole ethos of work is so much better. We have identified the need to standardise as much of the organisation and health and safety provision as possible. Workers on our sites today walk on and know what to expect, where to go to get anything they need, who to talk to. It is so much easier now to spread good practice from one site to another.’

Communication with the various sites is a key priority. To this end a communications co-ordinator has been appointed to improve, co-ordinate and manage more effectively the passage of communication from the project centre, out to the sites and the workforce. This includes finding a standard and user-friendly way to display statutory notices and health and safety information in the site welfare cabins.

The VOICE team

VOICE (Views of Operatives in the Construction Environment) has been a major initiative in the AMEC group of companies

Project fact file

Asset Management Alliance AMP4 Overview

AMEC Design & Project Services are currently working on behalf of Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water; the project is known in AMEC as the Welsh Water Framework. The Framework is responsible for delivering improvements to Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water assets in south-east Wales. The Programme covers the period 2005-2010. The scope of works covers project management, design, construction and operations.

The Framework sits within the overall Asset Management Alliance (AMA) which has been formed by Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water to deliver over £1 billion worth of improvements. The AMA partners have integrated to form four delivery teams. Each team is committed to working together to meet the principal aims of the AMA. The environmental integrated delivery team in south-east Wales for the AMA is comprised of DCWW and AMEC, cost consultants Chandler KBS and EC Harris, process support partner Meica Process and operational support partner Kelda.

since 2000. The VOICE mission is to secure the involvement of everyone on site by improving communication lines and the use of hazard observation techniques to monitor and underpin safe working on site, and improve environmental performance.

On the Welsh Water Project there has been a VOICE team comprising a ‘Champion’ and up to nine team members for six years. The aim is to involve at least one in ten workers in the VOICE team. The Team meets monthly as a committee to discuss safety issues. The committee has become a powerful agent of change, helping to break down barriers between managers and the workforce. Discussions have moved on from the early meetings where questions were raised, and issues dealt with on a reactive basis. Now the committee is proactive, aiming to foresee problems and improve conditions continuously. Designers have been included in VOICE team meetings, to bring design into problem solving. Workforce representatives on the VOICE team enjoy a pride and status as health and safety



Figure 1 VOICE team members

champions on site - relaying workers' concerns to management and providing advice themselves to their fellow workers.

Ground worker Colin Thomas is a Voice team member: 'The monthly VOICE meetings are very effective. As VOICE reps we are bridging the gap between management and workers. All the VOICE reps are ground workers. If there is a problem on site we can take it to the meeting, even if management did not know anything about it.'

Minutes with pictures

Site Agent Bob Gibson is also a VOICE Champion, and has initiated a new way of presenting the committee minutes to get them read on site: 'The minutes are presented tabloid style, with photographs of the issues and objects under discussion. For example, minutes from June 2006 show a poor quality bucket supplied to site, alongside a far better quality alternative, complete with a five-year guarantee! The same sheet describes the search for a better quality pipe cutter to cut and chamfer iron pipes, to eliminate having to use a portable disc saw or angle grinder.'

Benefits of consultation

Benefits from the VOICE committee have been considerable over the years. The committee has joined up the human resource and occupational health and safety functions provided for the project. For example the VOICE team asked for and received a comprehensive handbook for hourly paid operatives from the HR department, detailing the conditions of employment on the project. The project has two nurses who attend the project three days per week. The VOICE team has been active in promoting their services and allaying the fears of older operatives who might be worried about the consequences of disclosing hearing loss or other work-related conditions.

Subcontractors benefit too – for example, an excavator driver received a Hepatitis B jab after raising a concern. All training provided on the project is made available to subcontractors. The project team is looking for ways to increase the numbers involved.

Innovation

The VOICE team has been effective in introducing many innovations to site. For example:

- The introduction and development of self-contained welfare cabins for shorter duration sites containing water tanks and generators.
- A secure entry gate for scaffold entry to concrete sewer outflows.
- Better designed harnesses to facilitate entry and emergency rescue through manhole covers.
- Polo shirts designed for summer wear with integral hi-visibility webbing.

Moving forward

Since 2004 AMEC has been promoting a campaign called LIFE (Living Within an incident Free Environment), and within this a behavioural change programme called ABC (the AMEC Behavioural Change programme). This aims to develop the VOICE ethos, replacing for example, the emphasis on hazard observation with an emphasis on personal responsibility, ie 'Can I eliminate the hazard myself?'



Figure 2 A VOICE initiative - a better design of harness

This development is working; operatives are recognising that progress has been made with machine safety, and with procedures – it is behaviours that now need to change to keep in step. Nearly all the AMEC workers have attended the two-day ABC training course, and, as a result, reporting of 'learning events' by the workforce has risen by 55%. A learning event is something that happens on site that leads to the need for improvement being recognised.

The results

- A very good accident and ill health record – From August 2002 to February 2006 over 1.5 million man-hours were worked without a reportable accident. The over-three-day injury to a scaffolder in February 2006 remains the only accident reported to date.
- Staff turnover among site operatives in the Welsh Project is very low.
- Managers see the benefits of an approachable and committed workforce – 'The quality of the conversation we can have has improved massively. Managers make better decisions,' says Mike Hartwell, Catchment Manager.
- Innovation – Improved efficiency and working conditions.
- A long-term project has enabled the realisation of a virtuous cycle of development, where improved information from the workforce leads to better conditions and a satisfied workforce.
- Client satisfaction.

The final word comes from Site Engineer Gavin Lewis: 'Site morale is good on all these sites, AMEC provide good PPE, the best tools, good welfare facilities; everyone knows where they stand and few people choose to leave.'