



If you speak to engineer surveyors across the industry, chances are they'll mention two trends – one slightly surprising, the other plain worrying. On the surprising side of the equation, they'll probably mention that only now are some clients realising that the periodic inspections carried out for them are not just for insurance purposes, but also a regulatory requirement. As for the worrying point, inspectors will also tell you that far too many organisations are now relying far too heavily on them as a substitute for maintenance engineers.

Mark Russell, an independent lift and crane surveyor and longstanding BES (Bureau of Engineer Surveyors) member, says that it's only relatively recently that smaller businesses, in particular, have started to become aware of legislation that impacts them. It's good in one sense. As Russell puts it: "You see a growing number of clients questioning more of what we do, in terms of statutory obligations, whereas before they would accommodate us out of courtesy, but rarely take much notice of us or our reports."

But that raises the question, how many

An inspector

Engineer surveyors say that plant owner-operators are increasingly aware of their legal obligations, but too many still take shortcuts. Brian Tingham talks to INITA member Mark Russell

The INITA difference

As a group, INITA covers all aspects of engineering inspection. Its members' list of competencies includes: lifts and cranes, so LOLER and associated regulations; pressure and mechanical plant, so PSSR [Pressure System Safety Regulations]; electrical inspections [Electricity at Work Regulations, and Electrical Equipment (Safety) Regulations]; COSHH [Control of Substances Hazardous to Health] issues; and COMAH [Control of Major Accident Hazards] sites.

INITA members also recognise and advocate that it's never enough simply to qualify as an engineer surveyor. "All engineer surveyors must undertake CPD and INITA members are committed to that," says member Mark Russell (right). "The organisation runs three two-day seminars every year and it's rare not to have 100% attendance, as well as HSE representation. So, every few months, we're getting current technical information, changes, observations and concerns from the horse's mouth."

And he adds: "One of the things I had to satisfy myself about, before I left Allianz to set up as an independent, was how these engineers can define and maintain their competencies. INITA provided all the assurances I needed. It's a very professional organisation that only admits very experienced engineers, all of whom know their limitations and work within them."

How can he be sure? "We all spend a lot of money on professional indemnity insurance and that sharpens your focus. If an engineer surveyor steps beyond the bounds of his or her competence, they immediately invalidate that," replies Russell.

His point: don't think of independent surveyors as in any way less professional than the big insurance companies. "The independent sector shouldn't be seen as an escape route from proper inspections. Certainly, under INITA, we're a powerful force with excellent links into HSE."



organisations remain in blissful ignorance of their legal responsibilities and beyond the scrutiny of inspectors? More to the point, what does that mean for the safety of their equipment users and those around them?

As for shrinking maintenance departments and the cost-cutting that's so often the cause, Russell says: "Whether it's forklift trucks or overhead cranes, in the past we would have been introduced to the maintenance foreman before touring the site with one of his maintenance guys.

Nowadays, more often than not, the foreman is the only guy left. So whereas internal maintenance procedures used to find defects in a timely manner, now our thorough examinations are often the first to report problems."

With inspections scheduled every six or 12 months, that's hardly a situation anyone wants to encourage. Yet there seems little anyone can do. "You can only remind them of their duties under LOLER [Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment Regulations], PUWER [Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations] etc, to maintain their equipment – and the ramifications of failing to do so



under the Health and Safety at Work Act. We [inspectors] don't carry powers of enforcement. Only when we deem defects likely to cause imminent danger are we obliged to notify the HSE. Indeed, HSE, to an extent, relies on engineer surveyors to be their eyes and ears."

So how do the above issues manifest themselves? Russell says that, in part, it's about near misses. "On a weekly basis, I find something of significance that, had I not carried out a thorough examination, could have resulted in a serious accident."

False security

He gives the example of ASLIs (automatic safe load indicators) on mobile cranes, which, he says, frequently fail calibration – sometimes under-reading by 20% and dangerously lulling operators into a false sense of security. Meanwhile, on passenger lifts, he says that owner-operators are too

calls

often unaware of what's required, in terms of maintenance and inspection.

"Even if maintenance is being carried out, it's often subcontracted, so the owner-operator has little knowledge about its lifts. So we often end up auditing the client's maintenance procedures and having to tell them that the service they're paying for isn't good enough." He mentions everything from suspension ropes to landing doors and interlocking systems as failing to pass examinations.

What should you do? Plant engineers may well find themselves in a difficult position here. If the owner-operator can't understand, or won't listen to, advice – even where that advice relates to regulatory requirements – you have a professional responsibility, and a right, to blow the whistle.

If, in your judgement, the risk is serious enough – whether that's due to inadequate maintenance or failure to comply with inspection reports – it is incumbent on you to escalate your findings, ultimately to the HSE, which is empowered to force action. Before that, however, you might consider



So you want to be a surveyor?

Mark Russell left school at 16 and served a mechanical engineering apprenticeship at Hoffman Bearings, qualifying as a toolmaker with City & Guilds, before moving on to Marconi Radar and then GEC Marconi Research in Chelmsford for eight years. During that time, he took on a development engineering role, working on prototypes, including the then 'over the horizon' radar.

Fascinated by the work of safety inspectors periodically visiting the plant, Russell decided to switch sides into surveying lifts and cranes. "It struck me as such an interesting, varied and important job and I felt that, having spent years helping to develop weapons, it would be good to use my engineering skills to prevent harm," he says.

So he joined Cornhill Insurance in January 1995. "Like many others, I went through their training programme, which was excellent. We started by shadowing a number of experienced surveyors right across the company for six months. Allianz acknowledged that we were senior engineers, but the approach was 'now let's turn you into engineer surveyors'. Although most of the big four offer that level of training now, it was ahead of its time then."

Russell says that is essential, marking out those to be entrusted with engineering inspection from the rest. "Almost without exception, the inspectors I've dealt with through INITA are ex-SAFed [Safety Assessment Federation] inspection company employees, many of them having worked with one of the big insurance companies. So they've all had that kind of intensive training, on top of years in senior engineering posts, mostly with engineering management experience as well."


Russell says his experience with Allianz was both invaluable and rewarding, but, after nine years, he left to set up his own business as an independent engineer surveyor. "I was aware that there were independent engineer surveyors out there, so I spent two or three years researching the issues, the market, the possible problems and how to keep your CPD going through INITA, and then took the plunge in March 2004."

His advice: "It's a fantastic career, with huge job satisfaction and lots of opportunities. If you're ambitious and you think you're up to it, you should get in touch with INITA."

taking advice from SOE, BES, INITA (Independent National Inspection and Testing Association) or any of the big insurers, such as Allianz.

Should you turn to INITA, for example, you'll be pointed in the right direction – meaning a company or independent engineering inspector, specifically qualified to advise on your particular situation, the relevant legislation and courses of action open to you. Of that much you can be

confident: Russell, himself an INITA member and former Allianz employee, is emphatic that, whichever company you choose – certainly if it's from the INITA stable – you can expect professional service from time-served engineer surveyors, who know what they're talking about.

The advice is plain: if you see something you believe isn't right, don't stay silent. In the end, we are all the eyes and ears of the HSE and, if employers fail to act on their duty of care – for whatever reason – we must step in. People's lives may depend upon it. 

Pointers

- Plant owners increasingly understand their obligations
- But maintenance is too often being left to inspectors
- Don't assume that a contracted-out maintenance service is always adequate
- If owner-operators won't listen, you must blow the whistle, taking advice first from SOE, BES and/or INITA
- Be aware that experience in one area of engineering does not mean surveyor competence in another
- INITA engineer surveyors live and breathe competence