

Plant safety at any cost?

PlantEngineer



Supporter of WorldSkills London 2011



Don't get me wrong: it's hard to argue with current moves to streamline health and safety legislation, in line with Lord Young's 'Common Sense, Common Safety' report – especially given that chief among the aims is to reduce the bureaucratic burden on small companies. If that makes the UK a more attractive place for employers to set up plants, resulting in increased employment, more tax revenue, and a stimulated and revitalised economy, that's good news.

However, legislation is one thing; policing it is quite another. So when it becomes clear that HM government is now determined to go ahead with plans to cut costs at the HSE (Plant Engineer, May/June 2011, page 2), slashing its budget by one third over the next three years, it's difficult not to raise a challenging eyebrow.

As it is, barely a week goes past without people being maimed or killed. Most recently, HSE succeeded in prosecuting firms, including Duco International in Slough – where a night-shift worker died when he was trapped in an inspection machine that had not been assessed for hazards following modification and which lacked guarding – and Cannock-based Stakapal, where an employee was seriously hurt when dragged into a multi-roll forming machine, again with no fixed guarding.

So one has to wonder as to the wisdom of wielding the knife in an agency that, despite doing its best, is already failing fully to protect this country's workforce.

Turns out that HSE's answer is 'cost recovery', due for introduction in April 2012. Under this new approach, organisations found wanting, in terms of their health and safety procedures, practices, installations or presumably documentation, will be billed for the cost of the inspectors that catch them out.

Note the use of the word 'billed', not 'fined'. HSE chair Judith Hackitt does not like the F-word. "It's not a penalty," she insists. "It's about us recovering the costs of the work we put in to get that business to comply with the law." For her, this is about helping and supporting those that are "doing the right thing", but charging "those who wittingly or unwittingly flout the law". Hackitt even promotes the new way as removing any competitive advantage wrong-doers might be gaining through their negligence.

It may be persuasive, but her detractors, inevitably, see her argument as potentially disingenuous. Who, for example, will police the inspectors, who might understandably see finding fault as a mechanism for saving HSE jobs? Equally, how many plants can lay claim to running fault free? Surely that's why so many have always turned to HSE for that help and support? Who will put their hand up for help, come next April?

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