

Safe as horses

Educating workers to carry out their tasks safely is a recurring challenge for the construction industry. Dr Bassam Burgan, who is presenting on the final day of the RoSPA Congress, describes how a messaging approach called Trojan Horse could offer a solution.

TRADITIONALLY, THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY HAS displayed health and safety information on notice boards. However, owing to the often high number of notices – not all of which apply to everyone on site at all times – workers can stop noticing the key messages, and complacency can set in.

Apart from this 'wallpaper effect', the effectiveness of health and safety information on notice boards is compounded by literacy problems. According to the National Literacy Trust, more than 5 million adults in England have literacy levels below those expected of an 11-year-old.

Furthermore, the changing profile of the UK construction workforce now includes a large number of migrant workers, often unfamiliar with language, local working practices, and safety cultures. Many site operatives are self-employed, leaving little or no opportunity to invest in training. This is exacerbated by a culture of long work hours and bonuses within the industry.

These problems are reflected in the number of fatal injuries in construction, which saw the toll of casualties increase by 28 per cent in 2006/07 compared with the previous year. There is, therefore, a need to supplement conventional health and safety messages with timely, easy-to-understand reminders that are delivered to operatives at key moments during their work on site.

Conceived to do exactly this, Trojan Horse safety messages convey safety information through eye-catching pictorial messages on brightly coloured backgrounds. Messages are applied to the product or equipment to which they relate. In this way, they comprise a final and timely reminder to the operative just as they come to perform certain tasks.

As messages are applied to the products at the factory, engagement with product manufacturers is a key ingredient of success. This type of engagement has other advantages too. The messaging does not interfere with site activity, and messages will reach all construction sites where these products are used, irrespective of the size of site.

The main advantages of Trojan Horse messaging lie in the simplicity of the approach:

- Use of pictorial rather than textual messages: an inability to read or understand English is not a barrier.
- Clarity and simplicity: an unambiguous illustration of safe and unsafe practices.
- Eye-catching imagery: a high visual impact ensures messages are easily seen by operatives.
- Information at the point of use: messages provide a timely reminder to site operatives on how to carry out activities safely.
- Strategic timing of messages: they can be used in targeted campaigns to deliver health and safety information on topical issues.
- Positive reinforcement: a rise in operatives' confidence in carrying out the activity shown in the message.
- Cost-effectiveness: there is no need for a bureaucratic or technical system to implement it.

The effectiveness of the Trojan Horse technique in communicating health and safety messages was demonstrated in an HSE-sponsored research project carried out between 2004 and 2006. In this project, behavioural psychologists conducted interviews and observations of about 150 workers on several construction sites where the messages were used.

Analysis showed that more than 85 per cent of the workers interviewed on messaged sites were aware of the Trojan Horse messages, while the information uptake from the messages was very high. The conclusion drawn was that site operatives could recall and interpret the messages with a similar accuracy to that achieved when an operative was actually shown the message.

As a result of these encouraging findings, several organisations have joined forces to sponsor a project to develop, promote and broaden the application of the technique across construction. The project is developing a series of new messages to tackle issues identified by the project sponsors as problem areas on



Simple pictorial images can alleviate some of the problems the construction industry is faced with when trying to communicate health and safety to its workforce

construction sites. Messages will undergo peer review by health and safety experts and will be stored on a website currently under development.

There is also an ongoing dialogue with trade associations to raise awareness of the approach, and with a number of major tool-hire companies and construction product manufacturers (including timber, concrete, steel and gypsum products) to encourage them to adopt this technique. ■

THE CONSTRUCTION HEALTH AND SAFETY CONFERENCE 2008

Thursday 15 May

10.00	Introduction by the chair <i>Mike Totterdell, RoSPA National OSH Committee</i>
10.10	Refocusing the safety effort: report from the Strategic Forum <i>John Sparswick, chair, Strategic Forum Health and Safety Group</i>
10.35	Enhancing drivers for change <i>Louise Brearey, head of construction sector, HSE</i>
11.00	Open forum
11.15	Refreshments and networking
11.45	Developing effective health and safety leadership, <i>Peter Fisher, Group SHE director, Costain</i>
12.10	Involving the whole workforce <i>Edume Nunez Moreno, The Steel Construction Institute</i>
12.35	Open forum
12.50	Lunch and exhibition
13.50	House building and domestic repair/refurbishment <i>Shelley Atkinson-Frost, director of health and safety, Construction Confederation</i>
14.15	Raising levels of competence: Pre-qualification and construction skills scheme <i>Paul Reeve, head of HSE, Electrical Contractors' Association</i>
14.40	And what can happen if you fail? <i>Roger Bibbings MBE, occupational safety advisor, RoSPA</i>
15.05	Open forum
15.20	Close