

Lost in translation?

English is the international lingua franca of health and safety in the workplace. We consider the need for long-term planning when employing workers from foreign shores.



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Time to tackle the problem

On a larger, long-term basis the profession and other stakeholders should consider advocating, at an international governmental level, that basic English language workplace health and safety courses should be embedded in final year social studies or English language programmes to assist school leavers in making the transition from full-time education to vocational training and employment as safely and successfully as possible. There is a strong case for an internationally recognised English language qualification, such as the Safety Passport scheme. The rate of injuries and fatalities involving young people during their first six months of employment are considerably higher than at any other time of their careers. It would also help protect the millions of immigrants seeking a better life and entering into new workplaces and encountering English language risk communication for the first time.

The reality is that the international workplace is now multilingual and multicultural and English is the lingua franca of the workplace. It can be expensive, time consuming and unrealistic to translate all your training and risk communication into every employee's native language or dialect, but the issue is not going to go away and as professionals in this field we need to take the initiative to tackle the problem.

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Recent times have seen unprecedented levels of immigration on a global scale. For many immigrants, their search for a 'better life' will mean getting a job. The reality of these new multi-lingual and multi-cultural workplaces has led to particular challenges with regards to risk communication and safety training in the workplace and so it is a subject that needs to be looked at more closely by international risk and safety managers.

Most manufacturers, suppliers, employers and other stakeholders give bilingual instructions in their risk communication – often in the language of the host country/company and in English. This is commendable but it relies on the recipient of the communication, who cannot speak the language of the host, having sufficiently high levels of language and literacy

in English to be able to interpret and understand those it. Unfortunately, often this is not the case.

Freedom of speech

Having low levels of English not only restricts an employee understanding risk communication and safety training, it also prevents them from reporting concerns and being able to understand their rights and responsibilities in the workplace. This problem is compounded by the fact that very often these migrant workers are reluctant to voice concerns over their rights, their safety or their levels of English and understanding in case it costs them their jobs.

Current guidelines state that it is an employer's responsibility to ensure that their employees are given health and safety training and risk communication in a manner which they can understand.

One piece of advice often given is that the training and risk communication is translated into the language of the employee so that they can fully understand it. Though this is a legal requirement, this also presupposes that the employee has the necessary literacy skills in their native language to be able to read and understand the communications (see previous article *It's all Greek to me*, issue 06/2015).

Though translations may be viable for bilingual or even trilingual workplaces, in reality it can be very difficult, time consuming and expensive within an international, multicultural workplace where many different languages or even obscure local dialects are spoken. So what can international risk and safety managers do to tackle this problem?

First we need to recognise that this is a problem and, based on current levels

and forecasts regarding international migration, it is only going to get bigger. Failing to prepare can lead to increased numbers of occupational accidents, which in turn can cause loss of production, decreased profits, legal fees and fines as well as bad publicity – the building sites for the Qatar World Cup are a good example of this.

A positive response

In the short term, one piece of advice could be to assess an employee's level of English before hiring them or insisting that contractors have a basic level of English and OSH literacy ability. If that's not possible, giving basic English and health and safety lessons to new employees could also be considered. In my experience, trainees and employees generally respond positively to having English lessons related to health and safety. They can see the relevance to

their safety and wellbeing and their future employability, meaning they actively engage in the lessons – though I do recognise that this is not always practical.

Nevertheless, there are other measures which can be taken. There is a lot of advice available online on English as a foreign language in the context of health and safety. For instance, the www.oshliteracy.org website is a not-for-profit organisation specifically set up to tackle the problem of language and literacy with regards to risk and safety communication. The website has several pages of tips on how to assess and teach new employees simple OSH related English, links to helpful websites which provide a wealth of information and OSH related agencies, an OSH dictionary and a host of other valuable links and advice regarding this issue – all of which are free to use.