'YOU COULDN'T FINISH THE JOB WITHOUT BREAKING THE RULES': COMMON SENSE SAFETY ON A LARGE CONSTRUCTION PROJECT

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Common sense safety refers to the practical knowledge and judgement developed by workers after on-site experience and has been employed by workers of small and micro construction firms for quite some time. This study, which is part of a wider PhD project, aims to explore whether the common sense safety phenomenon is present on a large infrastructure project (+£500m) in the UK. A mixed method approach was implemented through conversations with workers and analysis of qualitative and quantitative safety climate survey data. Considering that the majority of construction workers were employed from smaller subcontractors, it was found that several brought this 'common sense' attitude. This caused frictions against the stricter and formalised rules and regulations enforced at a larger organisation. Workers believed that they 'couldn't finish the job without breaking the rules' and only wanted to use specific PPE for the tasks that required them. There was particular resistance with safety glasses, who some believed caused 'more accidents' than prevented. In a safety climate survey, 62% of employees agreed they 'sometimes use their own judgement about following procedures'; and 78% strongly agreed or agreed that 'using common sense will keep me safe at work'. The supervisors had concerns about a 'common sense' approach and middle-management acknowledged that it 'wouldn't represent a defence in court'. However, they did not always challenge the workers for not adhering to PPE requirements. For many workers the bureaucracy courtesy of rules and regulations was a big change and one that was unpopular. This can cause frictions in terms of working relationships and meant that greater safety efforts focused on compliance rather than the 'real' safety issues.

Keywords: common sense, PPE, safety, trust.

INTRODUCTION

In a report to the prime minister, Lord Young of Graffham (2010) highlighted that a growing compensation culture in the UK construction industry has had adverse effects on health and safety performance. This 'compensation culture' has created an environment where organisations attempt to eliminate all risks by all means, even though this objective is unattainable (Lord Young of Graffham, 2010; Gyi *et al*, 1999). The compensation culture attributes blame, and rather than accepting that accidents can and do happen, somebody must always be at fault and financial recompense is seen to make good any injury (Lord Young of Graffham 2010). In a

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study by Aboagye-Nimo *et al* (2013), a 'common sense approach' was brought to light, where workers informally and freely assessed situations and subsequently came up with possible solutions on how to avoid or handle potential hazards on site, while abiding by the law. This informal health and safety management technique was found to be an effective and key advantage that small and micro firms had over large firms. The aim of this study was to explore to what extent such a common sense approach existed on a large construction project, where acknowledgement of this 'compensation culture' may have more significant influence in the goals of the safety management systems in place, than on smaller more informal sites.

COMMON SENSE SAFETY IN CONSTRUCTION

Although safety performance in the construction industry continues to improve, recommendations for further interventions are proposed regularly. For example, Choudhury *et al* (2008) recommended that as a best practice approach, construction organisations need to target eight areas: safety policy and standards, safety organization, safety training, inspecting hazardous conditions, personal protective program, plant and equipment, safety promotion, and management behaviour. Such excessive 'safety bureaucracy' can prove problematic, indeed, Cheng *et al* (2012) found that several safety management practices are perceived as complicated and adversely affect the project performance in the construction industry. However, avoidance of workers' compensation costs have led to firms implementing excessive safety measures (Manu *et al*, 2013). In response to such concerns about excessive bureaucracy in safety, Lord Young of Graffham (2010) produced a report entitled 'Common Sense Common Safety', hoping to challenge this notion of safety red tape which reduces workplace production. The aim of the report was given as follows: *"to free businesses from unnecessary bureaucratic burdens and the fear of having to pay out unjustified damages claims and legal fees. Above all it means applying common sense not just to compensation but to everyday decisions once again"* (Lord Young of Grafffham, 2010: 9). The report highlighted that the existing 'compensation culture' in workplaces must be eradicated in order for common sense to prevail. In agreement with Lord Young, Löfstedt, (2011) added that matters concerning 'health and safety' have become increasingly ridiculed and therefore gradually losing its importance in society. In the report, it was indicated that excessive bureaucracy and red tape requirements have been blamed for preventing individuals from engaging in socially beneficial activities, overriding common sense and eroding personal responsibility. The HSE also states that is imperative that workers and working groups disassociate 'safety' from 'bureaucracy' (HSE, 2003: 73). Thus more emphasis needs to be placed on genuine safety and concern for workers' wellbeing if fear of the compensation culture is eliminated (Löfstedt, 2011). Managers of construction firms (especially large ones) have been found to be affected by the fear of the compensation culture the most as they have a larger workforce to cater for and as such, end up creating further strict rules and regulations to prevent such claims from occurring (Wamuziri, 2013).

Common sense is defined as the ability to behave in a sensible way and make practical decisions (Ludhra, 2015). Aboagye-Nimo *et al*. (2013) explain that common sense in the case of construction site safety refers to more than basic level of practical knowledge but requires experience and long term knowledge gained through training, experience, experiential learning in new situations. They found a common sense safety culture to be prevalent among workers of small and micro firms. However, many construction sites and projects are known to be dynamic and involve large, small and micro firms at different stages of the project (Izam Ibrahim *et al*., 2013).

Due to the fluidity of the activities on construction site, an overlap of cultures between strict and standardised safety measures and common sense safety may exist on large projects. This creates an opportunity for research of common sense safety operating alongside strict safety procedures within large project environments.

RESEARCH METHODS

The lead researcher employed ethnographic methods on a large construction project (+£500m). From October 2012, for a two and a half year period, an overt and 'moderate' participant observer approach was adopted, which can provide a good balance on insider and outsider roles (DeWalt and DeWalt, 1998). In this case the moderate participant observer approach involved being within the research setting one to three times a week during the core business hours. The lead researcher was affiliated with the health and safety department, which led to the health and safety advisors being 'gatekeepers' for their different work areas on the project. A gatekeeper can ease the passage of your entry, make the surroundings and contexts more visible and understandable and introduce a range of possible informants (Pole and Morrison, 2003, p. 26). The researcher was often perceived by construction workers as a trainee safety advisor who posed little threat likely to be due to his youthful looks, age, small height and that he was often with safety advisors. As a PhD student still attached to a university, the researcher assumed the role of a novice or an apprentice. Lofland (1971) describes this as being an 'acceptable incompetent' and Murchison (2010, p.42) states that ethnography can be very productive if the researcher assumes the role of an apprentice (Murchison, 2010, p. 42). Following previous research about the 'common sense' phenomenon, the lead researcher explored the data that had been gathered through conversations with construction site operatives and management (supervisors, foreman, works managers and site engineers) and from a safety climate survey that had been conducted on the project. The survey was administered by an external consultant, comprised of 128 questions, took around 15-20 minutes to complete and had 475 respondents. Of the respondents, 92% were male, 55% labour force, 45% supervised others and 38% have less than six months on the project. The surveys had a mixture of 5-point Likert scales (strongly agree, agree, neither, disagree, strongly disagree), unbalanced 4-point scales (always, sometimes, rarely, never), 3-point scales Likert scales (high, medium, low) and forced choice 'yes' or 'no' questions. Such a mixed-method approach is rare in construction safety research (Zou *et al*., 2014) but it is argued by Abowitz and Toole (2010) that it can lead to improved validity and reliability of research outcomes. For this study, which is part of a wider PhD, a mixture of quantitative and qualitative findings was used for triangulation, one of the three approaches to mixed-method research (Bryman, 2008). This research concentrates on findings relevant to 'common sense safety' rather than 'common sense health and safety'. Hence, safety issues, rather than health issues are discussed.

SAFETY CLIMATE SURVEY FINDINGS

This inductive study, which is part of a wider PhD project, highlights the key findings on a large construction project. The following section below presents and discusses on results of a safety climate survey. The next two sections are in first person and involve ethnographic conversations with workers from two levels (operatives and middle management).

In March 2013, a safety climate survey was conducted by an external consultant. The following survey results strongly suggests the presence of a common sense phenomenon: 75% strongly agreed or agreed that 'my own experience will keep me

safe at work'; the majority of worker's 'sometimes' (62%) 'use their own judgement about following procedures (always, 10%; rarely, 18%; never, 10%); and 78% strongly agreed or agreed that 'using common sense will keep me safe at work'. When asked if workers would challenge a workmate for no gloves, 56% said 'always'; for no eye protection, 62% said 'always'; for use of a mobile phone in an unsafe place, 58% said always. Along with speeding (54% always) and not clearing up (58% always), these five acts, out of a total of 19 acts, were the least likely to be challenged on site. This perhaps suggested these rules were questioned by workers or not perceived as important as others. The final open-ended question in the survey was 'how do you think we could improve the safety on this project?'. The following answers were related to common sense safety:

'Practical common sense Health and Safety goes out the window to protect persons by generating an exhaustive paper trail. Critical factors like competence go out the window and instead irrelevant rules are enforced'

'Not presuming the next one is a hillbilly but prepare the risk assessment with more emphasis on the existence of common sense.'

'Common sense approach required by safety team'

'Encourage Common sense'

'Everybody uses their common sense including safety advisers'

'Give people more common sense.'

'Use common sense and discretion.'

'Common Sense'

'More common sense approach. Client does not necessarily have the experience to determine what safety measures we as experienced contractors should employ.'

'A more proactive approach is required. Make the workers apply common sense and judgement rather than drilling into them that everything is safe as they take their eye off the ball.'

'Common sense of plant and equipment usage. Awareness of safety. '

'Make the workers apply common sense and judgement rather than drilling into them that everything is safe as they take their eye off the ball.'

'Look at the bigger picture. Gloves and glasses are not always the answer. Try looking at weather conditions, management, experience, foreign labour language barriers and most of all, common sense'

The statistical findings suggest that workers believed in a more common sense approach and sometimes use their own judgement when following procedures. The final open-ended question explored how workers believe safety can be improved, and the evidence suggests that there was desire for a more common sense approach. To further explore the rationale behind these suggestions, a fine-grained ethnographic approach using participant observation was undertaken. For ethical reasons, all names within the following ethnographic passages are pseudo-names.

ETHNOGRAPHIC FINDINGS: THE OPERATIVES VIEW

The following findings are from discussions with site operatives on the project. The section bold sub-heading quotations represent the beginning of a new ethnographic vignette.

'You could not finish the job without breaking the rules'

One afternoon on site, I noticed there was a discussion taking place between one of the construction workers, Paul and a safety advisor. Being curious, I approached to realise that the safety advisor was asking Paul to fasten the crotch-strap for his lifejacket. Paul proceeded to do it but wasn't too happy about doing so, suggesting that the safety advisor '*didn't know all the positions he needs to get into to'* and that the crotch-strap can often get caught on things, which is *'a hazard'*. Once the crotch-strap was fastened and the safety advisor explained the reason for the crotch-strap being there (to stop the lifejacket not going over your head when it inflates on water impact). After the safety advisor had moved on, I got the opportunity to speak with Paul, who I had met a couple of times before. I asked him how he was getting on and he smiled and said he was *'not bad, just avoiding trouble'*. I laughed and said that it *'looked like he was causing safety some trouble'*, to which he laughed and then responded:

'Yea mate, but you have to admit, Health and Safety is a bit of a joke at times - it goes too far. You wouldn't be able to finish the job without sometimes breaking the rules. You just need to use your own common sense as a risk assessment sometimes… For example, sometimes your gloves are a hazard. They can get stuck on things. So if you're in an area where they might get caught on thing - take them off. Also, your glasses, if they steam up so you can't see clearly - take them off. The other day I was in a confined space with limited mobility and my helmet was restricting vision and getting in my way, so I took it off.'

I asked: *'but what if you trip in the confined space and smack your head?'*
Paul replied: *'well that is your own stupid fault'*.
I said: *'But everyone makes mistakes now and then, no?'*
Paul: *'Yea there is human error, but I've been in construction 40 years and not had a problem.'*
I then asked: *'if he did see someone without an item of PPE on would he challenge them.'*
Paul: *'Na, its nout (nothing) to do with me'*.

The conversation with Paul was enlightening, and not an unusual opinion amongst construction workers on this project. Paul believed that wearing PPE all the time was too generic a rule for all situations, and that sometimes the rules needed to be broken. There were multiple occasions where workers were found not to be wearing their PPE, and this was causing issues with the safety advisors as they constantly had to remind workers to wear their PPE. This problem was noted in a site departmental meeting where the head of department had stated that the lack of PPE compliance was distracting them from the 'real safety issues'.

'Glasses cause more accidents than they stop'

Being a researcher attached to the safety department, I sometimes helped out with safety-related tasks when required. On one occasion I travelled around the site with a safety advisor to put the new monthly safety topic posters up in the workers welfare units. As we walked into a welfare unit, one of the workers noticed the safety advisor and immediately took out his safety glasses. He turned to his fellow worker and said

'I've only had these three days and they are already ------ [explicit language]'. The safety advisor overheard this conversation and asked to take a look. He suggested they might need a clean but the worker disagreed, saying he had just cleaned them and they were scratched. At this point, another worker in the welfare unit interrupted saying they were *'the worst things'* and they *'cause more accidents than they stop'*. He gave the example, of if they get dirty during a concrete pour, then *'it is not like you have time to go and clean them, and you aren't allowed to take them off'*.

'We are delusional. We think we are safe but we are not'

I am not the most comfortable with heights, and have found that the best way to handle this is to not look down! However, on a construction site, sometimes you can't avoid seeing the bottom. As I travelled up the construction hoist with a safety advisor, I was a little nervous. Watching my step from exiting the hoist to scaffold board, I got a quick flash of the drop. However, once on the scaffold I felt more comfortable, as the perimeter was boarded up. There was another higher platform in the centre of the scaffold, which the safety advisor wanted to check. My nerves returned as I climbed the ladder and the boarded perimeter no longer protected my view of the drop. Reaching the top one of the workers opened conversation with: *'you are no good with heights are you?'*. I smiled and said *'was it that easy to tell?'*. He joked *'it sure was, and we are going to enjoy watching you go back down the ladder as well'*. I asked if they were afraid at all of heights, to which they both said they weren't. One of them expanded to say that *'he had been doing it 15 years and always felt comfortable'* and that 'you couldn't do my job if you had any fear'. While having this discussion, the safety advisor noticed a worker sitting on top of a rebar cage (at height without any protection), smoking and on his mobile phone (both in undesignated areas). He raised these issues with the worker saying *'that is what you could call a hat-trick'* (three safety breaches at the same time). The worker that I had been talking with, then interrupted, saying that with all these safety rules and PPE we think we are safe *'but we are delusional'*. He expanded saying *'what is his helmet going to do for him there? If he falls off the rebar, it will just fall off his head? We think we are safe but we are not'*.

ETHNOGRAPHIC FINDINGS: MIDDLE MANAGEMENT VIEW

'It is just a bit of common sense'

Having heard from some of the operatives on their views on PPE, I was interested to hear from a supervisor for his perspective. I asked a supervisor if his guys wore PPE all the time. He said that most of the time the guys were good and wore full PPE despite not all of them being used to it - some of the subcontractors would turn up without all the required PPE and had never worn some of it before (usually safety glasses). He did admit that there were occasions when the workers would take off items of PPE when they were on site, but not working. He was happy with that arrangement as it was *'just a bit of common sense'*. He expanded to say that if the guys were enforced to wear it all the time it could damage his relationship with them and they would be more likely to take PPE off in other situations that could be higher risk. Though the supervisor did add that when the safety advisor comes out he would make sure that all they guys have their PPE on, *'out of respect to the safety man'*.

'You would be better off trying to understand the behaviours of some of the animals in the zoo than some of my guys'

After reading and signing onto the ten minute brief of a work area, I went to meet the site foreman with one of the safety advisors. I hadn't met the foreman before, so introduced myself as a PhD student researching safety. He asked what part of safety I was looking into and I told him that I was investigating the safety behaviours of the workers. He laughed and said *'you would be better off trying to understand the behaviours of some of the animals in the zoo than some of my guys'*. I asked him what he meant, and he expanded to say that *'some of them just aren't all there'* and they *'often do daft things'*. He said he had this one worker that kept walking into scaffold poles and other objects, and every time he heard *'a yell'* he knew who it was. The same worker once turned up early to start his shift, and proceeded to walk around the site with no PPE on at all. When the foreman confronted him, he believed he hadn't done anything wrong because *'he wasn't working'*. Common sense is based on individual's experiences and perceptions, and therefore can differ between people. This has led to the saying 'common sense is not common' and hence sometimes rules may be required to protect people from themselves.

'There is no such ------- thing as common sense safety in construction'

A minor accident had occurred on site, and during the post-accident investigations a safety advisor was discussing the contributing factors with the site manager. The incident occurred, while extending the cables of the construction hoist. The injured person had put his head over the hoist handrail, while the hoist was moving, to see if any of the cables were snagging. Unfortunately, his head got jammed between the handrail and a cable guide, causing a minor facial injury. One of the scaffolders had said that, even though he had not been trained to complete the task, it should have just been *'common sense'* to not put his head over the edge. The site manager reacted firmly stating: '*there is no such ------- thing as common sense in construction. You try and use that as an excuse and you would be laughed out of court.*'

ETHNOGRAPHIC FINDINGS IN CONTEXT

The following section summarises the above findings, and places them in context with research literature. Two themes appeared to emerge from the findings: common sense versus formal policies and procedures, with specific regard to the blanket rules around PPE; and trust culture versus compensation and blame culture. The safety climate survey highlighted that construction workers wanted a more common sense approach. The ethnographic findings suggested that workers thought all PPE shouldn't be worn at all times, and should instead be task specific. Using a commons sense approach would step away from the strict and inflexible site rules, and give the workers more responsibility. This would possibly create more safety aware workers, but some middle managers seemed sceptical whether they could be trusted. A trust culture could be seen as the opposite of a blame culture. The bureaucracy through rules and regulations was unpopular and caused frictions and a lack of trust in relationships. Middle-management acknowledged this but displayed reluctance in adopting a common sense approach, for fear of it being 'laughed out of court'.

PPE: Common Sense vs Formal Policies and Procedures

Many of the construction workers wanted a more common sense approach, which led to a lack of compliance among site safety rules with workers using their own judgement. This lack of compliance led to distractions *'from the real safety issues'* as

emphasis was placed on complying with the rules. Health and safety advisors constantly had to remind workers about PPE compliance. This perhaps suggests a common sense approach would be more appropriate, as this would shift responsibility back to the workers and create a more safety aware workforce. A more common sense approach would result in giving operatives more H&S responsibilities, but some managers displayed a lack of belief in this approach and weren't sure the workforce could be trusted, as they *'often do daft things'*. If operatives were given more freedom for assessing risk and performing some H&S duties, it could be worthwhile performing additional training, since Lombardi *et al*. (2009) found that lack of safety training was an important factor in affecting the lack of PPE use. He also suggested that a lack of comfort/fit and fogging or scratching of eyewear were important barriers to PPE usage, which was also the case in this study. In a common sense approach, such barriers could mean that construction workers could chose not to wear PPE because they don't want to, rather than because they weren't required to. Cameron and Duff (2007) also highlight this issue of PPE comfort as a reason why giving people this responsibility can be inadequate in some instances. In giving such responsibility, they also question beliefs about the risks involved for the task in hand. This could be an important point considering Oswald *et al*. (2014) suggest that due to the types of risks in the construction industry, risks are more likely to be tolerated and under-rated.

Trust Culture vs Compensation and Blame Culture

A compensation culture has created an environment where organisations attempt to eliminate all risks by all means, even though this objective is unattainable (Lord Young of Graffham, 2010; Gyi *et al*, 1999). This study found this created tensions and frictions in relationships as many workers desired a more common sense approach. Damaged relationships contributed to a lack of trust, thereby contributing to a blame culture. Rather than accepting accidents can and do happen, someone is at fault and financial compensation is perceived to make good of an injury (Lord Young of Graffham, 2010). On this project, researchers found that a blame culture did exist (see Sherratt *et al*., 2015, in press). This blame culture resulted in a lack of trust between operatives and management to discuss health and safety issues, under-reporting and late reporting. In such a blame culture, there is less opportunity to learn about future accidents. A common sense approach was found to be effective in small and micro firms in a study by Aboagye-Nimo *et al* (2013), suggesting that this approach could also have value on large projects. However, one key difference is that smaller firms are avoiding this compensation culture for a couple of reasons: the close personal relations in small firms would mean that claims could be seen as a betrayal and there is little money to be gained (Aboagye-Nimo *et al*., 2013).

In this study on a large project, the managers had a view that a common sense approach could be legally susceptible, and displayed fear of the compensation culture. Gyi *et al*. (1999) found that managers of large construction firms have been affected the most by the compensation culture, and have ended up creating strict rules and regulations in order to prevent such claims from occurring. Simple and inflexible rules may also be perceived as an appropriate approach due to difficulties with communication throughout large organisations. Top-down communication has to travel throughout the whole organisation to the operatives who have no computers access. This issue becomes even more challenging in multinational organisations (see Author *et al*., 2015, current conference), which is becoming more and more common as the world becomes more globalised. Considering these communication issues, simple strict rules without flexibility could be seen to avoid confusion in a large

organisation. However, this can result in a lack of worker engagement with workers being simply told 'it is a site rule'. Worker engagement is often perceived as a measure of trust (HSE, 2012). Researchers found that the Olympic Park project managed to counteract blame through worker engagement and trust (HSE, 2012), highlighting that it can be achieved in large organisations. Strict rules and regulations with little flexibility tend to the most basic stage of a five-stage worker engagement process documented by the HSE (2011): 'Individuals are simply told what to do regarding safety and/or health.' This means that decisions are not fully explained to workers, workers are not involved in the decision making process and are not trained to perform some small day to day H&S duties etc. A lack of engagement can result in a lack of compliance, resistance to the rules and a divide between management and the workforce.

CONCLUSIONS

Previous research has found the common sense approach to be effective in small construction firms. However, there is a lack of the compensation culture in such small firms in comparison to larger organisations, which means that larger firms adopting this approach could be more susceptible to claims. This has led to excessive health and safety measures, and evidence in this study suggests that there was resistance to such measures, especially from those at operative-level. This can lead to negative consequences such as resentment, poorer relationships and a divide between operatives and management. Using a common sense approach gives workers more responsibility and flexibility, but some managers didn't think that workers could be trusted and that it would leave the firm open to legal action. While a compensation culture exists, a common sense approach may be more difficult to implement and large firms may have to adopt strict regulations. This can lead to negative consequences and a blame culture, which creates an environment where it is hard to learn about future accidents. Trust can be seen as the opposite to blame and is often perceived as a measure of worker engagement, which highlights the importance of involving the workforce in H&S decisions. While worker engagement can be more challenging in a large organisation due to size and communication channels, large organisations should realise its importance in attempting to avoid overcome poor operative and management relationships and a blame culture.

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