C
ommunication is a key part of any risk management policy. It is also both a legal and moral requirement. But are the current methods and materials used in your communication of risk fit for purpose? Are they inclusive and accessible to all stakeholders? To answer yes to these questions you must be sure that the intended audience of your risk communication has the necessary levels of occupational safety and health (OSH) literacy to understand them.

What is OSH literacy? Many of us will be familiar with the terms financial literacy, health literacy, computer literacy, legal literacy and workplace literacy. Indeed there’s practically a subject-specific ‘literacy’ for every type of profession or specialism you can think of. But incredibly, as yet there is little research or information regarding occupational safety and health literacy.

Based on the definition for health literacy given by the World Health Organization, I have, for the purposes of this article, defined it as: the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, produce and understand basic OSH information and services needed to make appropriate decisions regarding health and safety at work or in training.

The British Dyslexia Association states that one in 10 working adults has dyslexia and 40 per cent of these have severe dyslexia. The American Dyslexia Association figures are considerably higher. Research shows that in the UK one in six working adults has non-functional levels of literacy. About nine per cent of all men have, in varying levels of severity, the red-green deficiency form of colour blindness. This means that they cannot distinguish the difference between red and green – two of the main colours used in occupational health and safety signage.

The OECD Global Survey of Adult Skills 2013 (http://bit.ly/1xOwHM) found that in most countries, there are significant proportions of adults who score at lower levels of proficiency on the literacy and numeracy scales. Across the countries involved in the study, between 4.9 per cent and 27.7 per cent of adults are proficient at only the lowest levels in literacy.

Research has shown that there is a definite link between low levels of literacy and workplace accidents – employees with poor literacy are more likely to have accidents. This puts themselves and their colleagues at risk, increases the need and cost for medical services leading to higher absenteeism, and damages long-term productivity (worldliteracyfoundation.org).

These statistics also vary significantly with different demographic groups: young people aged 16–25 are more likely to have an accident in their first six months on the job than in any other part of their career, according to the International Labour Organization. Young workers in this age range are less likely to have had any prior knowledge of OSH and risk communications within the workplace. Research has also shown that people with low levels of literacy tend to find employment in high-risk industries such as construction, transport, manufacturing, agriculture and fishing.

The information in this article does not take into account people with other information acquisition issues, such as visual and auditory impairments. Communication of OSH risk has its own subject-specific meta-language including a large number of signs, symbols and colour codes. It can become even more specialised and specific depending on the industry sector.

All of this means that OSH is a specialised type of literacy in its own right and deserves its place on the list beside the other types of ‘literacies’. This needs to be acknowledged and taken into account by employers and training providers when they consider communicating risk within the work environment or place of training. However, as an experienced literacy and OSH teacher and trainer, I have found that very often this is not the case – usually there is a disconnect between modes of OSH and risk communication and their intended audience, many of whom have no prior knowledge or experience of OSH regardless of their general literacy levels or receptive skills ability.

In a 2003 survey, the HSE found that its current leaflets have a readability level higher than desired and a level of comprehensibility suitable for undergraduates. (HSE, Ferguson et al 2003). Though the report was published in 2003 and the HSE has made great efforts in its policies regarding accessibility, general OSH risk communications have not changed much and I believe this needs to be addressed.

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It’s all Greek to me

Any organisation’s communication strategy should consider varying levels of literacy; cascading information clearly is critical where safety is concerned.