

Summary

Safety delegates in the construction industry

This report focuses on the safety delegates in the construction industry. In particular, we are concerned with the functions and roles of safety delegates in large and complex construction projects that include numerous operators. We elucidate issues associated with the challenges that the safety delegates encounter on construction sites in these new times. We have defined these new times as the result of contextual and institutional changes in the construction industry. EU enlargement and changed regulations for the use of foreign labour have led to a considerable presence of Eastern European labour on Norwegian construction sites. In addition, the use of hired workers has increased significantly in recent years. The construction enterprises have also undergone changes, and large construction projects in Norway have become an object of interest to foreign operators, who constantly participate in tenders for these. In parallel, changes have occurred in HES regulations for maintaining safety in the workplace. In 2010, new regulations for builders came into effect, seeking to ensure better organisation and management of HES efforts. In 2013, a tripartite charter for an injury-free construction industry was signed. On the other hand, the scheme for safety delegates, who are the employees' representatives in HES issues and their spokespersons in matters pertaining to the working environment, have remained more or less unchanged since it was established in the 1950s.

The report is based on a survey among enterprise managers in the construction industry (NACE 41.200, 42.000 and 43.000). A total of 2000 managers responded to the survey. In addition, we have conducted qualitative in-depth interviews and participant observation on three large construction sites. Altogether 19 persons were interviewed in the three cases studies.

Participation in various arenas

Overall, employers in the construction industry take a positive view of the safety delegate scheme. Those for whom a safety delegate is mandatory generally tend to have one. Organisational provisions are made for the safety delegates to fulfil their remit. They are mainly elected by the employees and are provided with training according to the statutory requirements. Although the construction industry managers tend to be fairly well satisfied with the safety delegates and the job they are doing, our study also shows that some barriers exist when it comes to implementing an effective safety delegate scheme on construction sites. We have examined the level of participation in various arenas where the safety delegates can and should be included in HES efforts in large construction projects.

Our data show that the safety delegates are included and participate in daily HES work on construction sites. Participation in safety walkthroughs and Safe Job Analyses (SJAs) are concrete efforts that are undertaken on each construction site. The safety delegates also play a key role in terms of their direct and immediate participation in these HES activities. They are physically present, and their green helmets have a high symbolic value. The safety delegates point out shortcomings in terms of personal safety equipment, imminent safety risk or safety violations.

Planning and progress meetings are key arenas for discussion of concrete as well as general/strategic issues pertaining to HES over the next stages of the construction project. These meetings are held under the auspices of the builder, but the safety delegates are not usually invited to attend. In the survey, we find that the larger the construction enterprise/builder, the less frequently safety delegates are involved in this work. At the workplace level, our data show that the safety delegates are rarely involved in meetings where the builder's mandatory plan for safety, health and working environment (the SHA plan) is discussed. In general, there are few meeting points between the builders and the safety delegates, since the latter belong to the individual construction enterprise.

A main conclusion to the question about employee participation in HES efforts on large construction sites is that although the safety delegates play an important role, their participation primarily tends to be reactive. Few provisions are made to enable the safety delegates to engage in proactive HES efforts in specific construction projects. One reason could be that the regulations do not specify any kind of linkage between the role of safety delegate in individual enterprises and the builder's planning for safety, health and working environment issues. Without any such linkage, the safety delegates rarely appear to be invited to attend arenas where projects are planned and various solutions discussed and selected – i.e. planning and progress meetings. These meetings constitute a key arena for discussion of various topics pertaining to HES in the project in question.