crunch time

What UK business leaders think about health and safety in the recession

Crunch time: what UK business leaders think about health and safety in the recession

The Institution of Occupational Safety and Health is the world's biggest professional health and safety organisation and the Chartered body for health and safety.

This booklet contains the highlights from a survey carried out by YouGovStone on behalf of IOSH.

We wanted to find out what effect the economic crisis is having on health and safety budgets, whether employers can support the government's drive to get people back into work and what exactly business leaders think about health and safety – in theory and in practice.

YouGovStone carried out a survey using its panel of influential people, asking the opinions of those who work in the business sector. The survey represents the answers of 720 UK business leaders. The online survey, including open and closed questions, was carried out in March 2009.

The state of the nation

Last year, 229 people were killed at work and 2.1 million people suffered from an illness they put down to their work. UK plc lost 34 million days because of ill health and injury at work.

If you run a business, you have a responsibility to protect the health and safety of your staff and others affected by your work – it's the law.

Employers all over the UK are feeling the pinch as the economy shrinks, reflected in new statistics from the Labour Market Survey. More people are claiming benefit while they look for a job than has ever been recorded before, but the number of vacancies they could fill is at its lowest since comparable records began. Redundancies are also at their highest.

People in and out of work

29.38 million people employed
▼ Down **75,000** over the year

2.03 million people unemployed
▲ Up **421,000** over the year

1.39 million people claiming Jobseeker's allowance
▲ Up **595,600** on the year and highest figure on record

266,000 people made redundant in the three months prior to Labour Force Survey interviews
▲ Up **154,000** on the year and highest figure on record

■ Source: Labour Market Statistics March 2009, ONS

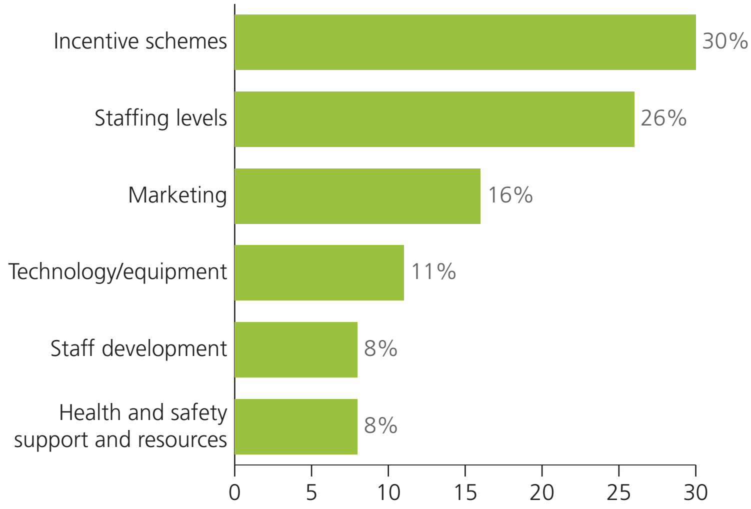
Show me the money

We asked the panel of UK business leaders if the current economic situation has caused a reduction in health and safety budget – 75 per cent said no, 17 per cent didn't know and only eight per cent said yes.

In fact, health and safety was the last area that panellists would consider cutting out of a choice of six. Incentive schemes were most likely to go first, followed by the number of staff and then marketing.

Our survey said:
"Health and safety at work is important, and even in an economic downturn spending should not cease to make the workplace a safe environment. The safety of the workforce is too important"

Which budget would you cut first?



Figures add up to 99 per cent because of rounding

Making your mind up

The panel had very different opinions about health and safety in theory and in practice. We asked them to agree or disagree with a series of statements about health and safety.

In theory, UK business leaders support health and safety management at work – 80 per cent think it saves people's lives, 67 per cent think it means that people don't get ill or hurt at work and 72 per cent think it's central to good corporate social responsibility.

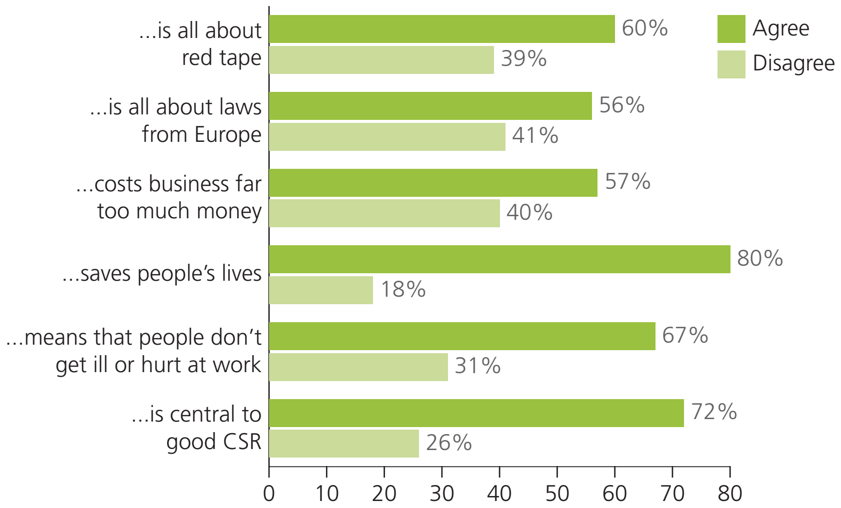
But in practice, 60 per cent think it's all about red tape, 56 per cent think it's all about laws from Europe and 57 per cent think it costs business far too much money.

Our survey said:

"There is too much legislation which involves a great deal of expense and its knock on effect brings about higher prices and less efficiency in the workplace"

"[Health and safety at work is] absolutely important. How does a CEO face talking to the widow of an employee killed doing his job?"

Health and safety…



'Don't know' responses aren't included

Getting people back to work

The government's welfare reform plan is to get 2 million people who are out of work back into the workplace. Its focus is on those who are on incapacity benefit because of sickness or injury, and older workers who may want to return to work.

We asked the panel if they thought that their business could give these workers an opportunity to join or return to work – 49 per cent said no, 27 per cent said yes, 24 per cent didn't know.

We asked the panellists to give a reason for their response and 66 per cent did. The most popular reason for not employing people who wanted to return to work was that they couldn't afford new staff or aren't hiring right now (30 per cent).

Our survey said:
"The current economic climate does not lend itself to expansion of resources – it's time for most businesses to cut their cloth"

Corporate responsibility – whose job is it anyway?

Employers have a legal duty of care towards their employees. But how many business leaders take an active interest in managing health and safety?

Over half of our panel (56 per cent) rely on someone else to manage health and safety at work, with only 28 per cent taking an active role with support from a health and safety professional.

The business leaders who rely on someone else to manage their corporate health and safety responsibilities tend to use in-house professionals – only nine per cent use external professionals.

Our survey said:

"[There is] far too much emphasis on the subject. A complete waste of time and money. Just provides jobs for bureaucrats"

"Health and safety in the workplace is essential and in too many organisations senior managers don't take the level of responsibility for this area that they should"

Which statement best describes your role in managing health and safety at work?

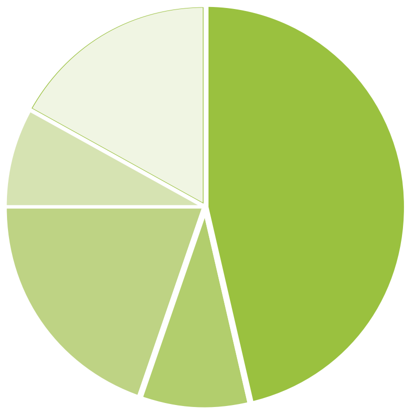
47% – I rely on an in-house health and safety professional to manage health and safety

9% – I rely on an external health and safety consultant to manage health and safety

20% – I take an active role in managing health and safety, supported by an in-house health and safety professional

8% – I take an active role in managing health and safety, supported by an external health and safety consultant

17% – I work on my own or in a small organisation and implement the legal minimum health and safety measures



Figures add up to 101 per cent because of rounding

What does it all mean?

UK business leaders value the health and safety of their employees, but not the way they're expected to manage it

Health and safety isn't the first budget on the chopping block in a time of economic crisis – in fact it's the last one to be considered. But even though the panellists recognise the value of the health and safety of their employees, they feel that health and safety law and practice is too expensive and excessive.

The Administrative Burden Measurement Exercise calculated an annual cost of £2.02 billion of admin burdens from health and safety legislation. The Health and Safety Executive is working towards reducing this by 25 per cent without cutting the level of health and safety protection.

Health and safety regularly gets a bad press for making life difficult, but if you scratch the surface of most stories you find that poor management, preparation or advice are the real culprits. Good health and safety management helps get things done and doesn't encourage petty bans or mountains of paperwork.

Our survey said:
"A lot of rubbish is spoken about the EU-imposed burden of health and safety legislation. Much of it is urban myths. Effective health and safety management saves lives and saves money"

During the recession, employers can't take on people returning to work, regardless of the government's welfare reform agenda

Nearly half the panel said that right now they couldn't offer jobs to older people or those coming back to work after being on incapacity benefit.

Some panellists made the point that the skills someone brought to the table were the most important factor, and not their background. Others suggested that the government should provide incentives or training support to employers who recruit from the 2 million plus people currently out of the job market because of incapacity or age. IOSH believes that business leaders will need further support. We've warned the government that without the right environment and support, there could be a 'revolving door' effect, where thousands of people rejoin the workforce, only to leave again soon after.

Our survey said:

"It's a recession! My company is thinking about reducing the number of staff it has, not increasing them"

"If government wants to get people back into work it needs to focus on what industries have a future and assist in providing the necessary skills and training required for these people to be useful"

Most business leaders don't see health and safety as part of their 'job description'

Over half our panel don't take an active role in managing health and safety at work, even though their organisations could face prosecution if there's a management failure which leads to someone's death. Health and safety is part of everyone's role, regardless of their position.

The people at the top don't need to be health and safety experts, but they do need to make sure that their business decisions are based on sound advice from a qualified source. And they need to recognise what that qualified source is.

Our survey said:

"Safety is vital. It requires commitment from the top to the bottom of the organisation"

Free information for business leaders at www.iosh.co.uk/techguide

- Setting standards in health and safety – raising performance through training and competence development
- Business risk management – getting health and safety firmly on the agenda
- Getting help with health and safety
- A healthy return – good practice guide to rehabilitating people at work

Links

IOSH: www.iosh.co.uk
IOSH campaigns: www.iosh.co.uk/campaigns
YouGovStone: www.yougovstone.com

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IOSH is the Chartered body for health and safety professionals. With more than 35,000 members in 85 countries, we're the world's biggest professional health and safety organisation.

We set standards, and support, develop and connect our members with resources, guidance, events and training. We're the voice of the profession, and campaign on issues that affect millions of working people.

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