

Editorial

Contractors, front line workers – how to manage them?

The first question I was asked when I came up with the idea of this special issue was – contractors, again? Yes, it is true that past issues of *LPB* already discussed different aspects of learning or not learning lessons from accidents involving contractors. However, these issues only partly covered the topic of management of contractors. Contractors and third party workers are often in the front line, even though some operators tend to forget about them in their daily routine, and therefore they could be exposed to hazards. Several accidents have demonstrated that companies fail to see the big picture when they consider the risk of hiring contractors, and even if they manage workplace risk, do they think about long term risks such as loss of corporate knowledge, loss of in-house skill, employee motivation?

Deepwater Horizon, for example, one of the most severe accidents involving contractors, had approximately 20 companies on the platform. It is clear from the investigations that the flow of information and general mechanisms for communications were complex and generally poor. Also, BP did not have the in-house competencies to be an "intelligent customer". This principle relates to a capability required of organisations when using contractors. The term appears in a couple of papers in this issue.

Subcontracting or contracting out work is a general practice in the process industries. Examples of commonly outsourced activities involving contractors include maintenance and housekeeping tasks, such as assembling pipelines, hot work (welding storage tanks or pipe parts that are connected to equipment containing dangerous substances), cleaning and painting. However, many companies do not give enough thought about why they use contractors. Cost-saving seems to be a driver, but in that case, if a contractor can do something cheaper, the operator should ask why. They should take into account all the costs including procurement, supervision and other contractor management activities. Using specialist contractors is one of the most challenging roles of the operator, because the contractor can be doing some very specialist work that may directly or indirectly trigger an

elevated risk on a major hazard site. However, responsibility still lies with the operator, so they need to understand how to provide appropriate supervision to make sure the contractor is doing their job correctly. Another pitfall could be when hiring contractors because of their expertise but then telling them how to do their job rather than using their expertise. This creates a very poor relationship and questions why they use contractors in the first place.

Every accident involving contractors is an opportunity for learning. As with most accidents, learning can be achieved on several levels. Some lessons may be purely scientific, such as when the accident was actually a scenario that was not thought possible in a prior hazard identification method. However, the most common lessons learned tend to be those that identify weaknesses in the overall process of risk management. These lessons learned are generally associated with either technical measures that were not adequate or failed, or failures associated with human behaviour.

Another aspect of lessons learned is how the organisation may have failed to properly invest in or design the safety management system, such that it was not adequate or did not function as envisaged. As is demonstrated in papers from the operators' point of view, it is also true that contractor workers can be proactive regarding process safety performance.



Dr Zsuzsanna Gyenes
European
Commission, DG
Joint Research Centre
IPSC - Security
Technology
Assessment Unit
Major Accident
Hazards Bureau