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Waste needs to be a safer place to work

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More needs to be done to reduce work fatalities and life-changing injuries in the UK waste sector, which has a relatively poor health and safety record, explains Christine Cole, research fellow at Nottingham Trent University.



Research fellow at Nottingham University Christine Cole

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Health and safety in the waste industry. Great! You're probably already yawning, or you've decided not to read any further.

But health and safety is something that we seem to be particularly bad at in the waste industry in the UK. Is this due to the number of people employed, the tasks they carry out, the way these tasks are carried out, or all of the above?

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE), the regulatory body responsible for enforcing health and safety law across UK workplaces, releases an annual report of accidents at work.

This year's statistics show that the total number of work-related fatal accidents in the UK has halved over the past 20 years to 137 between April 2016 and March 2017. However, more than 10% of these deaths were in the waste and recycling sector, which is around 15 times higher than the HSE's 'all industries' rate.

This does not include those who die as a result of working conditions and diseases contracted as a result of work, i.e. deaths from occupational lung disease from past exposure to dust or chemicals at work.

It also doesn't add deaths occurring while driving at work, as they are recorded as road traffic accidents rather than occupational fatalities. So, in reality this figure could be even higher. Multiple workplace-related deaths, such as last year's collapsed wall at a Birmingham recycling centre which killed five workers, capture our attention.

Although work-related injuries are not always fatal, they can still impact the ability to carry out activities usually taken for granted, such as low-level exercise, housework or driving a car. Losing a limb, the sight in one eye, or other long-term changes in health following an accident, can be life-changing and affect the ability to work in the long term.

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For those not employed in the waste sector, it is one we all connect with in some way on a daily basis, at home and work, and in public spaces. The nature of work in the waste sector and variety of tasks involved means there are wide-ranging dangers. Workers are often exposed to noise, extreme temperatures and chemical and biological substances.

Manual-handling tasks involving lifting, pushing or pulling heavy objects are the cause of most non-fatal accidents. The way employees interact, and the culture in the workplace, may also be integral to preventing workplace injuries.

Recognising the poor health and safety record in the UK waste industry, the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management (CIWM) has been participating in a unique exchange scheme between members in its Midlands region and organisations, municipalities and waste management companies in Denmark and Sweden. The staff exchange programme offers the opportunity of on-site, on-the-job experience within hosting organisations concentrating on health and safety practices.

Through experiential learning, this approach allows participants to challenge current approaches and operational procedures, giving them the opportunity to recognise and share examples of best practice.

In addition to this, the contrasting cultures in the UK and Scandinavia highlight different attitudes within the working environment and demonstrate the safest way is not always the easiest and quickest.

The project started in 2013 and was initially funded through the EU Leonardo project. Exchanges so far have involved nine Swedish organisations and twelve Danish organisations and individuals from thirteen UK organisations.

The true cost of an accident

Recognising the benefits achieved so far, the scheme is now continuing as a self-funded project by the participating organisations. Recruitment is currently taking place in Denmark and Sweden to send participants to UK host organisations.

The way employees interact and the culture in the workplace may be integral to preventing workplace injuries, and this programme is well placed to explore this and make recommendations for change.

Workplace deaths, as with every other death, cause ripples of emotional, psychological and financial harm to families, friends and communities. The costs of an accident are immense to both victims, family, friends and colleagues. Add to this counselling costs, legal proceedings, lost working days, and the costs go on. As an industry this is something that we need to take seriously.

We all have the right to expect to go home safely after completing a day's work. Health and safety in the workplace should be at the front of everyone's minds and we should strive to not only reduce fatalities, but to also reduce occurrence of those life-changing injuries.

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