Safety is a value, not a rule

Paraphrasing an old adage, one might say: “Safety is its own reward” and indeed it is. Thorough training, compliance with international ISO and other standards, vigilance regarding quality and health, safety and environment (QHSE) results in less on-the-job downtime, fewer accidents, healthier employees, improved performance and the delivery of quality projects. But attention to safety is an enduring challenge in the industrial world. Sometimes a limited number of accidents are considered a fact-of-life, just simply unavoidable. For the dredging industry, this is not an acceptable attitude – even though working in rough seas and weather, with tough offshore conditions, and heavy floating equipment can present huge challenges.

René Kolman, Secretary General, International Association of Dredging Companies looks at health and safety issues within the dredging industry.

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International regulations

Generally, safety policies are divided into four categories: health and human resources, quality assessment, environment and security of vessels. Since 1914, in response to the sinking of the RMS Titanic, the maritime sector, including dredging, has been governed by the SOLAS treaty (International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea) and its successive forms which are regulated by the IMO (International Maritime Organisation). The newest of these treaties is the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 which has just gone into effect as of 20 August 2013. Initiated by International Labour Organisation (ILO), the Convention is a milestone in international maritime labour law, providing comprehensive international minimum standards to ensure decent working conditions for seafarers with a level playing field for ship owners operating under the flags of countries that have ratified the MLC 2006. A brief summary of ISO codes (from the International Organisation for Standards) and other international regulations include:

- ISO 9001 for the execution of quality assurance;
- ISO 14001 for the execution of environmental protection;
- OHSAS 18001:2007 (Occupational Health & Safety Advisory Services) for the execution of occupational health and safety;
- ISM (International Standards for Management) for the execution of safety at sea and marine-environmental protection;
- ISPS (International Ship and Port Facility Security) for the execution of security on vessels;
- MLC 2006 which regulates working and living conditions for seafarers.

The major international dredging contractors abide by these recognised standards and have established systems for complying with these regulations to avoid risk and limit injuries and incidents. But in their estimation, these outside regulations are in practice not enough.

Going the extra mile

For the major international dredging contractors, safety has always been a crucial issue. Yet despite best intentions, despite a drastic reduction in safety incidents in the industry over all, injuries and accidents still do happen and require constant vigilance. The consensus amongst safety specialists is that safety consciousness over time seems to plateau. To get beyond this impasse, the major dredging companies have been taking a deeply critical look at their own internal safety systems, not just the regulatory requirements. This means going the extra mile, by implementing a new kind of ‘safety culture’. By analysing workforce and in some cases client surveys, the conclusion was reached that most safety programmes focus on procedures and instructions. ‘Do this, don’t do that’. To achieve the shared objective of accident- and incident-free operations, a big step was required – people’s attitudes, values and conduct had to change. The culture of ‘these are the rules, I must obey’, is not sufficient. In several of the dredging companies, a rules-driven approach is being replaced by a values-driven approach, one that creates a philosophy of safety that is embedded in the corporate identity.

Safety training programmes

At the major international dredging contractors, QHSE teams are appointed per project. A
QHSE team may interview employees about on-the-job safety, asking them what they see as necessary to achieve a safer working environment. Risk assessments are done. These surveys and assessments are then processed, discussed and formulated into concrete actions. According to some safety experts, however, even this iterative process has drawbacks. What people say when interviewed and how they act are not always the same. Observing employees at work is therefore crucial because human nature is complex. Workers may be hesitant to ‘betray’ a colleague. They may fear for their jobs if they are critical of a superior. Dedicated safety experts who are trained to increase awareness can help convince staff that they are protecting a colleague, not hindering, if they speak up. That watching each other’s backs by pointing out potential mistakes before they occur can save lives. During the preparation phase, typical pro-active actions are taken such as creating documents that describe the QHSE management systems. Stop-work notices, risk inventories and evaluation and job safety analysis are a few tools that support safety procedures and complement Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Kick-off meetings are held with dredging crews as well as with sub-contractors. During this phase, the main risks and potential impacts, the control measures and lines of communication with internal and external parties are established. For instance, observations confirm that language issues and multi-cultural workforces can influence safety matters. Moments when crews are rotating may require extra alertness. Hazard Identification (HAZID) meetings should also be held with all operational staff. Intensive safety training, coaching and leadership programmes for all personnel including management are conducted. These may be both seminars and workshops as well as ‘toolbox talks’, meetings or presentations organised on the job, just before work begins, that is, ‘close to the toolbox’. Toolbox talks usually focus on a specific working method, safety rule or job planning. They are organised at project launch or when new activities are being undertaken on a project or when working methods have been altered. Such talks are most effective when held often. Toolbox talks offer workers direct participation in the safety process and give them the opportunity to voice their own concerns about PPE, working with pipelines, chemicals, lifeboats, excavations, mooring lines, lifting heavy machinery and any other aspect of the dredging operation. Safety is also measured by regular audits conducted by trained company employees, as well as externally by Lloyd’s Register Quality Assurance and other auditing organisations. Depending on the particular operation a dredging project can expect to be audited by an external entity usually appointed by the client. For instance, an Occupational Safety and Health Suitability Audit, Occupational Safety and Health Compliance Audit and/or a Site Safety Survey Report might take place. Also ISM/ISPS audits may be undertaken.

Senior involvement

Studies of safety demonstrate that whilst safety plans and audits help, the involvement of top management is crucial. This involvement automatically signals to the rest of the company that safety is being taken seriously. Workers and management must be on the same page about caution, expertise and attention to detail. The realisation that poor safety statistics do not reflect well on the company - and will eventually jeopardise the future of any organisation - has got to be made concrete in corporate policy. Safety goes hand in hand with efficiency; a well-prepared and thought-out project is a safe project that will generate a profitable outcome. These attitudes toward safety and programmes must emanate from senior management. Amongst the major dredging companies in the dredging and offshore business, the involvement of higher management has made a huge difference in the follow-up of the protocols and perceptions of the operational staff. As one top dredging executive said: “Employees go to work in the morning and the expectation of their families should be that they are coming home hearty and hale in the evening.” As another said, a safety programme should emanate from caring, fostering, shielding, and protecting. You do not want to find yourself or your colleague in a situation you would not wish for your own child.

Client-contractor incentives

Recently, a new approach to safety performance in contract administration and management has been advocated: at the start of the contract the contractor would evaluate what the client wants to achieve in safety performance and then identify the specific tools and systems, initiatives, trainings and programmes to reach this goal. Together, client and contractor can define (positive) leading Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and agree on a programme / ‘milestone schedule’ - leading indicators to ensure a positive and predictive approach and to avoid any reluctance to pursue full transparency on incident reporting. The client can then commit specific parts of the lump-sum of the entire contract towards these milestones. This is NOT an additional amount, but a part already payable under the contract for executing the entirety of the scope of work. The safety performance would dictate WHEN this part would be paid, not IF it would be paid. Upon achieving a milestone, a designated part of the overall lump-sum becomes payable. If a milestone were not met, the payment of that portion would move back to the end of the contract. In this way a cash-flow benefit is attached to safety milestones and the contractor will be incentivised to achieve them.

Safety routines must not become routine

Someone once remarked: “It takes only one minute to write a safety regulation. One hour to attend a meeting to discuss safety at work. One week to set up a safety programme. One month to put that programme into operation. One year to win a prize for safety. One lifetime to make a safety conscious employee and just one second to destroy everything.” Scientific studies have pointed out that when new technologies are introduced, the frequency of incidents is greatly reduced because everyone is focused. Maintaining this intense level of attention to safety is an on-going challenge that the dredging industry is committed to meeting. With every new dredging operation and every new set of employees, the safety situation is re-assessed. There’s no substitute for being alert at all times.