Back to Basics

The Occupational Psychology Centre (OPC) sheds some light on why some employees find it hard to stick to the fundamentals of safety and considers the importance of creating a culture of accountability and risk awareness

Safety incidents in the rail industry can have severe consequences, especially for safety-critical employees like track workers, engineers, shunters, and train drivers. The nature of their roles can put them in 'harm's way' at the forefront of potential risks. Even minor safety lapses could lead to catastrophic incidents like personal injury and harm. Or, it could have a wider impact, jeopardising passenger safety or railway integrity.

In some organisations, safety performance can fluctuate over time. There may be periods of high accidents or incidents frequency, prompting safety training or a new initiative, resulting in improved safety focus and a subsequent decrease in incidents. However, sustained improvement may not continue, leading to a cycle of rising and falling safety performance interjected by safety initiatives.

Laura Hedley, a Senior Occupational Psychologist at the OPC said: 'As a team of safety-specialist psychologists, in our experience, while poor safety performance can stem from various factors like insufficient equipment or training, human factors are often a primary cause. While most individuals get it right, sticking to safety protocols, we're all prone to mistakes. However, in safety-critical roles, even minor errors can have significant consequences compared to other positions. In many cases, incidents can occur simply because we just don't get the basics right.'

What are the basics?
When we refer to the basics, we mean the fundamentals of personal safety. This includes ensuring any necessary Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) like hi-vis gear, protective trousers, and goggles are readily available for the job.

It's important that all necessary equipment is in good working condition and regularly maintained to minimise the risk of accidents. Any equipment faults or hazards should be promptly reported and escalated if not resolved. A full safety briefing should always precede any work.

Always abiding by the rules is a fundamental. Industry regulations have been devised over years of safety experience and are in place for the protection of

everyone—employees, contractors, and customers alike.

Prioritising safety over any work, time, or commercial pressures is crucial. It means having the right people assigned for the right task, and balancing the tension between safety and service delivery.

Laura said: 'The Non-Technical Skills (NTS) of vigilance and conscientiousness also play a key role in the basics of safety. Sometimes, seemingly inconsequential things like leaving tools behind, an incomplete job or an untidy site can cause an incident. Risk awareness and situational awareness are also crucial. Assessing for risks, especially personal risks like fatigue or stress prior to work is vital. In the OPC's experience, incidents often result from a buildup of small, cumulative risks rather than a single factor. Employees with a heightened awareness of potential hazards and their consequences are much better equipped to identify and manage risks effectively, reducing the likelihood of an incident.'

What prevents us from mastering the basics of safety?

Fundamentally, our own fallibility and some specific human factors tend to get in the way. Based on research and insights gathered when undertaking hundreds of Post Incident Assessments (PIA), OPC psychologists identified several recurring themes:

- Effort vs payback.
- Balancing the job vs. the basics.
- The trap of self-reliance.
- Why bother!
- A false sense of security.
- Not my responsibility!

Effort vs payback. Sometimes it's tempting to take the path of least resistance. When we're under time pressure or something interferes with pre-planning it can be more tempting to 'skip the basics', forget safety rules and protocols, leading us to prefer convenience over compliance.

Balancing the job vs. the basics. Sometimes it may seem easier to prioritise the task completion – to get on with it, and get it done - rather than 'waste time' focussing on the safety fundamentals.

The trap of self-reliance. It can be easy to be deceived ourselves into believing we know everything, being self-reliant in our own abilities. Just because we've never had an incident or 'near-miss' previously we think that everything will be ok – therefore I don't need to focus on the safety basics.

Why bother! When there's been a lack of positive action regarding a safety or hazard request, it can breed a sense of futility and apathy, meaning people just give up and stop reporting a risk. We need to generate a culture of 'safety is everyone's responsibility' not just for front-line employees.

A false sense of security. Failure to recognise risks properly can give an illusion of reassurance. Just because risks haven't been spotted or acknowledged doesn't mean there aren't any. Over-confidence can hinder us sticking to the safety basics and adhering to the rules.

Not my responsibility! Lastly, this pervasive attitude can mean a culture of disengagement and neglect, leading to a failure in getting the basics right.

Laura said: 'Most of the time, people try hard to act in the right way and make sure they get the safety basics right. However, we're only human! And we can and do make mistakes, but recognising and being aware of this fallibility is essential. It helps us understand why we make errors. It's also crucial for individuals to speak up and voice their concerns when mistakes are made – whether organisationally, in the team or at a one-on-one level, regardless of their seniority. This helps to ensure any unsafe behaviour is addressed.'

Why do we find challenging so hard?

Challenging an error around the basics of safety at an organisational level is a lot easier to do than challenging an individual about their safety behaviours.

Laura pointed out: 'Putting a report in about an asset like a faulty piece of equipment, a broken rail, or unavailable flashlights is a lot easier and less effort than challenging an individual about their unsafe behaviour or safety mistakes. Sometimes people wait to see the outcome before making a challenge – holding out to pluck up the courage, and reflecting on the potential impact to their relationships.'

Through our work over the years, we have identified some of the key reasons why people may not want to confront others.

Fear is a commanding factor

Fear of reprisal or negative consequences from speaking up, especially if the person committing the breach is in a position of authority over the employee. This may extend to disbelief that more senior or experienced individuals could have committed a safety breach.

Fear of rejection or ridicule and how others in the team may perceive an employee after a safety breach report.

A fear of being misunderstood

Worry about damaging relationships or creating conflict within a team by addressing safety concerns. This may be especially pertinent if the colleague is a friend, not just a work colleague. A contractor might worry about their future job opportunities if they raise a concern.

Confidence levels

A lack of self-confidence may inhibit people from challenging a safety breach in others. A lack of confidence in their own knowledge or understanding of safety protocols can lead to hesitancy in challenging others. Similarly, a lack of self-assertiveness can mean some people are filled with horror at the prospect of having to challenge another individual.

Social dynamics

Some people prefer to be 'followers' rather than 'leaders' and would never consider challenging someone on their behaviour. Being a 'people pleaser' and sacrificing a safety challenge to avoid upsetting someone or not wanting to 'rat on my mates!'

Organisational culture

If there is a prevailing norm of overlooking safety issues or prioritising productivity over safety in the organisation, people may be less inclined to speak up. If safety issues are persistently disregard then this can foster apathy in reporting along with a general feeling of futility.

Overall, a combination of fear, social dynamics, confidence levels, and organisational culture can contribute to the reluctance to challenge safety breaches, but it's good to keep in mind that our colleagues are our 'railway family'. In a recent project, OPC Psychologists asked over 600 rail workers, many of whom work together closely, about their willingness to have

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Laura Hedley, Senior Occupational Psychologist at the OPC

someone point out their safety mistakes to help their personal safety and that of others. Happily, over 90 per cent said they'd prefer to be told.

It's also important to be aware of our 'duty of care' in a legal context. Under UK health and safety legislation, failing to uphold safety standards can have serious legal ramifications. From criminal charges to civil suits, individuals can find themselves in legal jeopardy if they neglect their duty to ensure workplace safety. Section 7 of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 places the onus on organisations and employees—including contractors—to take reasonable care of their own health and safety, as well as that of others.

Doing things differently

It's about taking personal responsibility. Each employee proactively recognising they're responsible not only for their own safety but also for that of their colleagues. Whether it's speaking up about unsafe practices, reporting a fault and escalating it if unsolved, or going the extra mile to ensure

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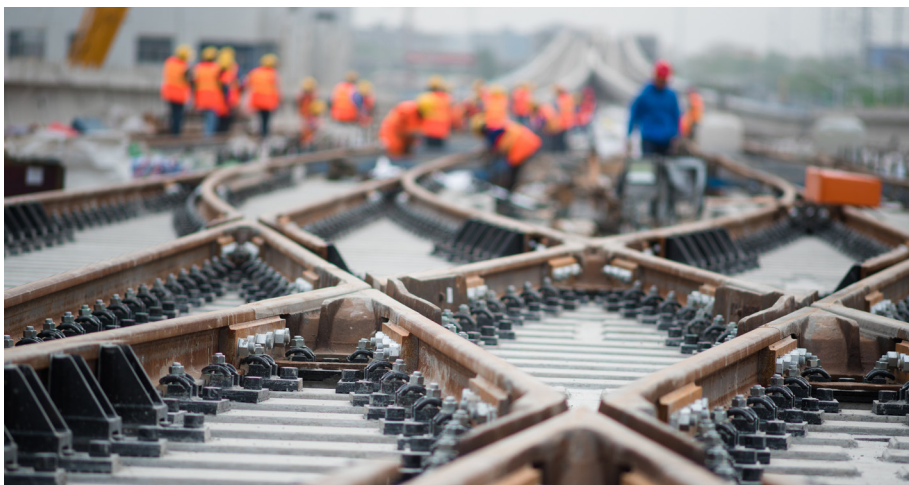
the rules are followed, everyone plays a part in better, safer and more effective working.

A Maintenance Delivery Manager said: 'Making the workplace safe isn't just down to one person—it's about all of us looking out for each other. We need to be willing to speak up and hold each other accountable, even if it means a difficult, uncomfortable conversation. The stakes are high. Potential consequences of safety breaches, such as fatalities or legal accountability highlight the importance of this collective responsibility. That's why we need to create a culture where safety is everyone's top priority.'

The OPC offers various training programmes designed to help improve safety performance. Among these are Non-Technical Skills training, a Back-to-Basics workshop and an Accelerate Your Safety Leadership (AYSL) workshop. The AYSL initiative helps safety leaders to critically examine their operational safety behaviours from a legal perspective; explore safety culture and leadership, and provides an opportunity to improve personal and organisational safety-critical responsibilities and leadership.

Laura concluded: 'In the realm of safety, risk awareness and sticking to the basics go hand-in-hand. Achieving the best safety standards isn't just about following the rules

and completing training; it's also a collective commitment to personal responsibility and having the courage to speak up when needed. It's about taking personal responsibility, displaying courage, and consistently choosing the path of diligence over convenience. Safety is everyone's job. Ignoring it has serious consequences. It isn't just a legal obligation – it's a moral imperative.' RP

the **occupational psychology** centre

Contact the friendly OPC team if you think your employees need some support getting back to the basics of safety.

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