



Health and safety is about planning together, not the paperwork

Turning down work for a major company because “their health and safety requirements looked too arduous” led to major changes for Coughlan Construction.

“We had a health and safety programme but that got me thinking ‘why do we think this is so difficult – do we need to lift our game?’” said Patrick Coughlan, co-owner of the Christchurch-based house-building and alterations company.

That began a journey to a new system Patrick is now confident to present to any client – and which has also reaped significant productivity gains.

Coughlan’s 14 workers, plus sub-contractors, are now engaged in identifying and managing risks through daily planning processes – including morning ‘tailgate talks’ and a whiteboard system for sharing information.

The company’s key risks include vehicles and machinery, working at heights, confined spaces, construction dust, tools, power, and slips and trips.

“Previously we used a contractor management system that ticked the boxes but there was no real interaction with our guys,” said Patrick.

“Our guys really see the benefit. They know what’s happening, and plan for it.”

“Stuff wasn’t getting done because there were too many bits of paper.

“Our guys still weren’t really getting what health and safety meant for them.

“We realised we also needed better communication, so started asking them directly how they would assess risks and how they would address them on site. That led to a lot more interaction and the tailgate talks.

“First thing every morning, we get everyone together to talk through what needs to happen for the day, who’s doing what and what needs to be done to complete it safely and to a high quality standard.



We encourage any contractors on site that day to take part too, so we're all on the same page and have all the right information in the mix.

"The approach is 'come on boys, this is what we're working on today, what will be happening, what do we need and what do we need to do – like keep routes clear?' That might be common sense to one person but not to the next. It's designed to encourage input from everyone.

"People pipe up, ask questions and make suggestions. My mantra is 'you don't know what you don't know' and there's no such thing as a stupid question. Some people will know what you mean by 'a clear access way' others might not, especially if they are new.

"Everything goes on the whiteboard – tasks, people involved, steps and checks required and any further actions. People add to it during the day. It reinforces what everyone's role is in getting work done in a healthy and safe way. And it's simple and relevant, because it is built-in to our usual planning.

"Our guys really see the benefit. They know what's happening. If the roofers are coming in and that area's going to be isolated, they know to plan for that. It reduces downtime and helps productivity."

Patrick says the beauty of the whiteboard system is that it's simple, with no paperwork. He can take a photo of the whiteboard each day as a record of all the planning, and share it with others as needed.

Suggestions for improvement are followed up as a team. Following the 22 February 2011 earthquake, workers raised concerns about the safety of underfloor work. Patrick and a number of workers met to look at the risks and options, and updated the policy around access points together.

Patrick says feedback from Coughlan's health and safety representative (HSR) is that as well as playing their part in health and safety, everyone now has a better understanding of what's happening on site.

"People raise things with him and it's one more way of making sure that everyone has a voice. It's great for management too. We can say from the office that everything looks like good health and safety, but having someone at the grass roots gives us more feedback and a true reflection of what is actually happening.

"This has been really good for everyone. We all recognise that effective health and safety risk management and worker engagement isn't difficult, it's just part of being a professional and efficient business."

WORKER ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

The best outcomes are achieved when a business and its workers work together on health and safety. Worker Engagement and Participation is about having planned ways for:

- > workers to give input on issues which will (or are likely to) affect their health or safety. This includes asking for and taking into account their views and
- > workers to improve work health and safety on an ongoing basis (eg by raising concerns or suggesting improvements).

This will help you and your business to make better decisions – and keep your people and productivity thriving.

KEY POINTS

Having workers participate in planning means:

- > everyone understands the risks
- > key information and ideas are shared
- > downtime is reduced
- > productivity is improved.

For more examples and information visit [worksafe.govt.nz](https://www.worksafe.govt.nz)
