Bringing health and safety to life

Bonnie Cheuk details how ERM is optimising its next-generation health and safety programme – using the intranet, ‘Minerva’, as a platform and collaborative Web 2.0 tools to build success.

Web 2.0 technologies are opening up new possibilities to enable your health and safety programmes to come alive. By incorporating two-way communication tools and user-generated content on their intranet sites, organisations can give employees more ownership over such programmes. Web 2.0 can also help environmental health and safety (EHS) managers go beyond the notion that safety programmes are solely about checklists and procedures. Whether you want to communicate about swine flu, new policies or reports, an interactive intranet can help EHS directors transform your ‘corporate speak’ into something ‘sticky’ and memorable to all employees. The key is to allow people to reflect and make sense of safety issues, through open and genuine online dialogue.

Taking safety programmes to another level

Organisations increasingly need to demonstrate their commitment to sound EHS practice to the relevant audiences. While many companies have safety programmes in place, these can become dry, ‘corporate’ and unimaginative over time. Compliance-driven safety processes are a critical part of any programme but they can be seen as top-down, bureaucratic and unimaginative.

If the safety programme is ultimately about ensuring all employees (as well as contractors, partners, stakeholders and the public) are safe, then the EHS director should be asking: ‘Where is the human touch?’ They should seek to establish how better to engage and communicate with employees to take the programme to the next level – and ask whether or not Web 2.0 technologies could open up new possibilities?

This article draws on Environmental Resources Management’s (ERM’s) own experience in adopting Web 2.0 features on its award-winning intranet platform, ‘Minerva’, which has helped move its safety programme into the next generation.

Bringing face-to-face safety rituals online

Prior to the introduction of the interactive global intranet, employee communications about the safety programme had always been one-way. This included regular news updates in the company newsletter, which informed staff of any safety issues along with any steps they should take.

The safety intranet site, where all safety policy and documentation was stored, was centrally managed by the EHS director. Although face-to-face meetings and training were organised in selected offices, the EHS director was unable to engage with all employees. Despite good intentions, his communication reach was limited at a time when global discussion was critical.

As ERM became more global, the need to engage with a larger group of geographically dispersed employees became more essential. In January 2008, ERM began its journey to fully leverage the power of a newly launched interactive intranet (Minerva) to provide new opportunities to engage with staff in addition to the traditional communication channels, and to enable them to co-create the next level of safety culture.

The first initiative was to bring our strong face-to-face safety culture online. At ERM, all face-to-face meetings start with a ‘safety moment’, where a member of staff will stand up and share a recent safety issue and any learning points. This ritual has been taken online by establishing a safety moment on the Minerva homepage. The update uses blog technology and is accessible from a link on the homepage, where users can access the
latest post. It is updated on a weekly basis and links to a blog posting – some posts embed video or podcast – which everyone can comment on and use to share their experiences on a safety topic. This helps to prevent similar accidents from reoccurring. Each week, a colleague from a different part of the world will contribute a safety moment.

The blog talks about real-life safety incidents, ranging from near-miss situations at natural gas facilities, to how good communication can help avoid accidents when driving in bad weather, or checking for insects that bite before embarking on certain tasks. Discussions include lessons learnt and how such situations can be avoided.

Putting the employees in the driving seat

With Web 2.0, the EHS director is no longer the only person who can share best practices or publish safety content on the intranet. Any staff can submit content or comment, tell additional stories and stimulate one another as they share their learning points online.

The safety moment section leads to an area that enables employees to share ideas and tips for keeping everyone safe. The articles are short, simple and straightforward, telling a brief story about incidents that occur. Articles may detail an issue, but do so in a non-accusatory style.

Later in the short article, there is a section entitled ‘What did we learn and how can we prevent this from happening again?’ A bulleted list outlines better safety practices for employees to follow, plus a credit that shows who wrote the article and which office they are based in.

At the end, there is an invitation to share individual safety moments. A call to action here promotes the sharing of ideas and experiences. The sentence reads: Does anyone have a similar situation that you would like to mention for our benefit? Post a reply to this blog post. The Add Comment section offers a Title and Body field for people to write their comments.

Finally, at the end of the post there is a more formal reminder that there is a section of the intranet dedicated to health and safety: Visit the Health and Safety Website (an inline link) on Minerva for guidance. This provides a link to a contact to add a safety moment article. The stories and the online interactivity create the rich context to motivate staff to use the safety systems, forms and policies. They give more personal meaning to the documents, as staff have the chance to reflect on their own experience.

Turning the intranet into an interactive communication channel

The safety intranet site has fully incorporated Web 2.0 features and moved away from a document repository and top-down news channel, to an interactive site that engages with all staff. The intranet is fully embedded in the overall campaign to push ERM’s safety culture to the next level.

The site comes with multimedia channels to deliver regular podcasts and videocasts. It also has an interactive forum to support the global consultation exercise – discussing how we should report and learn from the safety issues. This supplements the face-to-face consultation and provides an online voice for staff (who might not have had the chance to participate in face-to-face meetings). For example, a Swine Flu channel has been set up for updates on the pandemic.

The site utilises tools such as RSS [really simple syndication] feeds to ensure all the latest information from official sources gets published immediately. A monthly, internal alert, summarising all the safety highlights, is also delivered to all employees via ERM’s monthly staff news.

Top tips for EHS professionals

When cost reduction is a reality in times of economic recession, Web 2.0 technologies – if executed correctly – can assist greatly in communicating key messages to a global organisation. They can also help to improve staff engagement. The possibilities are limitless – the clue is to adopt simple, user-friendly, low-cost Web 2.0 technologies that address your safety goals. EHS directors need to consider the following when introducing Web 2.0:

- Web 2.0 requires ‘leadership 2.0’ – companies have reaped the benefits of Web 2.0 only when there has been a willingness to establish a genuine two-way dialogue with all staff. While Web 2.0 enables users to generate content, the safety director and the team need to constantly...
listen, read any suggestions, stories and ideas submitted by staff, and provide feedback and guidance to the employees based on their requirements;

- Collaborate with your IT team – find out what has already been invested in Web 2.0 technologies. Some tools may be available, but people may not know how to use them to address specific business needs;

- Collaborate with your internal communications or corporate affairs team – use all the internal communications channels available to deliver a consistent message to staff. Leverage any ‘traditional’ and interactive communication tools to broaden the communication span beyond your own geographical location;

- Set clear communication objectives – while Web 2.0 tools can open up new possibilities to engage with staff, they must be properly integrated with, and supplemented by, other internal communication channels. EHS managers who are not familiar with blogs, podcasts and RSS technologies need to invest time in learning to understand them and developing appropriate content;

- Web 2.0 performs best when there is a genuine need to promote two-way dialogue with an aim to build a common understanding. EHS directors must prepare for innovative ideas and nice surprises, as well as expect things that are difficult to hear. EHS directors can take this opportunity to demonstrate leadership and a willingness to collaborate with, and learn, from staff;

- Proactively nurture a global EHS manager’s community of practice – an online collaborative space to enable the sharing of ideas, experience, resources and mistakes taken from the rollout of the safety programme;

- Back-up with a sound EHS system to enable your organisation to report safety issues, identify trends, and inform decisions. A well-designed EHS system, supported by an effective communication campaign, will enable safety issues to be discussed, communicated and understood. The insights that can be gained from an EHS system are critical when seeking to stimulate effective online discussion.

**Summary**

ERM believes safety is important to the organisation and our clients, so we have fully embraced our award-winning intranet and utilised Web 2.0 features to roll out our next-generation safety programme. I hope this article has shared our first-hand experience and breakthrough thinking with you, in the same way as we have helped companies implement global EHS systems and safety programmes worldwide – delivering benefits in reputation management, reduced cost, and satisfied staff.

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