Health and safety in a changing world

IOSH research programme – call for proposals

IOSH is the Chartered body for health and safety professionals. With more than 38,000 members, it is the largest professional health and safety organisation in the world. IOSH was founded in 1945 and was granted a Royal Charter in 2002. Three years later it began to award Chartered Safety and Health Practitioner status to recognise individual professionalism and a commitment to ongoing learning and development. IOSH is a registered charity with the aim of improving health and safety at work, and supporting the health and safety professionals who are dedicated to reducing accidents and ill health.

Background

As a leading international health and safety body, IOSH is working to:

- make sure that people are at the heart of safety and health
- be the definitive voice for health and safety at work
- advance high professional standards
- champion pragmatic risk management, based on professional advice
- sponsor research and share knowledge
- support its members as leaders in safety and health in their communities and workplaces
- promote the benefits of good workplace health and safety.

In support of these objectives, IOSH set a research budget in 2004, with a first round of projects commissioned in 2005. This initiative was reviewed in 2008, leading to a strategic decision to reserve some of these resources to fund a more integrated research programme that would promote a closer relationship between researchers and other stakeholders and enhance the work’s impact. A total of £1.5 million will be available over five years. In June 2010, IOSH appointed Professor Robert Dingwall as Programme Director to manage the commissioning and oversee the projects.

The programme

Occupational safety and health (OSH) is the product of an increasingly complex institutional system, with both national and international dimensions. Much of the current structure in the UK is still based on assumptions about large corporations dealing with large unionised workforces, operating mainly within a national context. Health and safety practitioners are characterised as advisers on the interpretation and application of rules and the development of processes to achieve compliance with regulatory obligations.

However, the organisation of industry has become increasingly decentralised and networked, which has led to complex international chains of accountability that are not easily managed by traditional approaches. In parallel, in the public arena, there has been an apparent growth in misplaced fear of litigation for personal injury in the UK, fuelled by negative media stories and advertisements from claims management companies. This has led in turn to media reports of over-caution in public safety matters and criticism of a lack of a common-sense perspective from those involved.

Health and safety professionals are obviously concerned that this type of negativity should not taint public attitudes to serious workplace health and safety issues. The intended outcome – a safe and healthy working environment – may be compromised unless new approaches are developed. Although Lord Young’s recent report dismissed some of the more exaggerated claims about the impact of litigation and OSH regulation, IOSH is still concerned to promote a better professional and public understanding of the changing world of work and the future role of its members within this. New thinking is required to develop methods of achieving OSH goals that emphasise the individual and economic benefits, are sensitive to increasingly diverse working environments, and are acceptable to society at large.

This research programme therefore seeks to map the new landscape of OSH and to explore its implications for reconciling contributions to economic success and wealth creation with effective protection to workers, their families and their communities. Within this, the projects will give particular consideration to the role that might be played by OSH practitioners, bearing in mind that their role must be understood as part of the governance networks that shape OSH outcomes, rather than being seen in isolation.
Given resource constraints, the programme will also focus on the UK, although all projects are encouraged to take account of publications describing and analysing the experience of other countries dealing with the same social and economic changes. We also encourage them to consider what lessons can be learned from the experience of other fields, such as environmental hazard regulation, in adapting to the same social and economic changes.

We will encourage participation in the programme from a wide range of academic backgrounds. Previous work in this specific area is not a prerequisite, although all bidders will be expected to demonstrate their record and to show how their experience will bring innovative perspectives to the study of OSH policy and practice.

Projects
We envisage that approximately half the budget will be committed now to projects lasting two or three years. With limited funds, we’re unable to support full overheads, but we will look sympathetically at well-justified requests for directly allocated support costs. A further round of commissioning is likely to take place in 2012/13, reflecting experience with the first phase of the programme. You should bear in mind that, as a condition of funding, you will be expected to participate in workshops and other events arranged by the Programme Director and the IOSH research team, and to co-operate with dissemination strategies developed by the IOSH communications team. Workshop costs will be met by the programme centrally and do not need to be included in project budgets. A first workshop will be held about six months after funding starts and subsequent workshops will be held annually.

Proposals are invited for projects on the topics outlined below.

OSH knowledge and its management
This project will have two elements. Proposers must bid for the first part and may wish to indicate how they would address the second. Depending on the proposals received, we may either fund the whole as a project lasting up to three years (indicative budget £250,000–£300,000) or as one lasting between six and nine months (indicative budget £35,000–£50,000) with an opportunity to bid for follow-on support.

Part 1: Is there a coherent knowledge base for OSH interventions?
This will be a literature-based study. It does not need to take the technical form of a systematic review, but would be expected to review the knowledge landscape potentially relevant to OSH practice, to identify its main components and to ask whether they can be assembled in an organised fashion as a basis for use by participants in the OSH system, such as enterprise managers, worker representatives, OSH practitioners or civil society groups.

This study will draw on previous IOSH research, the IOSH research database and the wider academic and grey literature to map the resources available to those working in the system and the extent to which participants would have ready access to them. It will consider the impact of what is known about knowledge transfer or technology transfer from studies in other domains for the movement of knowledge within OSH networks.

This component will be the subject of an initial report to IOSH within 12 months of commissioning for publication by IOSH.

Part 2: How is knowledge currently used in OSH practice and how could this be improved?
This will be an empirical study that explores the movement of knowledge into the practice of different participants in the OSH system. How do the various actors engage with OSH challenges and what evidence do they use to help with this? How do they decide what counts as valid knowledge? How is this knowledge distributed? What facilitates or obstructs knowledge flows to different actors? What contribution do OSH practitioners make to developing new knowledge for their own or general use? How is knowledge used to negotiate outcomes or trade-offs between the goals of different actors, particularly those related to enterprise success or profitability, in ways that promote or impede positive OSH outcomes?

We anticipate that this study will build on the preliminary review to explore the ecology of occupational and other groups involved in OSH issues, to examine their interrelationships and to identify areas of possible improvement. It may investigate competing definitions of risk and consider how disagreements or conflicts are resolved, and the extent to which this is based on appeals to evidence or to compliance with rules.

Proposers should particularly consider the appropriateness of professionalising strategies in the OSH system and the relevance of traditional models of professions and the power derived from their relationship to expert knowledge in contrast with more recent models that have stressed technical expertise rather than generalised authority. Proposals should consider the role of non-professional actors and the challenges of exercising professional influence in the restructured work environment.

The balance between public and private sources of OSH regulation
An important part of the changing landscape of regulation has been the professed goal of moving away from detailed regulation by public agencies, such as the HSE, in order to create more space for creative problem-solving by enterprises. While society still expects OSH outcomes not to be compromised, participants in the system are supposedly being given more space to develop their own locally adapted strategies for achieving these outcomes. It might, however, be argued that the result has been to create a vacuum that has actually been filled by various private interests, whose influences may be less visible but no less constraining of adaptive behaviour, particularly for SMEs with limited capacity to negotiate or shop around.

The problems created for local actors may then be harder to address, precisely because private bodies may be harder to call publicly to account for their actions. Insurers have been identified in some contexts as filling this role, with their policy requirements expanding on or ‘gold-plating’ OSH regulation. Standard-setting bodies may also take on this role, particularly where purchasers require compliance with their protocols as a condition of participation in a supply chain. Some NGOs may also use threats of litigation or reputational damage to similar effect. Although trade unions
and collective agreements are probably less significant than they were in the past, projects should also recognise their potential influences on working practices.

There may be a particular role for international comparisons, although it is not expected that international fieldwork will be funded.

The project will investigate the sources of authority in the changing OSH landscape and whether actors are indeed being granted space to devise locally relevant strategies for achieving OSH goals or are simply finding themselves constrained in different ways. What are the external constraints that need to be managed by actors in local OSH systems and how are they changing with the industrial structure?

It is anticipated that this will be a two-year project with an indicative budget of £200,000–£250,000.

The local impact of the changing safety and health system
This project will focus on the management of OSH issues in organisations participating in networked systems of production or service delivery. Many of these will be SMEs but this is not a prerequisite for a choice of cases. However, proposers may wish to consider a comparison between sectors like construction, where networked forms of organisation involving subcontractors and agency workers have a long history, and those which are relatively new to this method of working, such as the railway industry.

The focus of the study is on understanding who does what about OSH issues on the basis of what evidence – and on how these various activities collectively generate a particular set of OSH outcomes. In some respects, this project is a mirror image of the project on public and private regulation – in other words, it asks what people do within these external constraints rather than how the constraints are generated.

The team may wish to approach this through a focus on risk, by considering how local actors define this and how they balance the risk of adverse OSH events against the risks of lost production, failure to meet contractual requirements or reputational damage, whether externally or within the production network. Bidders may also wish to consider the capacity of these local systems to deal with a more creative approach to OSH challenges, and to ask whether they are in effect protesting against public regulation but mechanically turning to private substitutes rather than taking advantage of greater flexibility.

It is anticipated that this will be a two-year project with an indicative budget of £200,000–£250,000.

Other opportunities
IOSH is also interested in opportunities to support CASE awards for PhD students in partnership with university departments recognised by relevant research councils for that purpose. Proposals should fall within the general scope of the programme and students will be expected to participate in programme events. Proposers may choose to link CASE awards to projects funded under the programme but this is not a prerequisite. Please contact the Programme Director for more information.

Outcomes and deliverables
Projects will be expected both to achieve agreed outcomes and deliverables in their own right and to contribute to the overall programme’s outcomes and deliverables. Proposals should refer to the following expected deliverables, together with any others that applicants may wish to propose in order to enhance the impact of their work:

- an end-of-project report in a format suitable for publication by IOSH
- participation in dissemination events organised by IOSH, such as workshops, conferences or policy briefings for key stakeholders
- co-operation with IOSH press and media activities to promote awareness of the programme and its contributions
- presentations on the project at academic and professional meetings relevant to the applicant – funding can be included in the bid for some of these
- peer-reviewed papers in academic journals
- a contribution to an edited programme book, if one is contracted with a publisher.

Application process
Please apply using the form at www.iosh.co.uk/researchprog.aspx. The process will be in one stage, and we must receive your proposal by 07 February 2011. You may be interested in attending a briefing meeting to be organised in Birmingham on 10 January 2011, although you do not have to attend this in order to submit a proposal. For more information about this event, please contact Alka Joshi at IOSH (email alka.joshi@iosh.co.uk), who will also be able to reserve places. Please make further enquiries about the programme itself by email to the Programme Director, Professor Robert Dingwall, at robert.dingwall@ntlworld.com. Anonymised copies of questions and responses will be posted on the programme website for the information of all potential applicants.