

To err is human

It is encouraging to witness the current focus on the “human element” in shipping. After a considerable period of regulation and progress in technical innovation and sophistication the industry appears to have recognised that it is the people that are important and that they have an almost limitless potential to get things wrong; accident analysis repeatedly confirms that this is so. I recall a notice that hung above a Captain’s desk, which said something like:

To err is human

And then underneath

The sea is totally unforgiving of human error

This is the environment in which seafarers operate; one where they are going to make mistakes (we are only human after all) and where those mistakes are not likely to be forgiven. In the past it was thought by some that human error could be regulated and/or designed out, but now it is clear that the emphasis should be on accommodating the humans by creating environments where they are less likely to err and where, when they do, the range of negative outcomes are limited or flagged in sufficient time to allow remedial steps to be taken.

In order to create these environments it is essential to gain a thorough understanding of how humans interact with their environment, equipment, regulations and procedures and other humans and this is a major challenge which now faces the industry. Where is this information going to come from? Accident and incident investigations could be a major source of data, but we all know that Flag State performance in this respect varies greatly and there may be little or no human element analysis. Those involved in safety management will testify how difficult it is to obtain “near-miss” reports, although we all know how useful they can be in promoting safety and analysing the human element.

Given the relative paucity of information, it must surely be important to ensure that the information available is collected and analysed using compatible or comparable tools. In this respect the adoption of a common taxonomy across the industry is not just desirable, but essential, if the industry is not to risk acting on insufficient or conflicting information. Might it not also be worth considering whether comparable transport modes have anything to offer us in our quest for better understanding of the human element; aviation, for example, has a wealth of expertise in this area and a well developed taxonomy, which might be easily adapted for maritime use?

With a relatively small amount of legacy data to deal with, the maritime industry has a golden opportunity to adopt a common taxonomy which will make the best use of the data available and permit comparison with other transport modes. It is imperative that this opportunity is not discarded too

readily by permitting an industry wide enthusiasm for the subject to result in a plethora of systems which are not compatible or comparable. There is a clear need for co-ordination and focussing of effort if the best results are to be achieved.

Note: The CHIRP Charitable Trust operates confidential human factors reporting programmes for the UK aviation and maritime industries - www.chirp.co.uk.

Michael Powell
Director (Maritime)
CHIRP
UK Confidential Hazardous Incident Reporting Programme
Building Y20E, Room G15
Cody Technology Park
Ively Road
Farnborough
Hampshire
GU14 0LX
UK

Tel: +44 (0) 1252 393348
Fax: +44 (0) 1252 394290