



THIS IS YOUR PILOT SPEAKING...

A leading figure in safety academia, Professor Sidney Dekker is also a qualified airline pilot. Ahead of his speech at IOSH 2014, he talks to **Nick Warburton**

Safety professionals attending this month's IOSH conference may decide to revise their thinking after hearing Professor Sidney Dekker's presentation on the first day.

The Brisbane-based, Dutch academic will undoubtedly offer some food for thought when he poses the rhetorical question – is there still a future in the idea that safety is the absence of negative events, or should we reaffirm our responsibility for the resilience and presence of positive capacities in people?

It's a philosophical statement and one that strikes at the heart of health and safety practice. Unpalatable as it may be to some

in the industry, the professor from Griffith University near Australia's Gold Coast, argues that the post-war period has seen the increasing bureaucratisation of safety. It is not a healthy trend, he argues.

In a nutshell, Dekker has observed an increasing move towards measuring safety performance through bureaucratic accountability rather than strive to achieve high safety standards because it is an organisation's ethical responsibility.

"Bureaucratic accountability up means that we are concerned with making those above convinced that our numbers are looking good enough to contract us again, to leave us alone, to give us a bonus, to not

regulate us very severely, to not have any other interventions," he explains.

"Safety as an ethical responsibility down would mean that our focus is really for the people who do the dangerous and dirty work for us every day and that our concern is less with the numbers and more about their lack of harm."

Dekker identifies two contributing factors that have led to an obsession with fixed rules and a situation in which safety has become the domain of those who are far removed from the sharp end of safety critical work.

The first is the vast increase in regulation during the post-war period, which in turn has prompted more bureaucratic responses ▶

from those being regulated.

“They need to supply numbers and incident data, all kinds of other compliance documentation for which in turn they need a department or function that takes care of these things,” he says.

The second factor is a move towards contract work, a trend that has accelerated over the past few decades and is heavy on paperwork.

“It seems as if bureaucratically organising is one of the typical ways in which organisations deal with the increasing complexity of keeping track of these networks of contractors,” he explains.

“When you look at the way we have configured accountability relationships in which we ask contractors to show us that they are safe, in which we have regulatory relationships, we sometimes seem more concerned with making numbers look good.”

Injury management

This is where injury management comes in; where organisations manipulate the figures so that safety performance is seen in a much more positive light.

“It’s where we put somebody who breaks a leg and is on a hospital bed on light duties by giving them an I-pad to work on so that at least it’s not a lost-time injury,” he explains.

“It’s that sort of trickery of the numbers if you will, that I think is a direct consequence

much harder to quantify. Even so, Dekker thinks that the industry should see this as an advantage.

“The reason being is that as soon as we start quantifying things and attaching consequences to the levels of those numbers, we create new kinds of lagging and indicators that can be manipulated,” he warns.

“If we attach incentives to showing low levels of negatives, then that is exactly what we’ll show each other, however we achieve them. I think it goes beyond self-delusion or almost ethical fraud. In the industry, I think it actively works against safety.”

Dekker argues that there is empirical evidence to show that construction sites with more incidents have a lower fatality risk.

“In other words, those sites which are more open and honest about the incidents they have, have a lower fatality risk for their workers. To me, that is critical data. If we do everything to suppress bad news, evidence of injuries...we are not learning.”

A prolific writer on safety issues; his books include *Behind Human Error*, *Drift into Failure* and *Just Culture*; Dekker offers a few suggestions to improve safety culture.

One is that businesses could make it an organisational policy that procedures and work method statements will only be signed off by those that actually do the work.

It would be far better, he argues, if organisations brought together a key group of safety practitioners or operators who are tasked with working with the procedures and leave it to them to identify the most salient points.

“Tell them not to have more than one page per procedure and tell them not to have sentences longer than ten words,” he urges. “Then, they can run it through some quality control processes to see whether it’s all legal. But have the basis made by those who do the work every day.”

Dekker also suggests that site and safety managers should be more mobile so that they are on the front-line more often and observe what is happening at the sharp end.

“I think it goes beyond safety managers,” he bemoans. “Even front-line supervision gets increasingly wrapped up in bureaucratic accountability requirements in terms of filling in their Excel sheets, making sure everything looks good when they report up. Even they get seen less on-site.”

Dekker does, however, add a word of caution and stresses that visibility should not be treated as another indicator. If it is, there is a danger managers will turn up on-site to meet this target but they won’t be any more effective.

“I think it’s more a matter of who you recruit to be your leader and to be acutely sensitive to the bureaucratic accountability demands that you put on these people; knowing where you really want them is out on-site managing the people they are responsible for rather than being in an office managing those processes they are accountable for.”

From his experience working with the oil and gas and construction sectors in North America, Europe and Australia, Dekker believes passionately that pursuing the former approach will create a climate in which the boss can hear bad news and take steps to prevent more serious incidents from happening.

As an academic, the professor spends much of his time analysing data and charting historical trends. Over the past few decades, there has been an explosion in safety literature and one area that has aroused his ire is the hindsight bias that sits behind the criticism of human error.

“We can point to the data that was critical and if only the individual had seen it, then it would have happened. It’s easy for us

“Dekker also suggests that site and safety managers should be more mobile so that they are on the front-line more often and observe what is happening at the sharp end”

of this counting and obsession with negative events as the indicator for safety being the main currency for how we relate to incidents of safety.”

While he stresses that the industry cannot do without these negative counts, he feels that a much more constructive and progressive conversation is needed whereby these indicators are complemented with positive ones.

This could be more interactive induction training or toolbox talks that measure the amount of time workers spend in conversation, “collaboratively solving problems for that day” and which are “directly related to injury risk”.

The problem with positive indicators, he adds, as a word of a caution, is that they are

A common feature of bureaucratically organising safety is that individuals who get to say how work gets done usually don’t have to follow the written policies in place.

Fantasy documents

Consequently, organisations create “fantasy documents” that bear “very little resemblance to how work is done and very little sensitivity to the messy details of contextual variation”.

All too often, the business will end up with “30-page liability management document that also contains some training, some insurance provisions and a little bit of procedure,” he adds. “But it does little to really help the person that has to do that work.”

Professor Dekker (*inset*) works at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia (*right*) and is a headline speaker at IOSH 2014



because we know the outcome, the full extent of the situation,” he explains.

“What we need to understand is what is the whole set of goal conflicts and attentional demands and knowledge factors that make it makes sense for people to do these ‘in hindsight’ stupid things.”

Dekker became a professor at 34 but admits that the achievement left him “existentially threatened” by the thought, “Oh, my god what do I do now?”

His response was to train as an airline pilot and to fly Boeing 737s part time for an airline before it went bankrupt. It’s improbable, with his current schedule, that he will ever return to the cockpit but how does he feel trading the campus for the skies has shaped his views on safety?

“The flying has given me a much more acute sense of the ethical responsibility of taking 189 lives literally in your own hands,” he confides. “It’s a whole different ball game than just blabbing about it.”

Interestingly, he admits that becoming a pilot has shown sides of him that he is alternately proud of and less proud of.

“Given what I’ve read and written in this

“Dekker argues that it’s impossible to be compliant and innovative at the same time. ‘It’s a contradiction in terms’, he insists. ‘In order to be innovative you have to be non-compliant.’”

field, I always thought that I would have some special insights that would allow me to, for example, intervene when I see a captain do something stupid. But ‘no’, I was not thus privileged over any other co-pilot configured in the same situation with the same lack of experience and assertiveness. That was very, very revealing.”

Dekker does feel, however, that his intellectual impatience has given him no choice other than to think “outside the box” and to be “non-compliant as a rule”. He argues that it’s impossible to be compliant and innovative at the same time.

“It’s a contradiction in terms,” he insists. “In order to be innovative, you have to be non-compliant. Having seen how these things work out in a variety of domains and being able to test skills, and being held to all kinds of standards where all of a sudden completely different rules and standards of perfection and professionalism count,

has given me a perhaps democratic or open mind-set about what counts as compliance, standards, perfection and professionalism.”

With IOSH 2014 only weeks away, Dekker confides that he has no intention of turning up and imposing his safety views on the audience. He stresses that there are no easy, right or wrong answers.

“I think the intentions everybody brings are right intentions. We want to make it safe; we don’t want to hurt people,” he argues.

“But in order to make progress, and I think we need to because we are not progressing safety as much as we once were – the curve is flattening in all kinds of fields – we have to think differently and to do that we have got to look at some scared cows.” ■

Sidney Dekker will be speaking from 12.30-1.00 at the IOSH conference, at ExCeL London on 17 June.

Visit: www.ioshconference.co.uk