

CIF Health and Safety Summit

Construction safety standards evolving to ensure workers’ mental wellbeing

Safety in construction has evolved well beyond the physical environment, with mental, social and emotional wellbeing key

QUINTON O'REILLY

With the latest Construction Industry Federation (CIF) Health and Safety Summit underway, those attending Croke Park on Thursday, May 1 saw over 30 experts speaking, discussing or running roundtables.

With the focus of the day's summit on developing solid foundations to drive a positive health, safety and wellbeing culture, the day explored how these factors are intertwined with physical safety.

The summit chair, Jonathan Healy, broadcaster at Newstalk, welcomed the room and wasted no time getting the ball rolling, commenting on the rapid advancement of technology in modern industries.

Frank Kelly, chairman of the health & safety committee at CIF, began proceedings with his address to the room, saying, "In a sector that is defined by progress and precision, nothing is more vital than the safety of our people on site.

"Today is about recognising that unwavering commitment from members and setting the highest standards, sharing the best practice and driving a culture so that safety in construction is never compromised," he added.

The summit started with the keynote address on the three Cs: coordination, cooperation, and communication.

Jim Leahy, technical director of health and safety at RPS, mentioned how these qualities are already incorporated into legislation in some form, and the three Cs are intertwined. If one breaks down, so too do the others.

"One point I would make here is that good communication is important," he said. "If you're dealing with contractual issues all the time, that limits you and stops you from talking to people. If you're using a poor tone, if the information is never-ending, if we're always giving out about something and pointing out flaws, this can sign a lack of cooperation – and lack of cooperation means the coordination breaks down and impacts the safety culture across the whole team.

"It's a balancing act. We're all involved in building, and we need to be responsible in our communications among each other."

The day's first panel discussion analysed the role of design in driving a safety culture.

Panelists included Neil Lenehan, environmental health and safety director at Cairn; Sinead Gaines, environmental health and safety manager at PJ Hegarty; Tim Dowling, senior inspector at HSA; and Brian Kavanagh, chairperson and director at Garland.



Padraig Reilly, founder and chief executive, Boxcore; Sean Downey, director, health & safety, education, training & skills, CIF; Joan Flynn, senior inspector, construction inspection and policy, HSA; Andrew Delahunt, global business manager, Equipment Safety Systems (EQSS); Sarah Miley, principal officer, construction and green skills unit, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; and Tim Dowling, senior inspector, HSA



Mike McLoughlin, associate director, health, safety and sustainability, John Paul Construction; Padraig Reilly, chief executive and founder, Boxcore; Rheelyn Mugri, director of communications, Women in AI Ireland; and Mark Madigan, group head of safety, health and environment, ESB

When asked about the importance of workflow, Gaines mentioned how such collaboration between design teams and construction teams is improving and the more work done in the pre-construction phase, the greater the benefits for everyone.

"Pre-construction is time bought and time saved, and it will save you on site whether it's pre-fabrication or any design element. Getting [designers] involved is key," she said.

"Only a designer can design a solution, so collaboration is key, and everybody wins; safety wins, quality wins, and the programme wins."

The next presentation, which focused on construction from a height and the need for collective accountability, tied into this. Joan Flynn, senior inspector in construction inspection and policy for the HSA, spoke about the importance of designing safety at the early stages.

Echoing Leahy's comments about the Project Supervisor Design Process (PSDP), she stressed the importance of bringing safety into the design stage as early as possible to help mitigate risks.

"The goal of the strategy is that we can all return home from work, return to your families... That is what we're looking for," she concluded.

The focus shifted to positive mental health, beginning with a panel discussion on preventing and managing psychosocial risks in the workplace.

Brian Shanks, partnership manager at The Lighthouse Club; Dr Noel Richardson, senior lecturer in the Department of Health and Sport Sciences at South East Technological University (SETU); and Grainne Kelly, researcher for Atlantic Technological University (ATU), joined Healy on stage to discuss this.

Kelly stressed the importance of backing up supporting psychosocial initiatives with action,

adding: "If you say you support mental health and support wellbeing initiatives, then you need to prove it, support it, and back it," she said. "Once workers see that supervision is really backing it, they start to open up."

Before the coffee break were three spotlight talks. The first was on competency in education and training delivered by Sarah Miley, principal officer for the Construction and Green Skills Unit at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

The second was on CIRI, the statutory register for providers of building works in Ireland, which Sarah Ingle, registrar at the Construction Industry Register Ireland (CIRI), discussed.

The final one was on building a better workplace through diversity and inclusion, presented by Paula Voiseux, senior business partner for HR, talent acquisition, and ED&I at Glenveagh.

Creating the environment for strong mental health

After the networking coffee break, it was time to focus on future technologies coming down the road.

Jeppe Ajslev, senior researcher at the National Research Centre for Working Environment in Denmark, kicked things off with an international keynote address on the impact and dilemmas of AI and other tech on construction safety.

Ajslev observed that throughout their research on emerging technologies in construction, none of the professionals interviewed mentioned technologies whenever they discussed core

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Jim Leahy, technical director, health & safety, RPS



competencies.

Part of it concerns the lack of knowledge and understanding of emerging technologies like drones and AI. He also suggested developing standards and common frameworks for both the productive and ethical use of technology.

"What we suggest is to implement some ideas from our framework... to make sure the organisation has some standards and general practices considering these technologies," he said. "[Answering questions like] what we do, how we handle it and what we address within the organisation."

Building upon this was a panel discussion on the latest solutions and embracing future technology to enhance productivity and safety.

Mark Madigan, group head of safety, health and environment, ESB; Mike McLoughlin, associate director of health, safety, and sustainability at John Paul Construction; Padraig Reilly, founder and chief executive of Boxcore; and Rheelyn Mugri, director of communications for Women in AI Ireland, took the stage to discuss this.

Reilly was optimistic about how transformative AI can be but stated it will take work, saying: "At a point in the future, there will be a way in which you can greatly reduce the incidents that happen based on this running model over data."

"But things like Chat GPT are built on massive amounts of data gathered over years and years, so really the short-term problem is how do you efficiently collect this data in a structured way sufficiently?"

With lunchtime soon approaching, there was



Jeppe Ajslev, senior researcher, National Research Centre for Working Environment, Denmark



Brian Kavanagh, chairperson and director, Garland; Tim Dowling, senior inspector, HSA; Sinead Gaines, environmental health and safety manager, PJ Hegarty; and Neil Lenehan, environmental health and safety director, Cairn

time for two more sessions. The first was a keynote address from Dr Shaun Lundy, vice president for the Institution of Occupational, Safety & Health, who discussed the process of building and managing a psychosocially resilient and sustainable workforce.

Dr Lundy said that such measures weren't about preventing harm but about allowing professionals to deal with the issue meaningfully.

"[IOSH's position] is advocating a prevention-first approach to hazards here. It's about trying to be people-focused, listening to them and creating the right culture," he added.

The final session before lunch was a panel discussion on promoting better occupational health and hygiene among construction workers.

Here to discuss it was Alison Gilliland, general manager for the Construction Workers Health Trust and the Construction Workers Benevolent Fund; Barbara McGrogan, cancer research scientist for the National Cancer Control Programme at HSE; Biddy O'Neill, national policy lead at Department of Health; and Shara Smith, honorary president for Occupational Hygiene Society of Ireland (OHSI).

When asked how difficult it was to convince workers to take health screenings, Gilliland said there wasn't much of a problem doing so as the work on the ground is done.

"We work very closely with the health and safety officers [on this]," she said. "It's during your work time; we're a presence on site... we very much emphasise that this is a benefit your employer is putting on, it's completely confidential, and it's free."

"If there's a problem on the day of your appointment, we're very flexible because we understand the work of construction workers, and it works really well."

Advocates for change

With lunch out of the way, it was time for the roundtable discussions, which focused on experts moderating group discussions.

The first roundtable discussed how best to collaborate effectively on health and safety. Alan Morrissey, health and safety manager at Uisce Éireann, and Sean Mannion, safety, health, environment, and quality manager at Ward & Burke Construction Ltd, facilitated.

Roundtable two examined ways to make workplaces safer, healthier, and more productive. It was led by Donal O Caoimh, health and safety manager at Gas Networks Ireland, and Gerry Keane, operations director at Walls Construction.

The third roundtable focused on behaviour-based safety, chaired by Eamonn Stapleton, chartered engineer & managing director at Clonmel Enterprises, while roundtable four looked at improving the standards and supervision of the construction supply chains. It was headed by Kevin Cummins, head of health & safety, John Sisk.

The fifth and final roundtable concerned safety at height and how innovation can help protect workers. This table saw Andrew Delahunt, global business manager at Equipment Safety Systems (EQSS), and Damien O'Connor, Irish country manager at IPAF, leading the discussion.

With the roundtables concluded, it was time for closing remarks from Sean Downey, director of health and safety, education, training and skills at CIF, mentioning the room's talent and how the room's engagement showed that the summit is on the right path. He concluded with: "You are the advocates on behalf of all the people in your company, so spread the word far and wide about everything you learnt here."



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Dr Noel Richardson, senior lecturer, Department of Health and Sport Sciences, South East Technological University (SETU); Grainne Kelly, researcher, Atlantic Technological University (ATU); and Brian Shanks, partnership manager, The Lighthouse Club