

On the Right Course

We're all aware that training can help to cut accident rates, but many organisations also discover that skilled, confident staff lead to a slicker, more professional service at a time when squeezed budgets demand more from the frontline. **Carolyn Cross** reports

Last year nine workers in our industry failed to make it home at the end of their shift. The dictionary defines the term "frontline" as "the most active, exposed or dangerous position or role in any activity or situation". We frequently use it to talk about public-facing roles such as receptionists or nurses, but for waste industry operatives working in a sector with the dubious distinction of an accident rate four-times the national average, working on the frontline can be just as dangerous as it sounds.

In August, a waste and recycling firm in Durham was prosecuted after a worker suffered a broken shoulder, fractured toes and broken ribs when hit by a reversing vehicle. Recent statistics show that accidents have fallen this year, but this type of injury is typical of our industry and perhaps not surprising in a complex

environment of moving vehicles, bins or skips – not to mention passing vehicles and members of the public.

What should raise eyebrows, however, is the fact that those taking to the streets to collect refuse or recycling, or involved in sorting and processing facilities, in some cases have received little or no training.

Andy Firman, managing director of AJF Waste Management, which has provided CIWM-accredited training to over 2 000 frontline staff across the UK, describes the situation as anathema: "Our industry must be one of the few in the country that you can walk into without any training at all. New staff can just be given their boots and gloves and told, 'Go with this guy, he'll show you what to do'. The only problem is, no one ever showed the other guy what to do either."

With agency workers commonly

relied on to make up a shortfall in staff numbers, the hazards can become even more acute. "Senior managers often tell me that they don't need training in place because they use agency staff, but we're sending them out into what we all know is an industry with perils on all sides. The fact that they might only be there for a week doesn't make them any more expendable," Andy explained.

With more than 30 years' experience in the industry, Andy has witnessed the effects of flaws in health and safety at first hand. He cites the case of a worker who lost two fingers after failing to hit the emergency stop button on a refuse vehicle and, worse, a fatality resulting from the collapse of a building that had been hit by a vehicle and not reported.

He said: "Attending a coroner's court was horrendous, by far the worst two days of my life. It reinforced my conviction that as an

employer you must do everything you can to protect workers. Equally, if an incident does occur, proof of training can go a long way to safeguarding a business or authority.

"Moving into the future, we are seeing an increasing drive to cut costs, with frontline operatives becoming more and more important. People are looking to make efficiency savings in the back office, while protecting the frontline, which means those operatives really need support and 'upskilling' so they can go out and talk to the public."

Prevention

IT IS clear that the prevention of accidents is the main driver for introducing training to frontline operatives, but those that do invest report wider benefits. When Cheshire East Council – a unitary authority launched in 2009 to combine half of Cheshire County Council and the former boroughs of Macclesfield, Congleton and Crewe and Nantwich – started to roll out a new, authority-wide collection scheme, it worked in partnership with AJF Waste Management to train all 200 frontline staff. Each member of staff has been taken through one day's training, covering safe manual handling techniques and reversing assistant training.

Head of environmental services, Phil Sherratt, said: "With the help of these re-inducted staff, the Council is going to make efficiency savings totalling more than £1m a year. It's going to maximise what goes into recycling rather than landfill and it's also delivering a system that's more customer-orientated and significantly lower risk for staff."

He describes the roll-out of the new scheme across 165 000 households as a unique opportunity to set new benchmarks, while management across other departments are considering the use of the same model for broader re-induction of staff when service transformation takes place.

He added: "Investing in operatives will enhance the Council's reputation and lead to greater customer satisfaction. Waste collection is the most high-profile service the Council provides – people don't see us once a week now, they see us up to twice



Justin Hodges of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council puts operatives through their paces

a week – so we need to invest in the people who are representing Council services to the public."

The philosophy mirrors calls in the Government's Waste Review for England for a "lighter touch" with householders, highlighting approaches such as South Oxfordshire's policy of meeting a wrongly-presented bin with a notice saying "Oops... sorry we couldn't take your waste today".

Phil concludes: "We can try and deal with customers through call centres and email systems but I'm personally convinced that most issues can be resolved immediately and to the satisfaction of both the customer and the council by our frontline staff, as long as they have the confidence to know that we see them as professionals in their game."

In Wales, Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council has opted for a different approach, yet it also subscribes to the view that investing in staff creates a more coherent and efficient workforce.

Alan Reed, chief neighbourhood services officer, said: "We think our staff now feel part of an overall service. They don't just come to work, do their job and go home – they feel more in control of what they do."

Blaenau Gwent services more than 30 000 households, mainly consisting of urban properties. In 2010, it introduced fortnightly collections, boosting its recycling rate from 29 percent to 36 percent. The authority supported Future Jobs Fund trainees, with 100 new employees receiving a specifically-adapted induction training programme

from AJF Waste Management. The authority then built on the success of this to provide training for its 40 permanent street cleansing staff.

Earlier this year, the borough expanded its training regime by funding one of its own staff, foreman Justin Hodges, to be coached as a trainer himself. Using AJF's course material, he has already trained 63 Blaenau Gwent staff members in working with refuse and recycling vehicles and other health and safety features and has also travelled to neighbouring authorities to assist them in developing safer working practices.

Justin highlights the fact that times have changed since he started work for the council on a YTS scheme: "These days, people really need training. There are three times as many vehicles on the road, so the risk of danger has increased enormously. When I started in 1986, there was no training at all really – you were lucky to get a pair of safety boots – but nowadays it's essential."

Alan Reed agrees: "In the industry we all know that there are incidents resulting from activities around waste and as local authorities we need to make sure we have the appropriate systems and training in place. We are evolving new services and it's crucial that the systems we implement are not just sustainable in terms of the environment, but are also sustainable for the health of all those involved in the service." **CIWM**

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