



Keeping the faith

Unite's Mike McCartney tells Brian Wall why yielding to the temptation to cut staffing to the bone could cause your business terminal damage

Downturns are not a new experience for UK industry, of course. They have hit home in the past – and hard. However, the present one is global and, in that sense, unprecedented. As a result, some manufacturers, struggling to sustain their businesses and market share in these challenging times – and even, in some cases, simply to survive the impact of the current crisis – are yielding to the temptation to cut staffing to the bone.

But the message from Unite the Union, sponsor of the 2009 Best Factory Award for Health & Safety, is: do this and your business may suffer irreparable damage. You ignore this at your peril.

“Unfortunately, there has been a tendency for companies to cut back on their workforces, and essential training around health and safety when times get tough, because they see this as a soft option,” says Mike McCartney (pictured), head of the health & safety unit at Unite the Union.

“It has happened in the past and it is happening again, but really this is a very short-sighted and short-term measure. Health and safety is too critical a factor to be treated like that and, if manufacturers start to ease off in that area, there are bound to be serious implications.”

McCartney is quick to point out that this is not about unions trying to impose conditions on employers as to how they run their operations. It is all about working closely together to ensure that health and safety is maintained and adhered to.



“I think a lot of the larger and medium-sized manufacturers do have agreements with the unions and therefore, ipso facto, these have clear health and safety implications attached to them.

“With the smaller companies,” he adds, “this is less likely to be so – when you are running a business that consists of perhaps four to five people, it is understandable. But when it comes to the bigger organisations, we would like them to be involved with a union – and not necessarily Unite, as long as they recognise them.

“People used to speak about a ‘partnership’ between employers and unions some years ago. It was the big word back then and it was all fine, of course, when things were going well economically. But when things go awry, that ethos and philosophy go out the window. So I think it is better to see these relationships in other terms, namely that we should be ‘cohesive’ with one another in achieving the end goals we all seek. And that is security of

employment, the safety of employees and achievement of manufacturing’s goals, which we should be working closely together to attain, particularly now when times are not as good.”

The Best Factory Awards, which Unite the Union has sponsored for the past five years, have been a potent force in helping to ensure that health and safety remains at the top of the agenda. “It’s what sits best with us as an organisation and is such a big issue, so we feel an alliance with the Awards, in terms of health and safety,” adds McCartney. “The BFAs act as a collective force for those companies that enter. They bring their teams together to work as one unit and to present their ideas, which is an approach that is very close to our hearts as a union. Everyone’s views are valued. And the involvement of Cranfield [School of Management] in the judging and assessment of their performance adds a great deal of weight to the whole process.”

McCartney says being a part of the Awards has served to raise the union’s profile and that of health and safety, too. “The Awards give us the prominence and platform to show that we are supporters of employers and not just tub thumpers. They allow us to demonstrate what we stand for. Big strides forward have been taken in health and safety in the time we’ve been involved in the Awards, but we must continue to use them to make employers realise that health and safety must remain at the forefront of their thinking.

“That is the best means not only of ensuring that people remain safe in the workplace, but also that the reputations of companies are safeguarded. Those who fail in this regard risk serious damage to their reputations and financial performance. Companies that enter the awards want to win, yes, but they are also organisations that are seeking world-class attainment – and health and safety is a critical measure of exactly that.” ■



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