Research studies in the UK and in other countries clearly demonstrate worker health and safety representatives make an important contribution to improving workplace health and safety performance (Hazards 74). There are a number of supports that are likely to be significant in promoting their effectiveness. One is training.

Our research study, The impact of trade union education and training in health and safety on the workplace activity of health and safety representatives, funded by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and supported by the TUC, looked to:

- gain an understanding of which elements of the content and delivery of training were thought by safety representatives to be most helpful in supporting their activities at the workplace;
- identify constraints on workplace activity prior and subsequent to training;
- examine the supports necessary to enable representatives to make best use of training provision; and
- evaluate the contribution of training in supporting the continuing activities of health and safety representatives.

The research investigated the impact of health and safety training using: a postal questionnaire survey completed by 1,400 trade union health and safety representatives; telephone interviews with 48 respondents to the questionnaire who had all undertaken a TUC Stage 1 health and safety course; and a questionnaire survey, face-to-face interviews and group activities with 85 health and safety representatives undertaking TUC Stage 2 health and safety courses.

Rep support

Courses provided by or on behalf of trade unions was the main experience of training for the respondents, with the TUC Stage 1 being the most frequently attended course, followed by union induction courses and the TUC Stage 2 course.

The research confirmed that trade union training is a powerful support for the workplace effectiveness of health and safety representatives.

Responses to the questionnaire survey revealed that 86 per cent of safety reps who had attended TUC health and safety Stage 1, and 91 per cent of safety reps who had attended TUC health and safety Stage 1 and 2, found the training to be “extremely supportive,” “supported them a lot,” or provided “some support.”

Safety reps attending the TUC health and safety Stage 2 were more inclined to value their training as “extremely supportive,” demonstrating the importance of TUC/union training as an ongoing feature in a health and safety rep’s work.

Action at work

Getting motivated: Detailed research was done with safety reps attending TUC health and safety Stage 2 courses. Of these, 89 per cent said that as a direct result of training they had initiated new health and safety activities in their workplaces.

Barriers: Two-thirds of the Stage 2 sample reported a lack of time, resources and facilities to do the job of a safety representative as the main barrier to their activities. In relation to training, some representatives reported difficulties gaining access to courses. Reasons given included difficulties of obtaining and feeling able to take paid release. As well as employer/management unwillingness to approve time-off with pay to attend training, individual reluctance to take time out of work for training because of large workloads or a sense of burdening colleagues was also important. The study found 81 per cent of Stage 2 reps felt that TUC/union training was “extremely helpful,” “helped a lot,” or was “of some help” in tackling barriers.

What works: The findings provide strong evidence of how trade union training supports workplace activities and achievements of health and safety representatives, by:

- enabling representatives
to share ideas and benefit from experiences of others;

- providing opportunities and support for flow of information between local, national and even international trade union sources and the course participants;

- encouraging participants to raise their awareness and take up new issues;

- developing an holistic definition of workers’ health which includes physical, psychosocial and organisational factors;

- providing a vehicle for representatives to learn the skills of effective health and safety action and initiate the actions themselves; and

- strengthening the autonomy of health and safety representatives in participative health and safety management.

Right approach: Respondents make it clear they value the methods employed in tuition such as student-centred learning and skills development.

Active and worker-centred participation in occupational health and safety management are basic to the character, quality and success of trade union training. They are a crucial reason why this training is so highly valued by representatives as both a stimulus and support to their workplace actions.

Course work
- Extent to which training helped gain achievements: all courses
  - Extremely helpful, helped a lot or of some help: 96 per cent
  - Extremely helpful: 44 per cent
  - Of little or no help: 4 per cent

Safety reps attending the TUC health and safety Stage 2 were more inclined to value their training as “extremely helpful” (54 per cent) in gaining achievements, demonstrating the importance of ongoing TUC/union training as a stimulus to a health and safety rep’s work.

SAFETY REPS DELIVER
The HSE-backed research into the impact of safety rep training shows that safety rep activities and achievements increase as a result of training.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity as a safety rep</th>
<th>Totals for “Extremely helpful”, “helped a lot”, or “of some help”</th>
<th>Totals for “extremely helpful” and “helped a lot”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Representing the health and safety interests of members/workers</td>
<td>98 per cent</td>
<td>85 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigating health and safety complaints from members/workers</td>
<td>95 per cent</td>
<td>75 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigating hazards in the workplace</td>
<td>95 per cent</td>
<td>74 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding and using health and safety information</td>
<td>94 per cent</td>
<td>73 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspecting the workplace on a routine basis</td>
<td>93 per cent</td>
<td>70 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making representations to management/employer on behalf of members/workers</td>
<td>91 per cent</td>
<td>66 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigating accidents, dangerous occurrences, ill health incidents</td>
<td>90 per cent</td>
<td>59 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in health and safety committees</td>
<td>89 per cent</td>
<td>68 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuading management/employer to find solutions to resolve health and safety problems</td>
<td>88 per cent</td>
<td>59 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving information from, and being consulted by management/employer</td>
<td>82 per cent</td>
<td>48 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in the risk assessment process</td>
<td>81 per cent</td>
<td>52 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representing members in consultation with health and safety inspectors and experts</td>
<td>73 per cent</td>
<td>41 per cent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What’s a rep to do?

Sacked for safety: Workers at a car parts plant in Wales have been fired after attempting to defend safety standards. In April, Transport and General Workers’ Union (T&G) members at Friction Dynamic Ltd – also known as Dynamex – in Caernarfon, went on strike for one week. The official strike was related to a dispute over health and safety conditions, impossible work targets and attempts to break existing agreements. On 29 June, 87 members were issued with dismissal notices.

Support the strikers: The TGWU Friction Dynamics Strike Fund can be contacted by telephone on 01286 672 031 or 01286 672 102. More information online: www.dynamexfriction.co.uk/html/support.html

Good examples: Europe’s unions say workers have a crucial role to play in the design of products and work methods – and are preparing a report to prove it. The TUC-backed Trade Union Technical Bureau for Health and Safety (TUTB), based in Brussels, is looking for “concrete examples” where unions or others have used workers’ experiences and views to better design machines, personal protective equipment or workplaces.

Send examples to: Theoni Koukoulaki, email: bksou@etuc.org or Stefano Boy, email: stfboy@etuc.org. Write to: BTS-TUTB-TGB, Bd. du roi Albert II, 5 bte 5, B-1210 Brussels, Belgium. Tel: 00 32 2 224 0560. Fax: 00 32 2 224 0361. Online: www.etuc.org/tutb/index.en.html

Whistleblowing awards: Hazards readers have been invited by the Campaign for Freedom of Information to nominate for an award any individuals or organisations “who have made significant contributions towards freedom on information during the year.” If your union rep or union HQ has done the business, why not put them forward for a Freedom of Information Award? Nominations should be submitted before 1 October to CFOI, Suite 102, Badwkins Gardens, London EC1N 7RJ. More on the web at: www.cfoi.org.uk/awards.html