

Dramatic licence

Bringing in actors might seem an attractive way to spice up your training, but putting on a good performance is not cheap. Frances Whinder looks at how to make sure your investment is worth it

There are plenty of videos dramatising accidents and safety lessons, so how do agencies offering to send actors into the workplace for safety training make a living? The answer is that theatre has a unique power; if it's done well, it will get your message to stick like nothing else and will put paid to employees' ideas of safety training being a bore.

Unfortunately, getting that value doesn't lend itself to a cheap DIY approach. Even contracting people from a local amateur troupe could be a false economy.

"Drama based training needs to be led by a qualified consultant," says Gareth Lewis, head of corporate client relations at training provider RRC International. "If you just bring in a group of actors, even if they put on a great

performance, it won't be worthwhile if they can't answer questions from the audience afterwards because they aren't competent in health and safety."

The commercial agencies' offerings are carefully structured and often follow a similar pattern. A typical workshop will involve four actors: one playing the workplace accident victim, one the victim's closest friend at work, another their manager, and the fourth the victim's wife or child. The performance will show the build up to an accident and its aftermath.

Once the actors have finished, a facilitator from the agency will lead a discussion about why the accident happened.

The actors sometimes then perform the same events again, but the facilitator will freeze the action at key points and allow the

audience to question the characters about why they acted in the way they did.

Stage right

You don't need a theatre and lots of large and expensive props for this sort of performance, says Islay Roberts, business development coordinator at Forum Interactive, Edinburgh based trainers specialising in culture change and leadership. "The most important thing about the space is that it's intimate," she says. "You only need space for the audience and a few feet for the actors to perform in." A training room or canteen could be sufficient, she adds.

The scenario should be tailored to your company to be believable. "We base our workshops on a real incident that has happened in the industry or even at the client," says Roberts.

Often, the accident doesn't appear in the drama. Instead, the performance focuses on the crucial point at which the accident became almost inevitable — when communication between the victim and their manager broke down, for example. The impact on the victim's family and colleagues is also important.

"It's often an area we focus on because it allows people to get involved more easily," says Steve Brough, director and founder of corporate trainers Dramanon.

It helps to get the language right. If your audience is mainly operatives, for example, the characters should use the workers' vocabulary, not management speak. It's worth putting some thought into this before you brief the training agency — they will write the script and check it with you to make sure it is authentic, but the more time they need to spend perfecting the dialogue, the bigger their bill.

Some agencies have a pool of actors who previously worked in industry, such as construction or oil and gas. Using performers who have experience of your sector will make the performance more realistic.

Heated debate

Audience discussions prompted by the drama often become animated, says Brough. "In a scenario in which an accident happens because the victim didn't speak out about a problem, we've had audience members practically shouting at the character 'You've got to speak up', but the victim will reply 'How can I, when he's my manager?' And that's probably something some of the audience have thought at times."

"At the end of the process, we often have workers say to us 'I've met him', or even 'That's me on a bad day'," says Harry Gallagher, head of behavioural safety at Macnaughton McGregor, which provided behavioural safety training to the Olympic Delivery Authority.

The audience get to ask the characters to change their behaviour, and the performance progresses so the audience can see the effect of making different decisions. "The audience should become the directors," says Brough. "You show them the wrong behaviour and give them the power to change it."

Target audience

Between 30 and 40 people is a good number for a workshop, says Roberts. Any more than that and some of the intimacy of the performance, and therefore its impact, is lost. For an audience of more than 50, at a stand down day, for example, the production will need to be more sophisticated — and therefore more expensive — to have an impact, notes Brough.

If you don't have the funds to cover your entire workforce, you need to decide which group would benefit most. You might want to target managers with training in the qualities that make a good safety leader. Forum Interactive worked with house building firm Taylor

Wimpey to encourage its regional executives to improve the quality of their safety leadership and to make safety a key consideration when purchasing equipment and hiring contractors.

For frontline workers, you might look at improving communication skills to ensure they are confident to challenge unsafe behaviour when they see it. Or you might aim to improve reporting: Macnaughton McGregor has worked with cement producer Cemex on a behavioural safety campaign to promote the use of near miss and hazard alert cards.

Supervisors might benefit from a different approach again, examining how to operate as go betweens for workers on the ground and managers.

Alternatively, you could pick employees from across your organisation and use the training to enthuse them to be safety champions for the rest of the workforce. "We encourage our clients to have a mixture of managers

and workforce in the room," says Roberts. But she acknowledges that not every company will want to take this approach, because some might be concerned that frontline workers won't be completely honest if their managers are in the room.

"You need to be sure the group you are targeting are going to be receptive to a drama based approach," says Lewis. "If you are inviting guys who have worked on the factory floor for 30 years, doing the same thing every day, drama might not be the way to go. It would be helpful to assess the types of training you have used before and how they were received, to get a feel for whether drama would work."

Investment potential

A workshop from a training agency is likely to cost several thousand pounds, with the exact fee depending on your requirements in terms of development time, audience size and length



Image: Dramanon



Image: Dramanon

+ ROLE PLAY

Even if you don't have the budget to bring in an agency, you can still incorporate some drama into your training using simple role play, says health and safety consultant Bridget Leathley.

"If I am trying to help managers to understand health and safety law better, I find it useful to use a number of case studies, some where the verdict might be obvious, others where it might not be," she says. "I could summarise the cases on bullet points and read them out. I could talk about them. What I actually do is give individuals a summary of the case and a part to play each. For example, one delegate is the victim, one the client organisation, one the contractor, and another the subcontractor. Each has to argue why they are innocent (whatever their actual opinion)."

Everyone else in the session acts as the jury and votes on the verdict, before Leathley explains what happened in the real case. "Because they have acted it out themselves the message hits home far better than just telling them about it," she says.



Image: Dramanon



Image: Dramanon

of workshop. "If you want something really slick, it will require an enormous amount of development work," says Lewis. "It's a hard thing to cost; you will almost need an open cheque book."

To make the case to your company's directors that such a big investment is worth it, you need to be confident about the returns.

"From a learner's point of view, drama based training is enjoyable and high impact," says Gallagher. "But it's an enjoyable waste of time if you haven't thought about what you want to get out of it."

"There has to be a learning point," says Chris Jerman, corporate safety manager at John Lewis Partnership. "When the audience leaves the performance, what are they going to do differently or do for the first time?"

"Sustaining the impact is what it's all about," says Roberts. Forum Interactive collates notes made by the audience during a workshop into a feedback document for the client's health and

safety manager. They will even produce posters showing some of the audience quotes. Seeing the posters reminds people how they felt at the time, she says, and how they resolved to act differently.

Forum Interactive also uses memory triggers — small objects that can be carried in a wallet and link to something from the workshop, such as a hair bobble to remember the impact on a victim's daughter.

Macnaughton McGregor takes a hands on approach. In its two day programme, the trainers spend the second day on site, coaching those who attended the workshop through real safety conversations with other workers.

"It's the only way to embed it," says Gallagher. "The workers won't learn if they don't do it themselves."

On trials

If the aim of your training is to give your directors the nearest thing to first-hand experience

of the consequences of an accident, a mock trial might be a better option than a workshop. For a courtroom drama, you will need the services of a legal practice that specialises in health and safety law. They will supply barristers to act as judge and defence and prosecution counsel and either another barrister or an experienced health and safety consultant to take the witness stand.

The case is usually based on a real prosecution, or an amalgamation of several, and the barristers will behave exactly as they would in court. The audience is the jury, and, after the verdict, has the chance to question the lawyers.

The advantage of arranging an in house trial is that the case will be specific to your company, helping drive home its messages. But because you are paying for lawyers' time, it won't be cheap. Organisations such as the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health and construction sector network Working Well Together hold mock trials throughout the year, which range in price from free to around £100 per person. These events have a limited audience size, so it might be hard to send a whole department, but if you want to target a small group of employees, they could be the most cost effective option.

"Mock trials can be terrifically useful," says Jerman. "They are like an autopsy of an event and you can get so much out of them."

But even the best drama based training is not a substitute for training in safety skills, and the provision of information, instruction and supervision.

"Drama is something to add to your arsenal," cautions Jerman, "it's not a magic bullet. If you think you need to use drama to give your workers a break from the usual safety lectures, then your usual training probably needs to be improved." ■