



The tyranny of tradition

What has the caddy and the golf bag got to do with the science of ergonomics? John Culvenor answers the riddle.

IT STRIKES ME AS ODD that caddies for professional golfers carry the golf bag. Watching the golf on television I see the caddies twisted to one side with a large load bouncing around on their back and I wonder what sort of injury rate these workers experience? I can't help but wonder how thoroughly their employers have undertaken the risk assessment of this particular activity?

Certainly on face value the posture and long periods of handling, would indicate a substantial risk. Strangely though, as weekend golfers know, the golf buggy (just for the bag, not to ride in too) is an established solution to this manual handling problem. Given the existence of an apparently obvious risk and a recognised solution, why are caddies made to go on carrying the bags? What defence would there be for not applying a readily available and cheap solution to such a problem.

Barriers to good solutions

Tradition. Culture. Habit. These were some of the possible reasons given when I posed the above questions to a group of trainees at an occupational hazard management course. They figured that these reasons were also often behind the failure to implement good solutions to the workplace. A lack of knowledge about a workplace safety problem was rarely important and often there was available knowledge about a solution. However, the consideration of change was regularly blocked by the psychological issues of tradition, culture and habit.

Ergonomics and the safe-place approach

Ergonomics is the art of changing the environment to suit the size, shape of the users, and may be more importantly, the way the users think. The science of ergonomics accords well with the ideals of our Australian legislation that encourages control at source. Our regulations encourage elimination of hazards and engineering controls as a priority over controls that rely



on the vigilance of the users. Sometimes this approach is known as the safe-place approach.

The alternative being the safe-person approach of relying on safe behaviour. Ergonomics is the central theme of the safe-place way of doing things. However, the application of ergonomic thinking aimed at changing the system gets too often strangled by tradition, culture and habit. In many cases it doesn't even take it's first breath.

"Caddies can't wheel the bags, it's just not done that way." Tradition, culture and habit are not bad things, they are the fabric of our existence as a people, but if we are to make steps in achieving the ideals of our legislation and apply some good ergonomic thinking then we must step outside these boundaries for a while and at least consider the possibilities for a new way of working.

Creative problem solving skills in safety have the potential to facilitate better use of the challenging mandates put forward by our regulators. For instance, brainstorming,

the enduring technique popularised by Alex Osborn in the 1950s can be employed to create a micro-climate where diversions from the norm, like elimination of the hazard, can be considered. Tradition, culture and habit can be put aside to allow a little free-ranging thinking, and this is the way we should move forward in safety.

Aiming at the hole

"But you can't eliminate the vee-belt, it drives the machine." Mostly the ideas of our legislation don't make any immediate sense, they confront the established way of doing things. Of course eliminating hazards is difficult, mostly the hazards do some worthwhile job. Designing safety to be in-built and largely independent of the user's vigilant behaviour is not

easy. Consequently the immediately obvious barriers to these good solutions to safety problems means that they are rarely considered. But that doesn't mean that it's acceptable or profitable to immediately ignore these approaches, and adopt ineffective, but implementable, safe-person controls like competitions, posters, personal protective equipment, and the like. These are attractive because they are easy to implement. It's fairly easy to add on a safety motivation program, or issue some protective equipment, but it's conceptually more challenging to alter the basic way of working so that it is safer.

Similarly, hitting a hole in one is difficult. But golfers persist at aiming at the hole because they have a better chance of success that way. In safety too, while our ideals of safe-place systems, and passive safety, and ergonomic design, are difficult, we'll do best toward achieving them if we keep our aim sharply focused that way.

● *Josh Culvenor, of VIOSH-Australia, University of Ballarat.*