

TRAINING PARTNER



With so much disinformation surrounding the Covid 19 virus, Gary Fallaize looks at the challenges and risks for businesses.

IF YOU are like me, you are finding it very difficult to get to grips with the business risks associated with the new Coronavirus outbreak, and more importantly, what to do about them. There is information overload with far too many informed and uninformed opinions on what appears to be a very complex issue. We also have the obvious desire from governments not to cause panic or damage the economy more than necessary, which may or may not be downplaying the risks. And then there is the dreaded social media and President of the US spreading disinformation to a fearful world population. All of this is making it very difficult for the layman to work out what is really going on and what to do about it.

Running a Health and Safety training business that operates internationally at such times provides some interesting challenges in identifying and evaluating meaningful risk and finding an appropriate response to mitigate them. Having said that our challenges are similar if not identical to many businesses.

As we run courses and exams all over the world we had been monitoring the Covid 19 issue very closely and had an expectation of some challenges operating in countries with more serious outbreaks.

For us the first week in March is an exam week, 450 learners, sitting in 90 venues throughout the world. As we expected some overseas exam venues had to close and one learner was unable to fly to their venue - all reasonable and appropriate given the risks in the specific countries. Learners were all reasonable, in fact we managed to get one into another exam centre so they were very happy.

What we had not anticipated was reactions in the UK, this started the day

after the Prime Minister told us to sing happy birthday twice when washing our hands and carry on as normal. There were around 35 confirmed infections in the UK and no deaths. Throughout the day, five learners contacted us. One kindly pointed out that we owe them a "duty of care" and enquired as to what actions we were taking to ensure their safety, the others were similar in their concerns. The learners in question obviously perceived a far greater risk to their safety than we could reasonably evaluate given the information being supplied by the government agencies at this time.

Looking at relative risk, they were statistically more likely to come to harm travelling to the venue than from being in the venue. BUT that is not how they had evaluated their personal risk and their concerns were important to them. We responded quickly, providing guidance to our exam invigilators based on the information available from the UK government website.

One day later after some energetic sporting activity I was in the pub with my sporting colleagues, putting back those hard lost calories, when COVID 19 was mentioned in the context of panic buying. One of the group loudly announced that hand sanitisers did not work on viruses, one of the many misinformations going around social media. This then led to others relaying various opinions and conspiracy theories gleaned from their social media feeds. My attempts to explain the inaccuracy of some of the more outrageous statements and encourage wider reading was wasted as they had read this on the internet so it must be true!

The next day I was out with a competitor and HSE trainer for lunch who was convinced the risk was being blown out of all proportion and

there really was little if anything to worry about.

Ignoring the pub chatter, albeit worrying that there is so much disinformation muddying an already complex matter, how do people with HSE knowledge with access to similar information come to such diametrically opposed conclusions? This is obviously not limited to this specific, but is more interesting as those involved should have learnt how to proportionately evaluate risk.

I am hoping to gain some insight as to how we can improve our training as I feel we have failed in some to get the message of reasonable and practicable across, but as of yet have no answers. I suspect however that this is just the complexities of human nature where we have the risk takers and the risk averse with both groups focusing on the information that supports their natural instincts.

The next few months will be challenging for all businesses, probably more so for those with responsibilities for health and safety. Flybe seems to be the first business victim of Covid 19, but there were underlying weaknesses with this airline and I can see the conflict between the needs of the business (in some cases survival), safety of workers, and customers providing complex challenges to all involved in running businesses. How those responsible for safety react to this challenge will be critical, there is not really a place for the extreme risk takers or the risk averse. The balance is somewhere in the middle, but exactly where is the big question of the moment.

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