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Environmental management systems usually require employees to be aware of the environment and of EMSs; but what does that mean? 'Awareness' cannot be measured. When is somebody 'environmentally aware'? When they remember to turn the light off? Is that all people are able to do to help the environment?

We should be able to spell out a lot more about what people can do to deal with environmental issues. If we are clearer about what we expect people at work to be able to do to minimise negative environmental impacts, it will be a lot easier to work out the various roles and responsibilities. Instead of getting people just to turn the lights off, we want to turn people on.

More capable

People are far more capable of doing much more than switch off the lights. Many working people are cutting, chopping, chipping, shipping, moving and altering lumps of the environment each day. They can see better than anyone else what could be done to minimise waste, use energy more efficiently and count carbon. One of the best ways is to learn by doing. This builds on the saying: "What I hear I forget; what I see I remember – but what I do I understand". So why not get people to do things for the environment, and while doing that, they may learn a lot more.

Here's an example of how vocational learning can change to make environmental improvements. Ageing bin-men in Copenhagen got fed up of running after dustcarts and suggested that instead they become 'green ambassadors'. They go before the dustcart now, advising householders all about rubbish: how to stream properly, what could be sold, etc. They are the first step in the waste chain – the critical point. Each year they go on a course where they learn about new methods that they can communicate to householders. And there are now women green ambassadors!

Luckily, in the UK we have a vocational qualification framework that provides a structure for all

parts of business to develop qualifications for people at work. It is easy to identify generic environmental skills that are needed in any workplace – like environmental policy and procedure writing, risk assessment and monitoring and measuring.

We need something called National Occupational Standards to identify the elements of those skills. It is a shame that 'the environment' has not got a particular home in the set-up, as all developments occur through Sector Skills Councils in order for awarding bodies to generate qualifications against those standards. Unfortunately, 'the environment' is not easily chopped up into 'sectors'. There has not been a coherent development of environmental qualifications based around a set of generic skills. Although there is an NVQ for managers, there is very little for anybody else. And what there is has developed in a disjointed way.

Parallels

There is a set of NOS for health and safety, from which we can learn what needs to be done and how to do it. While not wanting just to tag 'environment' on to health and safety, there are parallels. We can translate 'hazards' risk assessment into an 'impacts' risk assessment. A hazards assessment concerns what may affect you, while an impacts risk assessment considers what may happen to everything else. See www.epaw.co.uk/matrix.html for more.

These H&S NOS (produced by ENTO) do include one unit for the environment, but there is no reason why there are not other units parallel to H&S – writing a policy, making procedures and carrying out inspections/audits, for example. H&S has existing procedures that can be adopted and adapted for the environment. Too often, 'the environment' is brought into workplaces with no thought for existing relations and cultures and ways to connect with the rest of the workplace.

There is a qualification called Environmental Effectiveness produced by EMTA – www.epaw.co.uk/enveff.html – which asks supervised employees (Level 2) to "Make a suggestion for environmental improvement". When this was piloted in a dozen small workplaces in the North West it was found that, as a result of suggestions made, the companies saved £2,000 on average for each candidate. Promoting systems

There is another Level 2 qualification, but this time for managers, supervisors and worker

representatives to promote environmental systems. Developing Environmental Awareness, despite its name, asks candidates to consider water, waste energy, etc, and how controlling these concerns can be built into work – not just technically, but also organisationally.

By using vocational qualifications we also build-in recognition for the practitioners. Companies can get their standards and logos, so why shouldn't anybody else at work be recognised for their understanding and contribution? It also helps for CPD. It has been said that until 'the environment' is built into staff development and appraisal, we won't get far.

While employees are doing things to help the environment, they will be recognised for their learning. And, I suspect, many others will recognise the benefits too...