

SOFT SKILLS IN A HARD WORLD¹

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ABSTRACT

The focus of oil spill response organisations (OSROs) in their development activities, and through forums such as IOSC, tends to be on new equipment, innovative tools and better techniques for spill response. In the excitement about 'things' the people who actually deliver the spill response are often forgotten.

Over the last decade oil companies have downsized and rightsized and are now hollowing out. As result, when an OSRO is called to support an oil company in a spill response there is a requirement for the OSRO to become more and more involved in the strategic management of the spill, with OSRO:client interfaces at a higher and higher level in the client organisation.

The need for OSRO personnel to be well trained not just in a range of spill response techniques but also in a wide variety of 'soft skills' such as presentation, negotiation and influencing has never been more compelling.

This paper reports developments at Oil Spill Response Ltd in the selection, training and development of spill responders to meet the increasing demands of our client companies. Core skills and different specialisms required of spill responders are defined and a modular, fast track, training programme is developed. The core skills and training programme are benchmarked across a range of major OSROs to set common, high, worldwide standards. The accreditation of this programme to offer a formal diploma qualification is further examined.

Continuing education is a key theme of the paper, with senior spill responders offered a development opportunity in the training of new recruits, whereby they can become accredited trainers; whilst spill managers can convert the diploma qualification into a degree-level award.

DISCUSSION

The Changing World of Spill Response

The main driver in the review of our approach to the training and development of spill responders and managers is the changing profile of spill response. These changes relate to what type of organisations we work with, the level at which we work, the expectations of the stakeholders involved in a spill, the types of spills we encounter and the locations of those spills. These views on the changing markets are based on the Alliance's recent experience of international Tier 3 response, but will ultimately be relevant to all OSROs.

Traditionally, a Tier 3 response centre would work as a sub-contractor to a major oil company's large in-house strike team. It would bring specialised equipment and the people who knew how to operate that equipment and were involved in the spill at a 'tactical' level without taking much responsibility for the overall strategic management of the spill. The focus of the Tier 3 organisation would be solely on the 'emergency' phase of the spill immediately after it had impacted a shoreline. Today the major oil companies have reduced the size of their dedicated in-house strike teams, the majority of whom now have key roles in other aspects of the company's business and can be hard to release for any time in the event of a spill. At the same time many junior players have appeared who take their environmental protection responsibilities seriously but cannot afford the 'luxury' of a dedicated spill response team. We are beginning to see oil companies from the Former Soviet Union demonstrate a desire to attain more rigorous standards of environmental protection, but, where Tier 3 response centres are involved, there is currently little in the way of support from dedicated infrastructure and spill management expertise within these oil companies. Major oil traders, involved only in the storage and shipment of oil / fuel oil are also looking for us to offer spill response on their behalf, but again these organisations offer little in the way of support from dedicated infrastructure and spill management expertise. Finally, there is an increasing requirement on Tier 3 response centres to attend spills on behalf of P&I Clubs and other similar parties.

All these changes relate to the type of organisation an OSRO will work with and the level at which they will work. In a spill, whilst it may not take legal responsibility for the management of the spill, it is clear that the OSRO is being required to take on more and more of the strategic spill management responsibilities, rather than act as a pure sub-contractor. Such a role involves not just an interface at a senior level with the client, but also senior level interfaces on the client's behalf with a range of other stakeholders such as national and local government agencies, nation and international NGOs and representative of the local populace.

The types of spill we may encounter and the locations of those spills also have an impact on what skills are required of an OSRO. Whilst shipping-related spills have reduced over recent years, spills from FPSOs and similar installations have increased, as have those from sub-sea and inland pipelines. We have also, sadly, seen more oil spills as a result of terrorism and / or local labour unrest, and this trend is likely to continue. As such spills are associated with oil E&P activities, or, in the latter case also with downstream activities, the locations of spills have changed. OSROs are often asked to work in remote areas with poor infrastructure and often volatile government.

¹ *DISCLAIMER: The opinions and views expressed in this paper are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of any other party.*

OSROs must therefore be self-sufficient as far as practical and able to develop spill response strategies with no more than local unskilled labour, if even that is available.

Finally we must address the potential changes in the product spilled which the OSRO is required to clean up. Oil / petroleum products are increasingly shipped in bulk and by major transnational pipelines. The Hazardous and Noxious Substances protocol of the International Convention on Oil Pollution Preparedness, Response and Co-operation, 1990 (OPRC) will soon be ratified. OSROs are being asked to assist in disaster relief and other aspects of emergency response. Across the board, therefore, we can anticipate a broadening of the OSRO's responsibilities.

These emerging demands require OSROs to carry a range of new skills and the ability to learn quickly and adapt safely to new spill challenges and emergency situations.

The OSRO of the Future

To meet these challenges from their stakeholders, the OSRO of the future will increasingly become a knowledge-based provider of spill managers. The requirement to deliver specialist equipment to the spill site and to be able to operate that equipment will not go away; the OSRO team must be practically-minded and well versed in the tactics of spill response. These new roles, however, of providing strategic advice and management throughout the lifetime of the incident, managing high level interfaces with the client and a range of stakeholders and organising and training local labour will increasingly come to the fore in the future.

OSROs will only be able to deliver in these new roles if they have the right people with the right skills and experience to do so. Recruitment of mechanics or fitters and training only in the operation of specific pieces of equipment, as has been the case in the past, will not be sufficient. Recruits of the future will be at a graduate equivalent entry level with a mixture of environmental, mechanical and seamanship qualifications. This type of recruit joins a company with an expectation of a career rather than just a job and alongside this legitimately expects a well-developed training and development programme to run alongside that career.

Therefore, because of the changing demands of the market and the expectations of our new recruits, a rigorous training and development model is required which addresses not just the 'mechanical' requirements of spill response but also a range of 'soft skills' that are required in emergency response management.

Alliance Recruitment Policies

Over the last two years the Alliance has undergone a paradigm shift in its recruitment policies; moving away from the recruitment of (male) time-served fitters / mechanics. Instead recruits have generally been graduates or other graduate-calibre personnel such as officers from the Royal or Merchant Navy. Candidates' backgrounds have been marine / mechanical engineering, deck officers and environmental science / engineering and are both male and female. Because a practical aptitude is still required university graduates are invited to attend a one day engineering aptitude assessment which focuses on spatial awareness and problem solving skills that will be required to understand and operate the Alliance's equipment.

Key criteria for selection are the potential to progress at least one, and preferably two, levels within the organisation, self-confidence / presentational skills and problem-solving skills. A practical engineering background is still valued, but this may be demonstrated by the candidate maintaining their own car rather than through, for instance, an engineering apprenticeship.

Career Planning

Before a meaningful training and development programme can be developed it is important to define the competences required

for different roles in the organisation. Detailed competence-based job descriptions have been produced for all roles in the Alliance which allow all staff to plan their careers. For response specialists a set of core competences have been described which all responders must acquire, regardless of background. This core skill set includes, as would be expected, a thorough knowledge of a range of spill strategies, an understanding of environmental impacts and, as discussed, must still include basic engineering competences associated with the operation and maintenance of the Alliance's equipment. The core skill set also includes IT skills, report writing and presentational skills and project management. Response specialists will also have areas of individual specialism related to their background or to personal interest such as engineering, logistics, environmental assessment, navigation and so on.

As staff progress within the Alliance they will deepen their knowledge of the 'hard' issues of equipment operation and maintenance and implementation of spill strategies. For promotion to senior response specialist and then duty manager or incident command manager on a spill the development and demonstration of 'soft' skills such as leadership, problem solving, negotiation become far more important. It is training and development in these areas that has often been missing in the past.

The Alliance has developed a rigorous approach to soft skills training and development that encompasses formal courses (both internally and externally facilitated) and defined experiential development postings inside and outside the Alliance. It is very important that staff have a picture as to where their career might lead them and how they might arrive at their desired role and these development postings form a key part of this picture. Furthermore, the developmental postings and 'expert' roles offer an important part of the rewards and recognition that can be offered to high achievers as is discussed later in this paper.

Training and Development Programme

When a new recruit joins the Alliance it is unlikely that they have any meaningful prior experience in spill management. It is important, therefore, to bring them to an acceptable level of competence to be useful in a spill response situation as quickly as possible. An intensive induction training programme has therefore been developed which addresses the key aspects of practical spill response over a 10 week period. This induction course is modular in format and each module consists of theoretical and practical elements and concludes with an assessment test. These induction training modules are as follows:

- Responder health & safety
- Environmental fates and effects
- Waste management
- Shoreline clean-up
- Offshore response
- Inland response
- Use of dispersants.

On successful completion of the induction course, new recruits will join their teams but will be released from stand-by duties to attend further training in, for instance:

- Management and motivation of staff
- Control and supervision of local labour
- Project management
- Incident command structures
- Negotiation skills
- Report writing & presentational skills
- Project management

As discussed, training courses alone will not deliver the all round abilities which we require; experiential postings are a key facet of the Alliance's development of its people. Rotation of staff between departments is one important part of the Alliance's train-

ing and development programme. This ensures that Trainers and Consultants have a currency of hands-on spill experience and that Response Specialists have opportunities to develop and practise the report writing, presentational and client interface skills required in training and consultancy.

In addition to inter-departmental rotations, secondments are offered from Singapore to the UK and vice versa and, increasingly to other OSROs such as MSRC. Furthermore, the Alliance has developed a number of specific short term development positions; these include Special Assistant to the Chief Executive, IPIECA consultant, IMO consultant and secondments to our shareholders' internal strike teams.

Accreditation and Assessment

At present there are no nationally or internationally recognised standards for emergency spill response. The Alliance board, which comprises of representatives of the 28 shareholding oil companies, recognise the need for common standards in emergency spill response and strongly endorse the development of recognised standards.

The Alliance is working with UK leadership and training organisation, Cogent, to develop National Occupational Standards (NOS) for persons involved in emergency spill response. Cogent has an excellent track record in developing NOS for the benefit of the United Kingdom and then promoting them as world class. For example, the NOS for Emergency Response on offshore installations has over 40,000 candidates per annum from over 40 approved centres in locations on the five continents.

The NOS may at a later stage become a more formal vocational or academic qualification. The overall outcome from this project will be a competence framework for persons involved in emergency spill response. Qualification frameworks, assessment strategies and key / core skill mapping will be developed where meaningful groupings can be achieved and is supported by industry. A competence framework will be developed by Industry Workgroups, which would include response specialists from Oil Spill Response Ltd (OSRL) based in Southampton and Strike Team members of oil companies based in the UK.

Recognition and Reward

It is important to underpin the career planning, training and development with sensible rewards and recognition. The Alliance has benchmarked its pay and conditions for each role against oil industry norms to ensure that individual roles are properly rewarded. Where personnel are successful in their training the most obvious reward is in promotion to the next level or at least

in a pay increment or bonus payment. These monetary rewards are and will remain important but other incentives are available such as selection for sought after roles and / or postings.

In some cases in the past reward via promotion has been difficult because the only promotion route is into a management position and that management position may not be vacant at that time or that individual may not have a desire to move into management. In order to address this problem the Alliance is creating a number of 'expert' posts which can act as a holding position for a future manager and / or offer a long term career path for those without a strong man-management bent.

Costs and benefits

The approach which is being adopted by the Alliance to recruitment, training and development with its focus on the recruitment of higher calibre staff and a rigorous training and development programme to support their career progression is not without cost. The Alliance is facing an additional salary burden and increased training costs for the new generation of employees. These costs have to be borne by our shareholders; the oil companies. In return for this investment to oil companies have access to better trained, more strategically able, professional support which can assist in more aspects of spill / crisis management than ever before.

CONCLUSIONS

The Alliance has seen a shift in client expectations over recent years which is set to continue. This changing world of spill response will impact all OSROs in time. In order to respond to these emerging requirements the Alliance has reviewed and amended its recruitment, training and development policies with a stronger emphasis than ever before on securing graduate calibre staff and providing them with the soft skills to be successful in a hard world. Whilst such an approach increases the salary burden and training costs which are ultimately borne by our shareholders, it offers our shareholders a higher quality resource able to offer a broader range of support in the event of a spill.

BIOGRAPHY

A physicist by training, Rob holds a Masters Degree in Process Safety and Loss Prevention. Rob was Managing Director of an environmental technology spin off from a major nuclear corporation before moving into waste management services sector, where he had some six years experience as the General Manager of a hazardous waste business.

