

Human Error Concept

When you pick up the newspaper and listen to the television or radio you will find terms like driver error, human error and pilot error used frequently as if this was the definitive reason why “accidents”, more precisely referred to as personal damage occurrences, occur. We are surrounded by this everyday and it is an accepted part of our society. Authorities such as the police may have a focus on human error so they can find out who to blame and penalise after car crashes. When I hear people focusing on human error it really grates on me and tells me they did not understand how the personal damage occurrence occurred and they did a poor job on the investigation.

Now I am not going to be silly enough to say people are not part of the personal damage occurrence process, of course they are. A major objection to the human error concept is that there is usually a focus on the “errors” of the individual who was damaged and people do not look at the contribution of others who developed and managed the overall system being worked in. The term human error often misdirects effort in safety. With personal damages occurrences I have investigated I have found that people have done what on the surface appears to be some pretty stupid things, often when one delves into the reason why they have done these things you find the environment and the equipment have contributed to the decision making process. I must admit there have been occasions, not many, when I have walked away from an investigation, after trying to do a thorough, professional and objective job, and thought what the person did was just dumb. Of course we all do dumb things at times and are usually not damaged in the process.

The human error concept is an accepted part of our society but the reality is that the terminology is emotive, ill-defined, means different things to different people and in a lot of cases automatically infers blame. Even if the dependence on the human error concept was true, it is unhelpful. There are good reasons why human error is accepted as a big part of the reasons for personal damage occurrences. There is a fair bit of so-called safety research and high profile safety consultants that quote figures of about 90% of “accidents” are the result of human error. Sometimes the same people who are using these statistics are flogging their behaviour-based safety processes that they will have you believe are the answer to most of your safety problems. Behaviour based safety appears to be a big thing in the U.S.A. but it has had a chequered career in Australia. I have never seen any published studies claiming human error as the major factor that I did not think were dodgy, making extreme claims based on small sample sizes is common. I have had a couple of occasions when I have questioned these claims and asked people to produce proof, they got dodgy and twitchy and gave a vague response. I have seen robust safety managements systems with lots of training have an impact on behaviour but I have some doubts about the American B.B.S. programs.

If you look at Geoff McDonald’s Analysis Reference Tree-Trunk model of personal damage occurrence investigation you will find every personal damage occurrence will have Person, Environment and Equipment essential factors, the percentage contribution will vary. The trouble with the human error concept is that some organisations will concentrate on people fixes and forget about the equipment and environment fixes. Often fixing the person is the least effective way of getting meaningful change. For critical issues it is often more reliable to depend on things instead of people. Often working on the Person in association with working on the Environment and the Machine will be appropriate.

The above recognises there is a part to play in training workers and have supervisors enforce that the learnt behaviour occurs. You need to recognise that a “Least time, least effort” approach is a natural tendency with human beings and this is sometimes responsible for the behaviour you see.

The belief in human error as a major cause (another emotionally laden term) of “accidents” is one of the many myths and misconceptions that hold back the progress of safety and contributes to a poor body of knowledge. It is sloppy, unscientific and emotive terminology.