

Lunchbreak Chat: Graham Taylor, Cobra Biologics

In this interview, Graham Taylor, Health & Safety Officer at Cobra Biologics shares his views and experiences on the “Changing Role of a Health and Safety Professional” with our Marketing and Partnerships Director, Nikki Sammé.

Cobra Biologics is a leading international contract development and manufacturing organisation (CDMO) providing DNA, Viral Vectors and Microbiota for pre-clinical, clinical and commercial supply. More recently, Cobra Biologics are known for their role in the manufacture of the AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine.

Cobra Biologics use the AssessNET Health and Safety management platform to manage various aspects of Health and Safety compliance, including COSHH, DSE and Inspections.

NS: Graham, you spent the first 25 years of your career in Crime Scene Investigation, before entering the world of Health and Safety in 2005 – how has your police background helped you as a Health and Safety Leader?

GT: Lots of the skills I developed in the Police Service were transferable into my Health and Safety Career and fall largely into two areas – an eye for detail and people management.

Attention to detail is critical for running management systems,

carrying out safety audits and analysing data for example.

The key to improving safety culture is being able to understand behaviours and use this knowledge to develop high levels of employee engagement.

NS: Can you tell me a bit about your responsibilities as Health and Safety Manager at Cobra Biologics?

GT: In a nutshell, the purpose of my role is to ensure that Cobra Biologics remains compliant with Health and Safety law. There are two facets to

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this - one as an Advisor to the business in terms of our legislative obligations and the processes we need to adhere to and the second is supporting our people to ensure that they are following safe and healthy working practices. Over recent times, the role has extended to cover mental health and wellbeing – increasingly so during the pandemic.

NS: How have your responsibilities and related activities changed through the course of the pandemic?

GT: My role is still the same, but both the Board and our workforce are relying on me more as their point person to keep abreast of the changing coronavirus legislation landscape and interpret it correctly to ensure that we are continually Covid compliant. This means regularly reviewing and updating our Covid-19 risk assessments and adjusting our control measures appropriately – I'm on our seventh iteration!

As a key player in the AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccination manufacture supply chain, you can imagine how busy we have been – we have been operating to full capacity and with so many scientists in and out of our labs, I'm constantly focused on ensuring that we maintain a Covid-secure

environment across all four of our buildings.

The biggest change to Health and Safety Management brought about by the pandemic surrounds the increased need to support our people from a wellbeing perspective. Working from home and general Covid-related anxiety has brought its challenges, especially for those who had been working from home due to Covid health vulnerabilities during the first lockdown – returning to the office after the summer was a scary experience for some and I spent considerable time carrying out individual Risk Assessments and reassuring them on how we were operating in a safe way. Where necessary, we hold weekly meetings to support staff with any concerns relating to their individual circumstances. All new employees go through an induction process when they start – I follow up with them to make sure they are happy and comfortable with their work environment.

NS: Safety culture in the workplace has a direct impact on safety performance – what challenges have you seen in engaging employees and stakeholders in Health and Safety – and what insights on this point can you share from your experience?

GT: There were several challenges when I first joined the business, largely surrounding internal communications and employee involvement regarding our Health and Safety management system. Winning hearts and minds to get people on board with the importance of our processes and systems was my first focus. In my experience providing extra support for middle management is key, this cohort of stakeholders have the challenge of meeting their operational objectives and managing people, with Health and Safety often being seen as an “add on”. It is a bit of a culture shock for some when I push home the message that Health and Safety is everyone’s responsibility, not just mine! The key to success here is communication and training, as well as equipping them with tools to engage their teams.

Another important element of instilling a strong safety culture surrounds the onboarding of new starters – both the style and the content. Training new starters via a PowerPoint-heavy safety induction

can only achieve so much – imparting of key policies and instructions for example. In my experience, this style doesn’t offer effective training and engagement. I always take the time to carry out face to face inductions (over video calls when we are in lockdown). That way, I can read their body language, offer guidance specific to their questions and concerns and take the opportunity to talk about “taking personal responsibility for safety”.

NS: My next question continues the theme of employee engagement – how important do you feel soft skills and people management experience are in the context of managing Health and Safety effectively?

GT: Soft skills are an essential part of the job; you need to be able to speak to individuals about what is happening and get them to think safely and feel comfortable using their “safety voice”. Unless they have been involved in any major incidents or experienced work-related ill health, it’s hard to press home the message of “think safely all the time”. Being able to influence and empower people to do the right thing requires a Safety Professional to adjust their communications style and support

methods to positively influence safety behaviours.

NS: You must have seen several shifts in the role of a Health and Safety Professional over the last 15 years – how would you describe the key changes and what has been the catalysts behind them?

GT: Communication has been the strongest catalyst. The Health and Safety Executive has been focusing on changing people's opinion of Health and Safety for several years and this has helped shift the perception that Health and Safety is just a tick box exercise, focused on "policing and sanctioning". Nowadays, Risk Management Professionals know that good Health and Safety management relies on building strong safety cultures to empower people to take personal responsibility.

Approaches and methods of building robust Health and Safety systems now centre on stakeholder engagement and management commitment – communications and training play a leading role in these.

NS: Thinking specifically about Health and Safety technology, how has this changed?

GT: Technology has completely changed the day-to-day activities from a Health and Safety perspective – A huge part of the role surrounds gathering, monitoring and acting upon data – from Risk Assessments, Accident Reports, DSE programmes, Audits Inspections and so on. Fifteen years ago, these processes were mainly paper based, requiring heavy administration. Technology has helped enormously in reducing the burden of administration associated with these activities, through the introduction of automated workflows for allocating and managing tasks and most significantly for me, having visibility of our compliance levels in real-time.

Over the last year the AssessNET Health and Safety software has been critical for me – I wouldn't be able to work from home without it. I have the ability to access the system remotely to complete my tasks as well as monitor what everyone else is doing. Because we use the Portal functionality, colleagues can access the system wherever they are, meaning I can get information very quickly.

NS: How would you summarise the key considerations a Health and Safety Professional should think about when selecting a Health and Safety software solution?

GT: In my view, there are three main questions to ask:

1. Accessibility – Can your staff access the system to record information (DSE Assessments for example) and retrieve information (such as COSHH Risk Assessments)? In other words, users need to be able to access the system from any device, anywhere.
2. Ease of Use – Is it intuitive and user-friendly so that information can be found easily, and reports and tasks recorded efficiently?
3. Management Information – Is the system supported by Dashboards and Data Analytics

so that managers can monitor and act upon concerns and have real-time visibility of compliance levels?

NS: And finally, how do you see the role of a Health and Safety Professional changing in the future?

GT: Health and Safety will continue to expand in its scope; we have already seen a greater focus on health and wellbeing driven by the pandemic. No longer can a Health and Safety Professional focus only on the technical competencies and management frameworks; increasingly, they are becoming Advisors and change managers, both up and down the line. I would expect that the most successful and influential Health and Safety Professionals will increasingly become Business Leaders.