

IT'S GOOD TO TALK: UPDATING TOOLBOX TALKS FOR THE MODERN WORLD

Voice technology app RiskTalk is changing the way we assess risk and ensure our workplaces – particularly in high-hazard industries – remain safe



“It’s

good to talk” was a famous slogan used in a UK British Telecom TV advertising campaign in the mid-1990s to encourage people to use the phone more. These four simple words brought in an extra £5 billion in revenue over five years, showing the power of good communications.

This adage is also applicable to safety, particularly for toolbox talks, but human factors specialist Scott Moffat believes that new voice technology has the potential to liberate teams from the admin of toolbox talks and allow them to focus on discussing the risks in more detail and to better prepare them for the work ahead.

Scott Moffat is Human Factors Director at People Factor Consultants Ltd (PFC), based in Aberdeen, which specialises in developing the non-technical skills of people working in high-hazard industries.

He said: “Toolbox talks are a relatively quick and simple form of safety briefing that takes place between members of a team at the start of every task, where they discuss what needs to be done, what people’s responsibilities are and any risks they might encounter.

“Its purpose is all about engaging employees to think about risks and to prepare them for any eventualities, but often a toolbox talk is just a ‘tick box’ exercise which people run through and which does not really prepare them.”

Scott believes that the effectiveness of toolbox talks can be enhanced by liberating the team from note taking and ticking boxes and allowing a free-flowing

discussion where they can talk about the risks and the appropriate responses to any eventualities.

To achieve this ‘freedom’ during his company’s safety training toolbox talks, Scott is aiming to introduce a new voice technology workplace app by partnering with the safety app developers RiskTalk.

This app works on a range of platforms, from mobiles phones to tablets, and can capture safety conversations, complete risk assessments and incident reports and other safety related admin, with the data stored and managed through a customised dashboard system.

Scott believes the most important part of the toolbox talk is when the team discuss risks and ‘what if scenarios’ so they are fully prepared and mindful of the risks ahead. This enhances people’s situational awareness and they will be less likely to ‘freeze’ when confronted with a potentially dangerous situation.

Scott has practical experience in managing people’s psychological reactions to stress as he puts offshore oil and gas electricians under pressure in PFC’s high fidelity power distribution simulator. The



Scott Moffat

five-day course tests the electricians’ skills under different operating scenarios, leading to a full blown disaster on “bad day at the office Friday”.

In this way, he can assess a whole range of non-technical skills, such as stress management, situational awareness, decision-making, teamwork, leadership and communication.

He said: “When you get put under stress and pressure, you go to fight, flight or freeze mode. The reason we freeze is because the working memory takes in the information about the current situation and searches through its long-term memory for a similar situation and how it reacted then. If it doesn’t recognise the situation it will cause your brain and body to momentarily freeze.

“We obviously don’t want people to freeze in potentially dangerous situations so that is why it is important to discuss such eventualities throughout the toolbox talk. Every time you finish a regular task, you’re getting a positive outcome and a positive picture in your brain, but the one time that something goes wrong, you need your brain to switch on very quickly, and this can happen if you have discussed the possibilities of something going wrong beforehand.”

The RiskTalk voice technology app was developed by health and safety expert Stuart Farquharson and software developer David Press following Stuart’s experience in the mining, rail and construction

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Voice technology

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sectors in Australia, which highlighted a common issue with employees on the front line. He explained: “Lots of these types of industries have the same problem in that personnel on the ground are workers and not administrators, and they hate all the writing involved.

“For many, it can be quite intimidating and the worst part of their working day, particularly if they don’t like being caught out for their poor handwriting or spelling.

“The whole idea of RiskTalk is based around asking the worker on the ground how we can make their life easier. It’s about asking the right questions to cognitively prime people to be able to talk about the risks in their work and to capture their conversations to analyse the situation.

“They can edit or update their



records at any time during the day and add photographs to illustrate progress on issues. While the transcript provides an in-depth record for health and safety regulations, we can dig deeper into the content of the conversations using key phrase analysis, incident trend analysis and also auditing to provide feedback to make the talks more effective.

“The RiskTalk concept fits well into toolbox talks because it’s all about talking. What we are doing is capturing the conversations of what people are going to be doing that day, who’s going to be doing what and what they perceive the risks will be – so you can capture a huge amount of information in a short time period.”

RiskTalk is used in Australia, the Far East, South Africa and the

US, where one construction company based in Arizona uses it to provide a live feed to its team’s safety talks on numerous work sites on the West Coast.

Scott added: “People don’t generally like writing and reading, so the fact that this RiskTalk tool allows them to speak in more detail means it is actually helping their brains focus.

“And what you tend to find is that once people start talking about their jobs they can’t shut up about it. Without even knowing it, while they’re discussing the hazards, their brains are processing all the information and preparing them to act, and therefore reducing the chance of an incident.”

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