

SUBCONTRACTING VERSUS HEALTH AND SAFETY: AN INVERSE RELATIONSHIP

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ABSTRACT

The construction industry has an unenviable reputation of being one of the worst industries in the UK in respect of health and safety (H&S) performance. Among other factors, research points to subcontractors' safety behaviour (hence subcontracting) as one of the factors influencing safety performance on construction sites. With 80% of construction work in the UK being subcontracted, clearly it has become imperative to investigate this inverse H&S-subcontracting relationship. This situation is exacerbated by the increasing complexity of construction technologies which inevitably implies that specialisation will grow and consequently there would be even more subcontracting. Through a critique of the literature on H&S and procurement in the UK, it is shown that this state of affairs is attributable inter alia to the lack of adequate resources among small contractors to enable them invest in H&S, the differences in safety cultures between main and subcontractors and the less familiarity of subcontracted personnel with the inherent safety issues of all site activities due to their specialisations. Indeed it is argued further that this is compounded by the limited time spent on site, a lack of interest in the overall project and the impact of their activities on other operations on site. Beyond creating awareness of the inverse H&S-subcontracting relationship and the key drivers of this phenomenon, critical research questions arising from this phenomenon are examined, setting the premise for research work to expound on the reasons for this relationship and also identify best practice measures to be adopted to mitigate the negative impact of subcontracting.

Keywords: Construction industry, Health and safety, Subcontracting

INTRODUCTION

Research literature indicates that subcontracting grew significantly over the 1970s and 1980s and continues to be practised in several countries (ILO, 2001). It is evident that, in spite of the numerous economic benefits, subcontracting has adverse industrial relations effects on wages, working conditions, bargaining and unions (ILO, 2001; Chiang, 2009). In highlighting the diminution of employment conditions arising from this practice, researchers have identified a parallel link to occupational health and safety and the construction industry has not been left unscathed (Ankrah, 2007; Yung, 2009). As a prelude to a wider study into the inverse subcontracting-H&S relationship, this paper begins by surveying the literature on subcontracting within and outside of the UK construction industry, the aim being to explore its evolution, the rationale for its practice and its association with adverse occupational health and safety outcomes. It then goes further to highlight from the literature the causes of the inverse subcontracting-H&S relationship within the UK construction industry and through a critique points out the scope that still exists for further research by putting forth the emerging research question.