

HSA board member Frank Vaughan: OSH insights and challenges

As he prepares to step down from the Board of the HSA after six years, returning to his role as convenor of ICTU's health and safety committee, Frank Vaughan, presents challenging insights and views on the future of OSH.

Among the ideas he puts forward are more inspections, a greater focus on health, a stronger role for safety representatives, the appointment of trade union preventative agents (mobile safety representatives), and a new directive on psychosocial risk. He expresses "some concern" that the multiplicity of HSA roles may dilute the focus on OSH. He speaks of his respect for the board and staff of the Authority.

Before joining ICTU in the 1990s, when Peter Cassells was the general secretary, Frank Vaughan had a career in journalism and communications, working with the Irish Family Planning Association on health education, with a period in between as an arts administrator.

He was invited to join Congress to lead a project on the new forms of work. As he talks about that role, he gives an insight into the work of the trade union movement that often goes unnoticed. He explains that at that time Japanese concepts of management were very much in vogue. The buzz words of the time – JIT (just in time), CNC (computer numeric control), TPM (total productive maintenance) – trip off his tongue.

The purpose of the project was to identify sectors in which union members' jobs would be vulnerable. An engineering strand worked closely with unions, such as the TEEU and the AEEU, many of whose members had done traditional apprenticeships and spent their working lives with one company. Another vulnerable group were machinists in the clothing industry. A third strand sought to develop management skills for people in the newly established social employment schemes.

From there he moved on within Congress, where his main responsibility was as head of education and training. He recalls the funding Ireland got from the European Social Fund, the bulk of which went into education and training.



Frank Vaughan,
HSA

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He adds that it was money well-spent. In that context he mentions that life-long learning was a traditional part of the trade union movement's mission, even before the phrase itself was coined.

Among the courses he was involved in running were FETAC safety representative courses. He makes the point that ICTU was one of the satellite centres for the UCD OSH certificate course. They would, he recalls, have 25 people on every course, adding that some of that fell away during the recession. He adds that Congress and its affiliated unions also delivered health and safety training as part of the broader training of officials and shop stewards. That, he says, is how he was nominated for the HSA board.

Vaughan's philosophy of a fair society

To understand Frank Vaughan's approach to health and safety it is necessary to take a step back and understand his philosophical approach, which can be summed up in the words 'a fair society'.

The concept of society is a core value of Vaughan's. He says he has always "balked at the phrase Ireland Inc", as if

the State was just an economic entity, where everything is measured against profit. Speaking of the Value for Money Framework, which is at the heart of public policy, he says public money must be used carefully and wisely, but sometimes such frameworks exclude those who most need help. For that reason, he has a strong dislike of the value for money society. His beliefs are community, solidarity, and human values. There is, he says, a "need to have a vision which takes cognisance of broader issues".

It is not surprising, given his role in education and training, that a commitment to life-long learning is a core value for him. People need to develop personal skill sets, which help them get satisfaction from work, which is a huge part of life.

The HSA board

Reflecting on his six years on the HSA board, Frank Vaughan says "there is a high level of trust on the board". To illustrate that point, he refers to the work of the Legislation and Guidance Committee, a sub-committee of the board, which often must deal with highly complex issues and exceedingly long documents. In dealing with these documents, he says, the committee gets great support from the HSA's management and inspectors.

He says amongst board members there is good co-operation and trust, which is reflected in the manner of acceptance and trust shown when the committee reports back to the board on these complex documents.

While he believes the board works well and meets in a spirit of trust, confidence and respect, he says the tripartite nature of the board means there is a wide range of perspectives and experiences. There sometimes can be contrary views, which are a healthy indicator of a well-functioning board. "It is rare that some sort of consensus is not arrived at".

He says he is not sure about the view that people leave their hat at the door. As he sees it, the employers and trade union nominees come with their own perspectives, which "you can't leave outside". "Making sure you represent that perspective does not need to be confrontational and can ensure all aspects of an issue or proposal can be looked at". What they are united on, he said, are the objectives of eliminating fatalities and reducing injuries and illnesses.

Asked about the work of the board, he says board members now get board papers on iPad, about which he is positive. As well as the board moving from paper to electronic

communication, he mentions there is more emphasis on creating integrated systems to enable inspectors to report and access data electronically.

When HSR brings up with him the point that as this board comes to the end of its term in office, all three trade union nominees will step down having served the maximum two terms, Frank Vaughan says openly: "We have been very concerned there will be wholesale changes on the board of the HSA". That concern is not limited to the union side.

Saying that the SHWW Act determines the nomination process to the board, he says there is a balance to be struck in having a blend of new members along with retaining those with corporate memory. He says the present provisions do not reflect current thinking on good governance.

His view is that the board appointments should be for a five-year period, with members leaving the board and new members coming on each year. There will, he says, need to be a change in legislation, adding that the matter has been brought to the attention of the Minister.

Safety representatives

HSR spoke to Frank Vaughan on the day he again took up his role as convenor of ICTU's Health and Safety Committee. He explains that the committee is reconstituted every two years, after ICTU's biennial conference. Each union nominates a member to the committee, which sets up working groups on topics.

The topic that tops the agenda is the role of safety representatives. "We will", he says, "be engaging with the HSA on how we can promote the role of safety representative". The ICTU committee is planning a series of sectoral conferences over the next two years, with the dual aim of identifying key OSH issues in those sectors and activating more safety representatives.

One thing that irks Frank Vaughan is the appointment of safety representatives nominated by management. "You cannot in our view be a safety representative if you are nominated by management". Another thing that irks him is safety representatives "not having adequate facilities" and "not getting adequate time to fulfil their role". He says: "Safety representatives need to be properly resourced".

He says the training of safety representatives is "woefully inadequate". He contrasts our training with that in Northern Ireland, where those wanting to be safety representatives

take a Level 1 course, which is the equivalent to QQI Level 4, and then if elected take a further ten-day course.

Making the case for well-trained safety representatives, he says: "All the objective evidence is that workplaces with proper safety representatives are safer workplaces". He mentions the role safety representatives can play in improving safety culture.

In this context he mentions the safety culture in Boliden Tara Mines, where there has always been a full-time safety representative, adding that the safety culture in construction, where there are specific statutory requirements on the number of safety representatives, has improved. They have contributed to that improvement. "If we can change the culture that is half the battle."

Responding to the suggestion that employers might find ten-day courses long, he says we need to be innovative in how we deliver training. While it is essential to have classroom training, we can harness technology to deliver blended training.

As he talks about training, he acknowledges the learning activities supported by the HSA and welcomes the HSA's e-learning courses developed by Joanne Harmon and her colleagues.

Then he raises the issue of confusion between the role of safety officer and safety representatives, who do not have any legal liabilities. There needs to be a better explanation of the roles and this needs to be emphasised in training and information literature.

Dilution of OSH: some concern

Frank Vaughan raises publicly an issue, which from time to time has been mentioned in passing conversations, when he expresses "some concern" that, with the Authority now mandated to look after four areas – OSH, chemicals (including REACH), INAB (the Irish National Accreditation Board) and market surveillance – the focus on OSH will be diluted. He says: "You cannot be as focused on OSH, if you have the other three".

That concern is reinforced by the drop in the number of inspections, down from over 18,000 inspections in 2009 to 9,830 last year. The fall in inspections was understandable when the recession hit, but now "we are back in equilibrium", more inspections should be carried out. He issues a warning when he says that ignoring sectors, which are not being inspected, "will come back to bite us".

Health

The increasing focus on health in all its dimensions – he mentions MSDs and mental health/ stress in particular – is supported by trade unions in Ireland. Saying there are chronic serious illnesses and diseases, he says the statistics are woeful. The data and reporting systems we have are simply not adequate and seriously misrepresent the scale of injury and disease.

Referring to a seminar organised by ICTU for European Safety Week, he quoted figures presented by the HSA's health programme manager, Kieran Sludds. There are 430 cancer fatalities in Ireland each year related to occupation and over the years 2010 to 2015, more than 250 people died from mesothelioma caused by exposure to asbestos in the workplace. He warns that there are more and more chemicals are potentially carcinogenic than we now realise.

Saying that the HSA will shortly be launching a public consultation on the new draft Code on the Prevention of Bullying in the Workplace, he welcomes what he believes will be an important tool addressing one of the most significant triggers of workplace stress. He points to the number of suicides in recent years related to workplace bullying. The new Code will, Frank Vaughan says, merge and update the two existing Codes.

A psychosocial risk directive

Trade unions in Ireland and Europe want to see a new OSH framework established, particularly so after what they see as the hostile and barren years of the Barroso presidency of the European Commission. He expects that the newly appointed EU Jobs Commissioner, Nicholas Schmit, a socialist politician from Luxembourg, will be supportive of health and safety.

Speaking about a proposal from EUROCAD, a trade union representing managers and professionals in Europe, Frank Vaughan says they are campaigning for a new Psychosocial Risk Directive. He says that this campaign is driven by factors such as the pace of change and not being able to turn off, which is driven by shareholder pressure. There is he says a "a strong case for this directive", which he has brought to the attention of the ICTU OSH committee.

No doubt some members of the ICTU health and safety committee will be appointed to the next HSA board and with Frank Vaughan continuing his involvement there, values he shares will be voiced where OSH policy is made.