

# BUILDING A SAFER FUTURE

BuildSafe UAE is a non-profit organisation aimed at improving the health, safety and welfare conditions of all construction industry stakeholders. Group Administrator Elias McGrath explains how information-sharing between companies is helping to make UAE's construction sites a safer place. Sarah Pursey reports.

**Accidents on site** are often viewed as an inevitable part of the construction industry. However, understanding the risks and dangers involved in the trade can play a huge role in reducing the frequency and severity of incidents. By encouraging companies to pool information and share experiences, BuildSafe UAE hopes to demonstrate that accidents are preventable and that safety is ethically 'the right thing to do' and business-wise 'the smart thing to do'.

**Word spreads fast**

Formed in January 2008, the company started life as BuildSafe Dubai – a knowledge-sharing group comprising five construction companies, exchanging ideas on best practice and risk management with regards to site safety.

"The BuildSafe initiative was launched in Dubai to encourage construction stakeholders to collaborate and to get their senior managers to agree to the philosophy that being mindful of health, safety and welfare is the right thing to do," explains Mr McGrath.

"The idea was very well received, with word spreading fast and more and more organisations wanting to join the initiative," comments Mr McGrath. Indeed, the success of the venture saw the organisation's influence spread to cover the whole emirate area and logically led to the organisation re-branding as BuildSafe UAE.

"We now have 73 signatory members, with many more set to come on-line in 2009," he tells us, explaining that BuildSafe UAE's target membership is more

wide-reaching than simply main contractors: "We are after any construction stakeholder that actually has foot-on-ground and delivers work on site. So, we're looking to attract individuals such as project managers, safety managers, developers and main contractors," he explains.

**Unique statistics database**

By encouraging companies to pool information, BuildSafe UAE hopes to raise awareness and communicate potential dangers and lessons learnt in order to prevent accidents across the industry. "We have tool box talks, safety alerts, risk assessments, posters, safety management plans, safety presentations. We share and upload this information onto our website – Buildsafeuae.com – and circulate shared safety alerts via email."

By investing time, developing relationships and ensuring confidentiality, BuildSafe UAE has managed to collect accident and fatality statistics – voluntarily supplied by its members. "We have created the only statistics database of its kind in Dubai," McGrath comments. The aim of this is to target weaknesses in safety practice, as he points out: "These statistics have helped to create a performance benchmark indicator against

which stakeholder members can measure their company's performance and then develop measures to address areas where they are falling short."

**Confidentiality guaranteed**

Companies sharing information about on site accidents is vital to rectifying existing problems and preventing similar incidents. Safety alerts – straightforward notices with imagery to alert the on site workforce to hazards – have proved very successful to this end: "Sharing safety alerts between competitors really is the best way of communicating risk and teaching one another about lessons that have been learnt," comments Mr McGrath.

Yet, encouraging companies to open up about mistakes made has not been without its challenges: "Traditionally, companies would produce safety alerts but then keep them internally to avoid being exposed to bad publicity, which could ruin their reputation," he tells us. So, in the past, such incidences were kept fairly confidential.

"But Graham McCaig, Chairperson at BuildSafe UAE and General Manager of Ducto Balfour Beatty, firmly believes that companies should, without question, immediately share information about any fatality, to prevent such an accident happening again," McGrath tells us, and drives the point home with a chilling example: "Mr McCaig came across a trench collapse, and within a week, that trench collapse accident had been replicated on a competitor's construc-



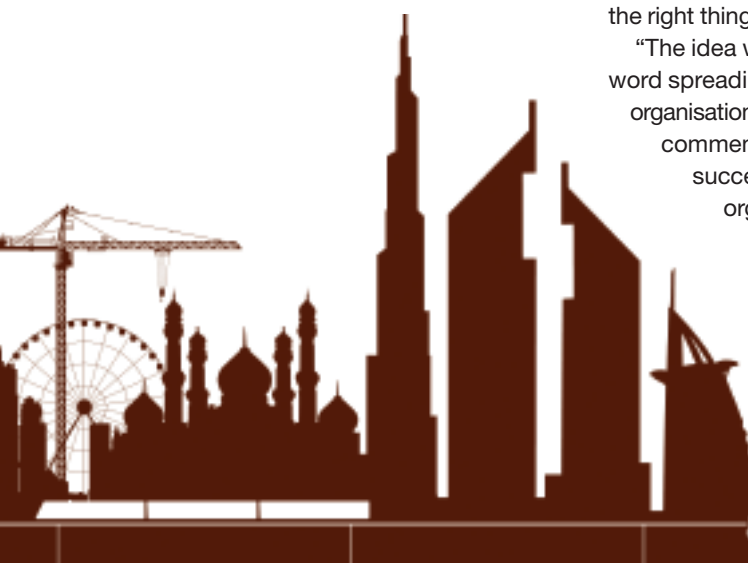
tion site. It really shocked him, his company and the whole industry, because that life could have easily been saved if such organisations had only communicated effectively between each other." The cast-iron promise of confidentiality has eased the industry's concerns over such transparency, as McGrath stresses: "We obviously want to show the alert but have no desire to damage the company's reputation. So, before the safety alerts are distributed, all logos are removed and there is no indication to competitors from which company this alert originated."

**A hard market to regulate**

The sheer volume of projects, plus the fact that different sections and work zones are controlled by a plethora of bodies makes the UAE's construction industry very difficult to regulate. For this reason, McGrath believes self regulation will be vital in the future: "Regardless of whether a regulator is on site or not, we should be ensuring that the quality of work being delivered is of the highest standard," he stresses.

But for self regulation to work encouraging its widespread adoption will be crucial, and McGrath provides the following reason: "On projects here, you are working with a number of main contractors to deliver a single project. Whilst your organisation might have an excellent H&S management system, another company on site could have a terrible one – thus exposing both your workforce and your reputation to risk," he explains. "The only way to eliminate that is by having the industry improve its own benchmark, forcing contractors to implement systems and, in turn, weeding out the poor performers."

To this end, BuildSafe UAE has been successful in securing a number of meetings with the authorities in Dubai and Mr McGrath is hopeful that this "could eventually support a move towards one body controlling the health and safety market here – not only in Dubai, but possibly for the whole UAE." ↘



**Healthy business prospects**

Cutting corners with regards to Health and Safety represents a false economy, believes McGrath. “Organisations operating here, especially those from countries with little experience in safety and welfare, are putting these considerations to the bottom of the agenda. In turn, they are facing the consequence: Fatalities,” he states. “But the ongoing costs of a fatality are huge: the cost of insurance, the blood money, your business’ reputation, loss of future work, delays to the project work – not to mention the morale of your workforce.”

A major aim of BuildSafe UAE has thus been to encourage firms to look at the bigger picture, as McGrath’s message to companies illustrates: “It may affect your bottom line but you have to look at it long-term – in the current economic crisis, the companies that survive will be the ones that are smart and have invested heavily in the right systems. And H&S really does play a vital role in this,” he claims. “So, a big part of encouraging companies to invest more in H&S is really getting them to understand the big financial positives that relate to it.”

**Building up a reputation**

New for 2009 will be a range of initiatives including animated safety stories. “These will communicate safety messages in different languages, delivered in an animated format. Basically, taking a traditional Safety Alert and turning it into an animation, in an attempt to get the huge number of people employed at site level to understand the messages we are trying to voice”, explains McGrath. “So, we will be very excited to see how the workforce responds to these.

Two huge master developers – Nakheel and Aldar Properties – will also be welcomed on board this year as signatory members – a huge step forward for the programme which McGrath believes “will undoubtedly lead these master developers expecting their preferred construction stake holders to fall into line with BuildSafe UAE’s objectives.”

Summing up the initiative, Mr McGrath tells us, “It’s really about individuals coming together to try and get the government to support the initiative. Thus far, BuildSafe UAE has been very well received and this year will hopefully be taken even further.”

*Find out more by registering your details at [www.buildsafeuae.com](http://www.buildsafeuae.com)*