

EPIC: an immersive and experiential induction

What are the issues?

Inductions are ubiquitous in construction and workers experience them whenever they move to a new project, which may be very frequently. There is evidence that typical inductions have become ineffectual, partly due to workers thinking that they have 'heard it all before'.¹

What was done?

EPIC is one of the most striking examples of where Tideway have tried to do something 'transformational' in relation to occupational safety and health (OSH).



Loughborough has worked with Tideway from an early stage and proposed an immersive, interactive induction that was then developed with the actor-based training organisation Active Training Team (ATT). Tideway and ATT built upon previous immersive, behaviour-based OSH training programmes (such as the one-off initiative on Crossrail) and developed a full-day event in which actors take participants through – and engage them in – a 'real life'

Industry benefits and opportunities

- Large projects and programmes could easily adapt EPIC to their contexts.
- Scenarios and contexts could be developed for different sectors whilst retaining the underlying messages.
- There is a potential for regional roll-out of a more generic version of EPIC to engage smaller projects and SMEs.

scenario involving an incident on a construction site. Participants have an opportunity to discuss and influence the outcomes of the scenario being acted out in front of them in a purpose-built facility.

EPIC is one of several steps in Tideway's onboarding process, along with the Central Onboarding Facility and site inductions. Everyone who works on Tideway must attend EPIC, irrespective of their role and the duration of their work on the project.

The objectives of EPIC are:

- For people to leave the session having had a visceral experience that instils an intelligent and respectful wariness of the dangers of the workplace
- To gain buy-in to the fact that, regardless of role or function, OSH is everyone's equal responsibility
- To engage everyone in understanding that people at all levels should expect to challenge and be challenged over OSH issues.

EPIC was therefore designed to be experiential, challenging and different to the standard OSH training programmes and project inductions used in construction.

What did we do?

Having been involved in the initial proposal of the EPIC concept and watched it evolve over time, we were interested in exploring participants' perceptions and experiences of EPIC, and understanding whether EPIC was realising its objectives.

Our review of EPIC,ⁱⁱ as part of our longitudinal project-wide study funded by IOSH,ⁱⁱⁱ involved:

- Each member of the research team attending and experiencing EPIC first-hand as 'normal' delegates¹
- The research team members reviewing their experiences individually and then as a group providing direct feedback to Tideway as part of the periodic review of EPIC
- Analysing exit feedback collected from 530 EPIC participants over a three-month period
- An online survey of mainly office-based staff working on the project (224 responses)
- Focus groups with frontline workers at two of the main drive sites
- Interviews with a wide variety of people working on Tideway, including senior managers.

What did we find?

The feedback we received was very positive. 79% of the respondents to our survey agreed that EPIC was 'excellent'. When asked 'why?' there were a variety of responses including:

"This reflects real life. Unless you have been exposed to [the] consequence of a work accident you are not prepared for the aftermath. This should help people understand the wider issues of safety and should help avoid incidents that lead to the consequence and subsequent enquiry."

People made a point of describing EPIC as feeling 'different' and 'innovative' and said that they found the day informative and thought-provoking, with a clear and powerful message. One person commented that:

"I had never experienced anything like it before. I loved the fact that it was interactive and emotional. It actually meant something. I came away feeling as though I could challenge a construction site worker should I feel the need to."

78% of survey respondents agreed that attending EPIC had made them more confident to stop any unsafe work that they saw. 72% agreed that EPIC had improved their understanding of the project and made them feel part of Tideway.



Analysis of feedback forms from participants at EPIC revealed that people found the day interactive (n=200), well delivered (n=114), engaging (n=83) and informative (n=73). When asked an open question on what they would take away from the day, the three most common responses were:

- Personal responsibility for safety (n=90)
- Communication skills (n=82)
- The importance of safety (n=73)

Negative comments about EPIC tended to focus on the emotional nature of the day, which a few people found to be too stressful, and the behavioural theory in the afternoon session, which some people didn't think was relevant and felt that it made the day unnecessarily long.

¹ Each member attended on a different day to experience the actors playing different roles and responding to different cohorts of attendees

The focus groups and interviews suggested that EPIC had generated unrealistically high expectations amongst some workers regarding issues such as personal protective equipment (PPE) and welfare facilities on site, particularly during the early stages of the project. Some also questioned whether EPIC has actually changed how workers behave on site, so a key challenge for Tideway will be how to reinforce the message from EPIC once people begin working on site.

We will continue to study the development and outcomes of EPIC as part of our longitudinal research and further insights will be published in due course.

What have we learnt?

EPIC is an excellent example of Tideway's 'transformational' approach to OSH and has been very well received. It also provides a number of important lessons for the construction industry and OSH practitioners in other sectors, namely that:

- If you want to genuinely engage workers in meaningful conversations about OSH, you need to move beyond the use of traditional PowerPoint briefings and provide a more immersive and interactive experience for workers. This takes time, thought and commitment.
- Initiatives such as EPIC are as much about making people feeling valued and creating a sense of common purpose, as they are about raising awareness of OSH issues. The importance of this should not be underestimated in an industry that has traditionally been poor at valuing a largely itinerant workforce.
- It is important to think carefully about the amount of behavioural theory to introduce to participants, as this can be off-putting for some people and might be perceived as irrelevant. Behavioural theory is arguably most effective when its less overt and more embedded in the scenario being acted out.

- Maintaining the element of 'surprise' is critical to the impact of immersive OSH programmes such as EPIC. Tideway appears to have been very successful at encouraging participants not to spoil the surprise for their colleagues – 92% of survey respondents agreed that 'EPIC was surprising'.
- Transformational programmes such as EPIC can raise expectations amongst workers joining a project. It is therefore important to manage expectations and deliver on commitments, particularly when they are about being better than industry norms. It also underlines the need for a consistent onboarding experience.
- Although the notion of challenging unsafe behaviour is becoming more accepted in construction, immersive and interactive programmes can help people feel more confident in challenging colleagues. This is particularly the case for people who are less familiar with working on construction sites.
- Immersive sessions like EPIC won't suit everyone. Care needs to be taken to manage the emotional nature of the day, which some people can find stressful. A balance needs to be achieved between forewarning people of the nature of the day and spoiling the element of surprise.
- The duration of the event needs careful consideration, particularly for people travelling long distances. It is also important to recognise that people's concentration and attention may diminish if the day is too long.

ⁱ e.g. Pink, S, Tutt, DE, Dainty, ARJ and Gibb, AGF (2010) *Ethnographic Methodologies for Construction Research: Knowing, Practice and Interventions. Building Research and Information*, 38-6, 647-659. ISSN: 0961-3218, <https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/17838>.

ⁱⁱ Summary authors: Pinder J, Gibb AGF, Dainty ARJ, Haslam RA, Bust PD, Jones W & Fuller P (August 2017) Loughborough University.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) and Tideway are supporting Loughborough's longitudinal research to trace the effectiveness of HSW interventions throughout the Tideway project.