



David Thomson has been an elected safety representative for nine years. Photograph: CAN Group

A passion for saving lives

Anna Ryland
British Safety Council

David Thomson, the Health and Safety Champion of the International Safety Awards 2016, believes that in the current challenging economic environment everyone should get involved in safety.

Working for two decades as an inspection engineer on oil and gas platforms off Scotland's north coast has given David Thomson, of CAN Group, a unique perspective on health and safety in the oil and gas industry.

Established in 1986, CAN Group is a market leading provider of asset integrity services. Its business streams CAN, ENGTEQ and VENTEQ deliver a comprehensive asset integrity service, spanning inspection, maintenance, access solutions, integrity engineering,

quality assurance and quality control services, to the energy industry across the world. Operating globally with bases in Aberdeen and New Orleans, CAN Group has a workforce of approximately 900 people and an annual turnover of £82 million.

In a nutshell, CAN is responsible for ensuring that offshore sites such as platforms, FPSOs (floating production and storage vessels) and onshore sites such as refineries, are inspected regularly using various non-destructive testing techniques to keep them operational and safe. CAN inspectors check for cracks, leaks and damage to the sites. This work is done via rope access as a method of getting to otherwise inaccessible areas. The company pioneered the use of rope access in the oil and gas industry in the 1980s, as an alternative to traditional access methods, such as scaffolding.

"Asset integrity management is the company's core business," explains David Thomson. He says it involves

looking after such offshore and onshore structures as oil refineries and oil rigs, which require regular inspection and maintenance because of corrosion and process operations. "We have a large number of highly skilled inspectors, both on and offshore, who ensure that the client's pipework and pressure systems are kept in serviceable condition. They carry out different types of inspection procedures, such as radiography and ultrasonic inspection."

David's professional journey

David works as an offshore inspection engineer (OIE). "I am responsible for ensuring that the structure and pressure systems of an offshore installation are in good condition and fully compliant with the current regulations. I also lead a team of inspectors and advise on repair work to ensure that it's done to the correct standard. I have been working for the company for 14 years, both onshore and offshore in the UK and abroad, in Azerbaijan and Georgia."

Originally from the Highlands, David started his professional life as a fabricator (a joiner who works with steel), working for 16 years on a number of projects, including civil engineering, mining and oil and gas. "Around the year 2000, I decided to follow a wider professional direction and took a quality control/quality assurance role, working offshore. I became an NDT (non-destructive testing) inspector and progressed to become a team leader. Non-invasive testing enables us to look through a cross-section of steel and see if there is a problem inside it, for example, internal corrosion. I have been working in an OIE role for 10 years."

David describes his light-bulb moment: "It wasn't until I went offshore that I saw things differently. In the past, the onshore construction environment had a more macho culture, where safety was just seen as slowing things down. Offshore culture was much more focused on understanding potential hazards and controlling the work. This was largely due to the findings from the Piper Alpha disaster. I saw the benefits of safety measures and that there was no real impact on how quickly the work was done with the controls that were put in place.

"At this point, I also became an elected safety representative (ESR),

which gave me hands-on experience of safety. This was nine years ago and I've been an ESR ever since. After attending the Piper 25 conference in 2013, [to mark the 25th anniversary of the Piper Alpha disaster] I realised that I needed to make a greater contribution, so I applied to become a member of the G18 Safety Rep Group for Step Change in Safety. The group is comprised of 18 elected safety reps who are trying to address challenges that the industry is facing.



My ultimate reward is watching my colleagues get on the flight home to their families safely



"I've since become chair of the G18 group, which can be as rewarding as it is challenging. I found that I can have a more proactive role in what I do; I identify problems and address them first hand. It gave me the impetus to get involved in the work of Step Change in Safety groups, such as Helicopter Safety, Asset Integrity and Joined-Up Thinking."

David's work as an elected safety representative is voluntary. Safety is of paramount importance to CAN Group and his role is fully supported by the company's dedicated team of quality, health, safety, environment (QHSE)

professionals, headed up by QHSE manager, Gillian Farrell. CAN Group benefits from the combined knowledge and experience of the QHSE team which is reflected in its safety record. All QHSE needs are managed by the QHSE team. Technical safety officers provide technical safety support for radiography and inspection, rope access, trades and fabric maintenance and integrity management.

Among the initiatives David has introduced is a video for the Beatrice platform [an oilfield consisting of three platforms located 24km off the north east coast of Scotland] to show people how to launch a lifeboat when there is no coxswain available. He also produced a number of other films to show positive behaviour and hazard awareness, as well as a tool for health and safety audits.

"The first video was made following an explosion on the Rough platform [a natural gas storage facility situated off the east coast of England] a few years ago, when the team couldn't launch a lifeboat because the coxswain didn't know how to deal with that particular model. When I worked on the Beatrice Alpha platform which had a similar lifeboat, I made an instructional video showing how to launch a lifeboat without the full rigmarole of a nautical genius. The video is humorous but with a serious message, featuring the people who were on the platform. We found that by injecting some



Operations such as rope access are categorised as high risk. Photograph: CAN Group.

humour, it kept people's attention. The company rolled it out to all new starters on the platform."

David has also helped produce instructional films for the offshore and onshore workforce. These range from norovirus awareness, through to major accident hazards and barrier management. "I was part of the production team for the Step Change in Safety award winning Joined-Up-Thinking campaign. The videos, rolled out across the oil and gas industry, use real-life events as case studies to improve our industry's safety performance," he says. They address issues that are directly related to hydrocarbon releases which could have devastating consequences. The videos have been used internationally and have received very positive feedback.

"I also hope that my more recent work on workforce engagement has helped keep the number of injuries down. I've also produced a small foldable pocket guide for safety reps as a handy reminder of the expectations and responsibilities their role entails."

The challenges

With the current low oil price, the oil and gas industry is facing its most challenging time. This has led to rota changes for the offshore workforce. Some had been working two weeks offshore and then had three weeks at home. This has now changed to three-weeks offshore and three-weeks at home. From a health and safety perspective, this led to a focus on managing fatigue and the effects that working longer can have on offshore personnel.

David explains: "Offshore, everybody works a 12-hour shift, e.g. from seven in the morning to seven at night. An oil rig never shuts down. It never sleeps, it just keeps going 24 hours a day, 365 days a year."

From a day-to-day operational perspective, CAN Group's biggest challenge, besides managing its workforce and equipment remotely on offshore and onshore oil and gas sites, is ensuring that safe systems of work are in place, understood and followed. Some of the company's activities are categorised as high risk, such as rope access and radiographic inspection. These activities are regulated by legislation and standards that

require competent personnel, robust procedures, good supervision and leadership. Everyone offshore is aware that in case of an emergency, there is only one medical professional onboard and hospital support can be hours away by helicopter.

"It is always a challenge to make people understand that they don't have to cut down on safety in order to continue to operate in a more challenging financial environment. It is important that onshore and offshore personnel work together on these issues.

"Everybody is encouraged to make their voice heard and to stop any kind of work or project when they see a potentially dangerous situation emerging. No one should be afraid to be heard, something that over the years has been a challenge in the industry.

"To get this message across, I made another film, which features a poem 'I could've saved a life today'. It's about a worker who saw a colleague doing something very unsafe and turned away because he didn't want to get involved and make a fuss. For the video I got one person from each discipline (electricians, operators and even a helicopter pilot), on the platform to say one line. The message was: it is okay to speak out and it's okay to stop the job. This is a way of preventing accidents. The video has received some 20,000 hits on social media and on the Step Change in Safety website."

Asked what gives him the most professional satisfaction, David said: "There is only one ultimate reward for

my efforts and that is watching my colleagues get on the flight home to their families safely."

His future professional plans include undertaking an NEBOSH NGC qualification, "so I've got a stronger base from which to contribute to the company's safety plans. I am also looking to start a business degree course with the Open University this year."

Health and safety champion

As a member of the British Safety Council for 15 years, CAN Group has applied for (and been awarded) the International Safety Award for the past eight consecutive years, also winning the first Sector Award for the Oil, Gas & Mining category in 2013.

In 2015, for the first time, the company put David forward for the Health and Safety Champion award. The news that he won the accolade in 2016 took David by surprise. Working offshore at the time, he was unable to collect the award in person. "I was gutted and elated at the same time. I would have given anything to be there.

"The award recognises the shared achievement of all my colleagues, who have a vested interest in the health and safety culture of the offshore industry. Without the support our QHSE team and our first class backroom staff, I couldn't have achieved it."

The International Safety Awards 2017 are now open for applications. More info at:
www.britsafe.org/isa



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