

Umeme prioritises safety, health

By Owen Wagabaza

His peers envied him, for after graduating with a bachelor's degree in chemical engineering, Moses Ssempuga immediately got a job at a plastics manufacturing plant in Kampala as a senior chemist in 2000. "My job description involved mixing all kinds of chemicals," Ssempuga says. Unfortunately, in 2012, after 12 years of working with the plastics plant, Ssempuga was diagnosed with liver cancer, and the doctors attributed the cause to Ssempuga's consistent contact with chemicals. "To make plastics, pellets are heated in huge injection molding machines. The machines, sometimes, eject sticky plastic that smokes and smoulders and that workers can breathe in. And this is the situation we found ourselves in at the plant. It was so bad that workers would complain of nosebleeds and headaches," says Ssempuga. Because the company lacked a clear and elaborate policy on occupational safety and health, equipment such as gear to protect the workers was not provided. Even when Ssempuga was diagnosed with cancer, he says the administration contributed nothing to his medication. I had to sell almost everything that I had acquired in the last 12 years to raise money for medication. Fortunately, the cancer was still in its early stages and I survived. Unfortunately, many Ugandans, just like Ssempuga, are employed in organisations with no policies on occupation safety and health.

What is occupation safety and health?

According to Ronald Miti, an occupational health expert, occupational health and safety is the aspect where an employer puts in place systems and processes that prevent non-intentional injuries arising from the processes and systems employed and behaviour accruing from the people who interface with these systems. Such systems ensure that the work environment is safe and free from physical, chemical and biological processes, but also that people have the right mindset to be able to work within those processes. "Occupational safety is, therefore, that branch where employers work diligently to ensure that non-intentional injuries to the persons do not occur both from the safety perspective and the health industrial hygiene



Pupils display placards with information on how to keep out of dangers of illegal usage of electricity

perspective," Miti says. Occupational health focuses on three different objectives. They are, the maintenance and promotion of workers' health; working capacity and the improvement of working environment; and work to become conducive to safety and health. It also focuses on the development of work organisations and working cultures in a direction which supports health and safety at work and in doing so, also promotes a positive social climate and smooth operation and may enhance productivity of the undertakings.

Why should an organisation have an occupational safety and health policy?

"It is a duty of care, but also, when an employer lacks the various systems and processes for safety and health, employees suffer various injuries and illnesses and this will ultimately lead to compensations and various legal challenges. The events in turn will hurt the business' profitability and people's productivity," Stella Baliruno, a human resource specialist, says. She adds that running a business without health and safety systems means that you are injuring and maiming people, creating incapacity within the community and this hurts the reputation of the company. "Besides, staff is the biggest resource for every business, it is, therefore, important that you take care of them so that they can be productive and take the business forward," Baliruno says.

Safety at Umeme

According to Herbert Kanyali,



A staff of Umeme teaching pupils on safety and health management

the head of safety at Umeme, safety remains an integral and essential part of everything at Umeme Ltd.

"Occupational safety and health is a top priority for our business, staff and our contractors. Our long-term success depends on working to ensure the safety of our workers, contractors and visitors to our work sites and the general public," Kanyali says.

Kanyali adds that a safe and healthy workplace is a fundamental right of every employee and also a business imperative that is well articulated in Umeme's core values.

"We place the safety of our employees and the public at the centre of our actions, and we do this by ensuring the protection of our workers and contractors through adhering to various national and international legislations. They include the Occupational Health

and Safety Act 2006, the safety code, the International Finance Corporation (IFC) performance standards and various related International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions," Kanyali explains.

At Umeme Ltd, we approach safety in several ways. For worker safety for example, all workers that are exposed to various hazards that may cause harm to them are provided with personal protection equipment that includes overalls, high viz jackets, overcoats, raincoats, working gloves, goggles, hard hats, safety shoes and boots, bee suits riding helmets and suits among others.

The company also provides workers with tools and equipment such as proximity or voltage detectors, earthing kits, fall arrest safety belts and arc flash helmets, among others. The usage of this equipment enhances the safety of all workers.

Umeme further ensures that staff undergo mandatory and specialised safety training that equips workers and contractors with the requisite skills and competences that enables them to avoid accidents. Training needs for staff are determined following a job safety analysis in which key job risks and hazards are identified.

Some of the training includes, defensive driving training, first aid training and risk assessment firefighting training. Also, technical staff undergo operating regulations for high voltage systems (ORHVS) in order to operate the networks using the permit to work system.

Furthermore, staff and contractors undergo a rigorous process that includes theoretical and practical training after which successful candidates are accorded different levels of authorisations. No staff or contractors are permitted to

operate the network without the ORHVS certification.

Safety management systems

Umeme Ltd adopted a plan do check act system of safety management, which is aligned to key international safety standards. The plan – do, check, act approach – achieves a balance between the systems and behavioural aspects of management. It also treats health and safety management as an integral part of good management generally.

"We recognise that our employees and contractors while undertaking network operations may have an impact on the environment safety and social wellbeing of the community. We, therefore, comprehend and endorse the need for adherence to environmental, social and governance (ESG) policies consistent with the values of Umeme Ltd," Kanyali explains.

The ESG subcommittee is the apex body that governs safety and environment in Umeme Ltd and reviews safety and environment performance every quarter.

In order to continuously improve the safety behaviour and performance of the organisation, there are safety committees which comprise staff and contractors in all offices. They hold regular safety meetings, tool box talks, workplace and tool inspections in order to identify and mitigate against potential hazards.

Public safety

Umeme Ltd recognises the fact that electricity, when mishandled can lead to death or injury. The continuous expansions of the network and increase in the numbers of new connections invariably increase the levels of risk to the general public in terms of network failure and interference.

In addition to a network refurbishment programme that seeks to identify and restore poor sections of the network, the company has a comprehensive public safety communication programme that uses radio, print, television and social media to reach out to members of the public.

In addition, the district teams undertake school and community visits during which they educate pupils and the public about the dangers of illegal usage of electricity. Over 100 electricity safety clubs were formed and are active in different schools, where pupils become the safety ambassadors by educating their fellow pupils and communities in which they live.