INTRODUCTION

Human beings communicate with each other frequently and in many different ways: most obviously in spoken words and in writing, but also via codes, gestures, facial expressions and body language. Even our behaviour can communicate a powerful message to those around us. Communicating with each other is routine, second nature, therefore we hardly ever think about the process and we may believe we have nothing to learn about how to communicate effectively.

The problem with everyday communications is that we tend to use natural, non-technical language and informal phrasing. For example, talking with friends and family, we can make many errors of communication: use the wrong words, put words in the wrong order, choose phrases that can be interpreted in several different ways, make 'slips of the tongue' and assume that the other person had understood what we intended. We also make allowances for any messages we receive that are less than perfect – we fill in gaps or make assumptions about what was meant.

Everyday communication errors are unlikely to have major untoward consequences; when we make a call on our cell phone in a noisy environment or the earpiece we are using distorts the sound, we don't expect that calling the person back at a later time will have extremely negative consequences – it rarely does. In work situations however, certain communications are 'safety critical' in the sense that highly damaging consequences may follow if we make errors that result in information we send or receive being, for example unclear, incomplete, not received, misheard/misread, sent too late or not understood (Bellamy 1984).

A specific problem area in work communications is the communication *between* work teams at shift handover. Problems have been found particularly with transferring information concerned with ongoing maintenance tasks that extend across several shifts (Health and Safety Executive 1996).

This short document is a form of communication, but it's a one-way communication and the authors have tried their best in hopes that the reader will understand the content by making the words clear and unambiguous. Of course, in the absence of feedback from the reader, they cannot know for sure that their attempt to transfer information from one place to another place has been successful.

TERMS/DEFINITIONS

Communication: An act or instance of transmitting information, or, a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior (Webster's dictionary).

Shift Handover (or shift turnover): The process whereby the shift team going off duty hands over responsibility for plant operation and safety to the shift team coming on duty.

DISCUSSION

Level of concern

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) is the body responsible for industrial health and safety in the United Kingdom. HSE regulates all UK industry using a process of site inspections, management system audits, safety case assessments and incident investigations. Through these activities, HSE inspectors have found that the same 'top ten' human factors issues continue to arise. Problems with safety critical communication is one of that top ten. In their publication, 'Successful