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RiskTalk at Swissgrid

Interview with Kurt Meyer, Chief Risk Officer of SwissGrid, December 2017

Company Description

Swissgrid is Switzerland's national transmission grid operator responsible for providing a safe supply of electricity as well as maintaining, modernising, and expanding the grid efficiently to meet future supply. Swissgrid engages 450 employees and many subcontractors who operate the 6,700km-long grid, 24 hours a day, in a dangerous, unforgiving environment.

Challenge/Situation

Safety is the top priority in everything we do at Swissgrid, but we are operating under strong pressures to perform and save costs. In the past, the priorities were not always clear – some of our employees or subcontractors would not even notice if they compromised their own safety, so as to save money or to deliver the service to a tough deadline. If issues were reported, they got noted down, and sorted out on an ad hoc basis. We lacked a system that tracked issues and ensured that they were properly resolved. Further, without total anonymity, and using templates coming from above, employees were having a hard time speaking up about issues.

Why RiskTalk

We chose RiskTalk for its simplicity. We looked at the tools that were available on the market but most of them offered additional features beyond the scope of what we needed. Some tools were so complex that they forced the user to think like a risk manager. The ease of use was a huge selling point for us. We did not have to provide any additional training or hire additional staff. RiskTalk allowed employees to manage risks on top of their day-to-day jobs. The convenient tool was right there on their smartphones and with them wherever they went.

Experience

We launched RiskTalk at a substation with a small group of users and gradually cascaded it throughout the organisation all the way to our subcontractors. There was definitely a buzz around RiskTalk. I remember it was such a hit among the initial users that others started asking me if they too could gain access to the tool. Submitting an issue takes about 2 minutes. With such a low threshold and a simple interface, which allows people to explain what they saw in their language, they began reporting issues whenever they saw something – big or small, related to our core priorities.

The user is not asked to categorize the issue, we have a “triage team” that handles the categorization at the back office, as part of the RiskTalk monitoring environment. About twelve of us formed the triage team, agreeing that we take turns daily in monitoring new issues and allocate them to each other using RiskTalk’s kanban interface – among us, we cover all issues that come up. I am on the triage team, so is the head of safety and security, of maintenance and so on. We did not have to hire any new staff – RiskTalk in fact saves us time in finding and dealing with issues. We do this because it helps us be the high-reliability organization we want to be. At the same time, we are talking across functions, and bringing down the proverbial walls that divide us into silos.

At every step of the resolution process, the reporter (who raised the issue in question) is kept in the loop until their problem is fixed. The feedback loop has proven to be one of the key motivators for people to use the tool. The beauty of it is that although total anonymity is an option – our people rarely report anonymously. The culture has changed –instead of playing the blame game, we focus on solving issues. It’s not about who was wrong, but what is right.

Results

RiskTalk received glowing feedback throughout the organization. Our CEO pays homage to the improvements fostered by RiskTalk, and our new “can-do” culture in his regular town hall meetings. Indeed, we have seen a shift in mindset with safety becoming more important than ever, while many people think of RiskTalk as a “way of getting things done.” In 2017, about 300 issues were reported, of which 280 have already been resolved. We acted on them with our core values and priorities in mind – and we allocated resources accordingly, too. RiskTalk ensures that all the issues are tracked and never forgotten – and that we hold ourselves accountable to the values we espouse.