Common mistakes in drone integration (and how to avoid them)

While the adoption of new technologies can create excitement about the great potential they hold, this excitement can itself lead to overly hasty adoption without a framework of systems in place to ensure safety, return on investment, and the full achievement of the strategic advantage technologies hold.

Common mistakes include:

Rushing to buy drones

Technology providers are understandably very excited about the machines they have created. They are often also very good salespeople. The history of drone technology is littered with examples of organisations that rushed to buy the latest and greatest drones without really planning for how they would be integrated into business-as-usual processes. An additional problem to this is that when the program fails for a lack of planning, sometimes the whole idea of using drones can be sullied by a bad previous experience.

The solution:

Before buying drones you really need to understand why you are doing so first, and only then go to market to find the solution that will give you what you need. You also need to make sure you have the training and operational procedures in place so the drone will actually be used in the way intended, and so you can actually measure the return on investment.

Unstructured use

Many of our clients come to us because they've just discovered someone in the organisation is using drones without permission. The reality is the capability increase is so compelling that often a group of workers somewhere in the organisation just bring their own drones and start using them for their daily work. As organisations often don't have any policy or procedure on drones, the worker just assumes the absence of any policy or procedure saying they can't use drones means they can.

This obviously presents a huge risk to the organisation from many perspectives, including legal, regulatory, safety and stakeholder/reputational. No organisation wants to stop its workforce from innovating and bringing new technology with such obvious benefits. And even if you are only using a few drones now the reality is that use will increase.

The solution:

This is why a solid framework of policy and procedure is so important – not to stop the use of drones, but to support their use in a safe and efficient manner. You need to create a policy and procedure framework that is simple to use, does not put in place unnecessary barriers, and is widely known and accessible in your organization. People have to know that it's there, know how to use it, and not feel like it's just there to stop them using drones.

Under-investment in training

Even organisations using drones commonly under-invest in training and thus leave themselves open to risk while also failing to achieve the full benefits of the technology. In such a new area as this, training is really about sharing knowledge and skills and being able to scale the capabilities so the organisation as a whole can benefit. While base-level training is needed for anyone wanting to use a drone, often the application training is not as widely shared. This can mean one section of a business unit is getting great results, but because they have no structured way of sharing their experiences by training other business units, the organisation as a whole is missing out.

The solution:

Realise that training is going to be a cost from the beginning – but a cost that enables the use of the technology, which benefits the organization. Make sure the cost of training is realistically budgeted in the integration plan so the cost doesn't come to haunt the project later and become a blocker. If you have a learning and development team engage them early in the integration as a key stakeholder.

Low or misdirected stakeholder engagement - internal

Sometimes one area of an organisation can gallop far ahead of the organisation as a whole, leaving other stakeholders behind. This can cause problems when people who need to know about the use of drones don't, or when the fast-moving area extends activity beyond the reach of the current policies and procedures – and then trouble ensues.

The solution:

When integrating drone technology it's a very wise idea to make sure others in your organisation know it's going to happen in advance, and their input can be sought. For example, you need to engage with whoever is responsible for your insurance. Often, the data security people need to be involved. Your safety and risk departments need to be across it as well.

By engaging with these stakeholders early you are much more likely to succeed and get the best out of the technology.

Low or misdirected stakeholder engagement - external

Then there is the public. Drones can create a range of emotions in the public, from excitement and interest, to anxiety and hostility. Not only are the drones a new technology, but they are also in a place (the sky) people are not used to being very aware about. When people are confronted with new technology in new environments they react in different ways. You need to be aware of this in advance, and take actions to ensure their re-actions are more on the interest/excitement end of the spectrum than the anxiety/hostility end.

The solution:

If any of your work involves flying where the public can see you it is highly recommended to engage with them in advance. This can be simply leafletting letterboxes, or putting up signs. Any operators who might come into contact with the public should also know how to explain what they are doing simply. When notified in advance the public can be very engaged and you can turn the use of drones into a valuable public relations exercise. When they are not notified in advance some members of the public can become understandably concerned to see an object flying in the sky when they were not expecting it to be there.

Attempting to exploit the regulations

Currently, in many jurisdictions it is legal to fly drones that weigh less than 2kg for commercial reasons without an accreditation (in Australia, a Remote Pilot Licence). This 'excluded' category was designed to assist small scale operators undertake basic drone-related activities, such as real estate photography, without needing to undertake a Remote Pilot Licence course.

While it may be legal for your organisation to take advantage of this, it is certainly not best practice to equate the 'excluded category' with the idea that you don't need any supporting structures. Sometimes internal advocates will maintain that operating under the excluded category equates with their being no need for policy and procedures and training around the use of drones. In our opinion these people are wrong. Your organisation needs policy, procedure and training for the use of any piece of potentially dangerous machinery, and the drone is just one.

The solution:

Hopefully your organization is used to operating different kinds of machinery safely and legally. You should use the existing understanding of the need for safe use practices for other types of machinery to extend that consideration to drones. People can get overly excited by the capability of drones and become very keen to use them immediately. You need to manage that expectation by pointing to the procedures around other technologies, and create one for drones.

Failing to train the managers

This is a common mistake. Often again caused by people concentrating only on the drone and not the wider workplace environment the drone will operate within. Trouble can arise when drone operators arrive to a workplace and start using the drones. Either the manager of the workplace can demand they stop, or else can just shrug and assume all the procedures are being followed by the operators. Both of these responses are problematic and are the result of low internal stakeholder management, including training.

The solution:

Engage managers early on in the process. Training the managers about the processes that need to be followed by operators is key both from a stakeholder management perspective and from a safety perspective. The managers do not need a large amount of training – just to be able to understand and recognise when the procedures are being followed and when they are not, and to be able to explain the procedures to others in the workplace.

Getting middle management engagement is key to a successful integration both in terms of driving commercial success, and ensuring a safe workplace.
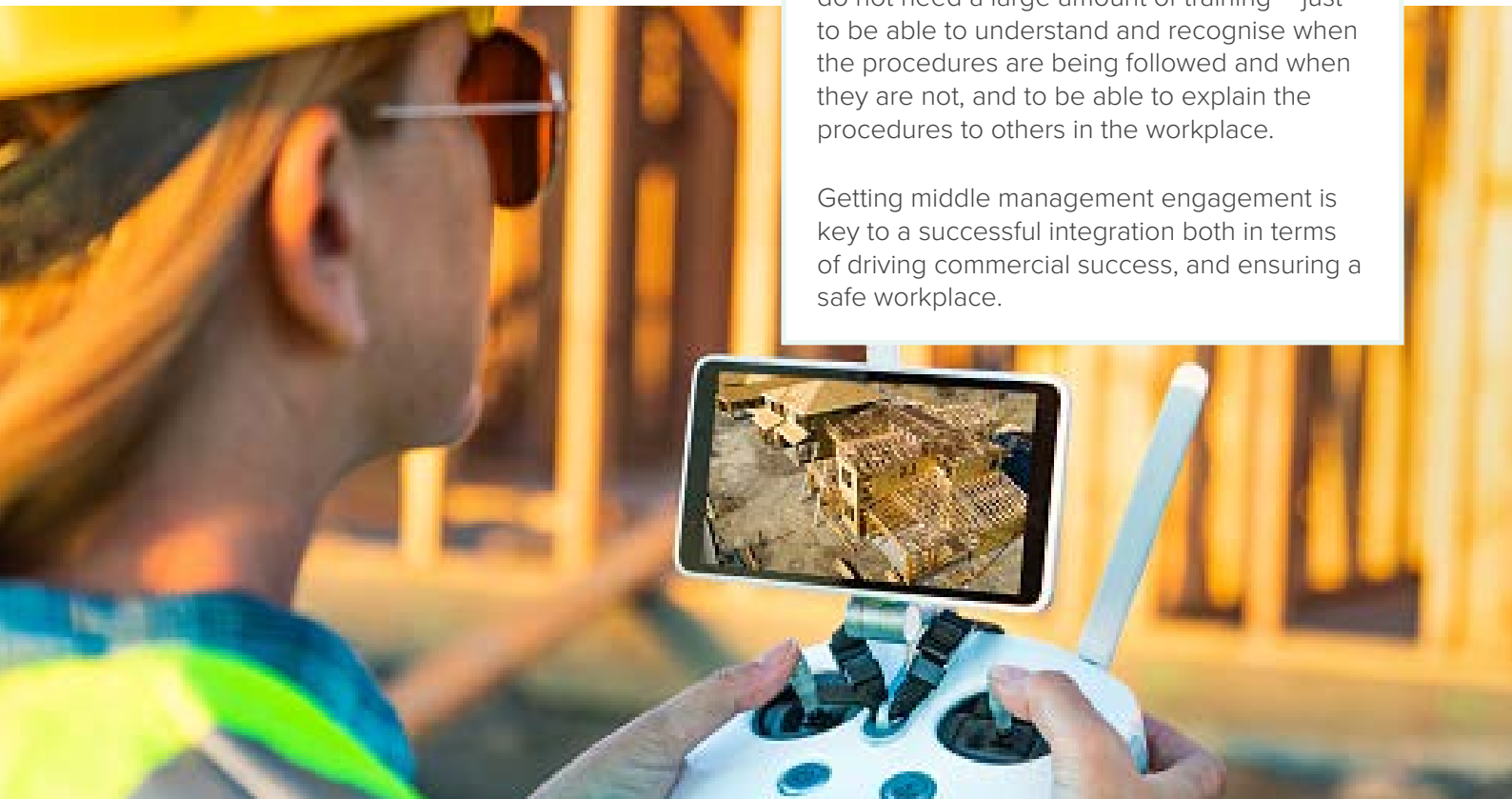
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