4
The Construction Industry

The industry was selected for several reasons. For many years it has been associated with a relatively poor health and safety performance, accounting for one in three of work-related deaths, one in three HSE prosecutions and one in two prohibition notices. This performance, as well as resulting from the many hazards of the industry, is widely regarded as the consequence of a number of underlying features of poor management arrangements for health and safety and a ‘risk tolerant’ attitude in the sector. In addition, the organisation of work in the industry undoubtedly presents many serious challenges to the implementation of contemporary prescriptions for systematic health and safety management. Temporary and multi-employer worksites, complex supply chain relationships and responsibilities in project commission, design and completion, large numbers of casual and relatively low-skilled workers and low levels of trade union organisation all contribute to these challenges. All of these factors are known to the industry and its regulators, and achieving better health and safety management arrangements that take them into account has been their stated aim for many years.

Our central interest in the case studies undertaken in the sector, as with those in chemicals, is the role of worker participation and particularly that of representative worker participation in the operation of such arrangements. In the construction industry, this means the examination of participatory approaches to risk management in an environment in which it is known that many of the supports for conventional approaches for representative worker participation are absent or underdeveloped. This absence of support for a more participatory approach has been one of the factors identified as responsible for the poor health and safety performance of the industry. As a result, regulatory requirements found in the CDM Regulations 1994 now oblige principal contractors to ensure that
employees and the self-employed are able to discuss and offer advice on health and safety. These measures are in addition to the rights that workers have to representation and consultation under the statutory requirements made in pursuit of Section 2 of the HSW Act 1974. We have selected five case studies, typical of a range of situations found in construction, to explore ways in which these provisions contribute to the achievement of participatory arrangements for health and safety in the sector as well as the supports and constraints to which such arrangements are subject.

First, however, as we did with chemicals, we outline some general features of the sector with respect to industrial structure, economic performance, workforce composition, labour relations, hazards and health and safety outcomes.

The industry

Construction accounts for 6 per cent of GDP, contributing about £80 billion per year to the economy. It employs between 1.5 and 2 million workers across 168,000 firms, and although employment in the sector has fluctuated it has more or less followed the pattern for the economy as a whole (Figure 4.1).

Work in the sector varies enormously, with construction projects ranging from new building, through maintenance of existing structures, to demolition. The scale of such projects also varies greatly from small-scale domestic work to major infrastructure projects that may take years to complete (NAO 2004: 2).

Figure 4.1 Employment in whole economy and construction 1978–2002 (index, 1978 = 100)
Source: Office for National Statistics.