

MANAGING CLIMBING WALL RISKS

Tom O'Rourke asks whether climbing wall management for compliance and profit are incompatible bedfellows?

The proliferation of climbing walls and pressure on discretionary leisure spend requires leisure centre managers to ensure that valuable capital assets are well used and remain financially viable. However, it's easy to lose sight of how apparently peripheral issues can impact on sustainability.

Climbing walls present leisure centre managers with different challenges compared with other facilities; for example, squash court use might result in minor injuries, but when a squash court is converted into a climbing wall facility the risks that need to be managed are of a different order of seriousness.

BALANCED APPROACH TO RISK

The remarkable innovations in indoor climbing are among the underlying reasons for the growth of this popular leisure activity, as Paul Cornforth, director of King Kong Climbing Walls, recognises: "In the past, climbing walls were set in dirty, dingy environments, whereas nowadays walls are innovative and aesthetically pleasing leisure facilities."

As indoor climbing became popular, so providers became more aware of the inherent risks. Unfortunately, in seeking to manage the associated risks, in some cases

the unintended consequence was that the quality of the climber's experience was adversely affected, while the potential for serious incidents remained.

Risk management of indoor climbing walls differs significantly to the appropriate approach in the provision of other facilities as the risk factors include a number of factors unique to climbing. This presents a challenge to the leisure manager who might not be a climber or indeed a risk management specialist. The consequences of poor risk management could allow potentially fatal situations to arise; or, at the other end of the spectrum, an approach that is so restrictive that the potential user is put off from using the facility.

RISK NODES

This conflict requires a balanced and considered approach to reflect the practical and economic aspects of managing the facility, the user's experience and key 'risk nodes' on the user's journey through the climbing experience.

One key risk node is when the user visits the centre for the first time. Their impression of the facility could be substantially influenced by their contact with the reception staff during the signing in process. This is a

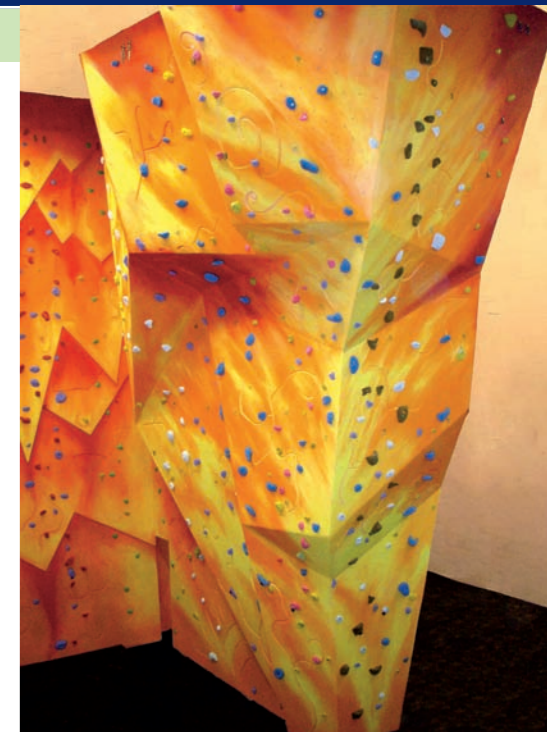
critical risk node as the first link in the risk management chain. No one wants to fill in lengthy, complex forms but if this process is flawed, or inappropriately managed, the risk management implications of the new user may be overlooked.

On the flip side, an experienced climber can feel insulted by being questioned by someone half their age with no climbing experience. This process is not then the paper chase that it is widely perceived to be, but a critical aspect of risk management and centre management – as, correctly conducted, it will go a long way to ensuring that the user has a positive experience.

BUYING IN THE EXPERTISE

In facilities where managers are not experienced climbers or risk management experts, an external review of risk management processes can be of real benefit, as Malcolm Tarling of the Association of British Insurers says: "Identifying the risks and having a risk management plan in place is essential. Experts can help identify the dangers operators may face and the action needed to minimise them. No activity can be totally risk free, but managing the risks will make it easier to obtain liability insurance."

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the risk was obvious". This raises the question, is the risk obvious to the reasonable man or to the injured user? Answering this question is substantially speculative, however proper risk management and a proper signing in process should ensure that all users are demonstrably aware of all material risks. An example of this is the rare but serious incidences of ground fall. It should be obvious to all climbers that ropes offer no safety unless the climber is properly tied in. However, despite this, there have been a number of serious injuries as a result of this basic failing.

As a consequence, the British Mountaineering Council (BMC) promoted a good practice 'check or deck' campaign which involved the distribution of informative material to climbing wall operators.

QUALITY CLIMBING IN A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Even with the most modern, sophisticated and expensive wall, the climber is never going to experience the thrill of climbing in a remote mountain pass or a day on the moors in an indoor environment.

Indoor climbing is all about the quality of the climbing experience, as Graeme Alderson, chief executive of The Climbing Works says: "The climbs are the leisure or climbing centres' product. In other words, if it sells a low-quality climbing experience it can't expect repeat visits."

Artificial climbing walls are also a large capital asset and require regular inspection and servicing, as Simon Palmer of Peak Structural Design explains: "Climbing walls

usually rely on an existing building for support. It is, therefore, essential that the main fixings back to the building are sound and frequently inspected by a suitably experienced structural engineer – particularly where wall fastenings may have deteriorated over time."

Ensuring the climbs are of high quality and are regularly re-set may seem a commercial issue. However, route setting is a risk management mine field, as it should be properly considered as safe construction, regarding building regulations. Health and Safety Executive inspector Gavin Howat says: "Stripping a wall of holds and then resetting the route needs to comply with regulations and operators should make sure that they are familiar with their obligations."

Among these obligations is the requirement to ensure that staff are competent, which means they must receive whatever training is necessary to ensure that they are competent and this level of competence needs to be checked regularly.

A particular necessity is that all climbing wall staff should possess a rope access qualification, for which specialist training is only available from the Climbing Wall Manufacturers Association (CWMA). This is designed to ensure that staff are safe and competent and that they can efficiently set high quality routes.

According to Cornforth, perhaps proper route setting is the key to safety compliance, a quality experience and profit. "If routes are regularly changed with new holds and volumes, the user will come back to enjoy the climbing experience on a regular basis," he says. ●

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