Unseen Risks in Routine Work

Laura Hedley, Head of Consultancy and Talent Services at the OPC, shares insights from recent South Eastern Railway workshops on recognising and tackling complacency to help maintain safety vigilance

Over recent months, OPC psychologists have worked alongside colleagues at South Eastern Railway (formally Network Rail Kent route) to support their regular safety updates and workshops for hundreds of their safety-critical frontline employees. These sessions examined how risk is perceived in day-to-day work, how it arises, can be anticipated or prevented, and the human behaviours that can influence it.

A recurring theme raised by participants as a key factor in failing to anticipate risks was complacency. This prompted the design of a bespoke workshop to explore this issue in greater depth with frontline teams.

At the Occupational Psychology Centre (OPC), complacency often emerges during Post Incident Assessments (PIAs) undertaken with employees who may have been responsible for, or involved in safety incidents. It can often appear as a precursor to Non-Technical Skills (NTS) gaps such as poor checking or reduced situational awareness. It is a subtle yet very significant behavioural vulnerability that can quietly undermine even robust safety systems and interfere with routine activities.

Laura Hedley, Head of Consultancy and Talent Services, said: 'Many experienced safety professionals recognise complacency, yet it's not often discussed or formally recorded as a risk factor. For those with deep operational insight, it may appear as a slow decline in vigilance, increasing over-confidence, or a 'mental fog' that blunts risk awareness. Left unchecked, it can quietly erode safety-critical performance and, in some cases, contribute to incidents with serious consequences.'

So, what is complacency?

In psychological terms, complacency is a state of reduced vigilance, overconfidence, or disengagement from risk, often brought on by routine, familiarity, or a false sense of security. It's not inherently lazy or reckless behaviour; it can stem from genuine experience, confidence in one's role, or the belief that 'nothing has gone wrong before'. But that very familiarity can cause drift: where attention fades, assumptions take root, and early signs of risk may be unnoticed.

Laura added: 'Complacency can affect capable, experienced people who stop noticing subtle changes around them, and in themselves. Familiarity can mute our natural sense of caution, particularly with routine tasks. At the OPC, we see complacency as a mindset shift, that sometimes happens unconsciously, but is likely to quietly widen the gap between what someone thinks is safe, and what actually is safe. The danger becomes background noise, and because it rarely presents as a technical safety lapse, it can go undetected. That's why it's vital to explore its influence in safety-critical environments.'

The complacency workshop

In the follow-up safety session, OPC psychologists delivered a tailored workshop exploring how complacency develops and how it can affect safety performance.

Over 150 employees took part in guided group discussions focused on three core questions:

1. What does complacency look like?
2. Why might it arise?
3. How can it be recognised – in ourselves and others?

During the workshop, OPC psychologists also shared practical strategies for identifying and managing complacency to support safer working practices. After the session, the OPC conducted a detailed content analysis of the groups' feedback to deepen understanding and gather additional frontline team insights of how complacency

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manifests and influences safety behaviour. What follows are some key outputs from the workshop discussions including some of the fresh insights from the content analysis:

Question 1. Recognising complacency

Delegates described a range of subtle indicators, many of which can be easily missed in busy operations. Common signs included operating on autopilot i.e., going ‘through the motions’, or tasks completed with minimal active engagement or thought processing. Skipping steps, failing to double-check details, relying on memory or previous experience instead of adhering to safety procedures or rules were key mentions.

Overconfidence in ones’ own ability, a reluctance to challenge unclear instructions, emotional withdrawal, and assuming others colleagues have completed their tasks correctly without verification were also noted.

During the feedback, participants shared experiences like:

- ‘You feel disconnected – like you don’t care anymore or can’t see the point.’
- ‘It’s not that you don’t know how to do the job. You stop thinking about it and might miss steps.’
- ‘You might be distracted by your phone and not pay proper attention.’

Content analysis revealed that complacency isn’t a simple slip in behaviour, but a multidimensional issue involving mental attitude or mindset, emotional, and behavioural contexts. In safety-critical settings, stress and pressure can amplify the problem.

Laura explained: ‘Stress may cloud judgement, narrow focus, and reduce situational awareness, making shortcuts much more likely. It can also intensify existing behaviours across other factors, like communication, the quality of work or reduced concentration. This complex interplay is precisely why complacency demands closer focus in safety-critical environments.’

The OPC’s content analysis grouped the feedback into six key themes. The table below shows the themes in ranked order:

Six key themes for what complacency looks like	Ranking	per cent of the total responses
Waning Attention and Focus	1	26 per cent
Poor Task Execution or Procedural Failures	2	21 per cent
Low Motivation & Energy	3	16 per cent
Attitude and Mindset	4	14 per cent
Cognitive Bias & Assumption	5	13 per cent
Interpersonal Communication and Interaction	6	5 per cent
Stress and Pressure	7	5 per cent
TOTAL responses 166		

The table shows their rank ordered frequency of mentions:

Key drivers for why we may become complacent	per cent Mentions	Summary
Routine and Familiarity	Over 30 per cent	Repetition naturally reduces mental load as confidence grows in the process steps. This can lead to an ‘autopilot’ state and dulled risk awareness. E.g., ‘Mundane tasks can make you go into a kind of tunnel vision.’
Fatigue, Stress or Distraction	20 per cent	Emotional strain, personal issues or mental overload can reduce focus and affect decision-making. E.g., ‘Worries at home can crowd your thoughts, and you lose the plot.’
Confidence, Risk and Attitude	Nearly 17 per cent	Overconfidence can affect both older employees who may rely too much on their experience, and younger, overly-confident workers may underestimate risks. Both can lead to shortcuts, assumptions and poorer rule adherence. E.g., ‘You can become a little too comfortable, thinking you’ve got it covered!’
Low Motivation or Disengagement	16 per cent	Feeling undervalued or bored impacts focus, attention to detail or level of care in the job. E.g., ‘When there’s little recognition or reward, you can just stop caring.’
Support, Knowledge & Workplace	15 per cent	In some organisations the availability of management support, resilient planning, effective leadership and work conditions can all affect concentration. E.g., ‘Balancing home life and shift work is really tiring.’

Question 2. Why might we become complacent?

Frontline employees shared reasons that align closely with psychological understanding of behaviour in repetitive, high-pressure, safety-critical roles. Five key drivers stood out in the content analysis.

OPC psychologists recognise that complacency is rarely just an individual failing. It can reflect wider system pressures, culture, and wellbeing. Without time to reflect or strong leadership, even conscientious staff can sometimes slip into routine thinking and disengagement. Likewise, factors such as safety leadership or an organisation’s job design can also influence complacent behaviours. ▶

Question 3. How can we spot complacency in ourselves or others?

Recognising complacency, especially in experienced teams where routine is the norm, is challenging. Delegates highlighted several warning signs. There were some overlaps in the themes from previous questions:

- **Declining Task Quality** – nearly 40 per cent of responses mentioned examples like missing steps, errors, or rushing. They shared feedback such as: 'I sometimes backtrack or miss tasks when I'm not completely focused' and 'Some people just don't care, they're always late or unprepared.'
- **Reduced Focus & Mental Clarity** – zoning out, 'brain fog,' forgetfulness, and distraction were common mentions (15 per cent) with examples like: 'I sometimes can't remember if I did a task' and 'I can feel distracted by other worries while on the job.'
- **Overconfidence & Mental Attitude** – also had 15 per cent of mentions, making it the joint second theme in how we recognise complacency. Feedback included ignoring checks or assuming safe working performance due to personal experience. E.g., 'I don't need any extra training; I know what I'm doing' and 'I don't need to do any extra checks I've done it all ok, already.'
- **Physical Fatigue** – physical influences were mentioned (twelve per cent) as tell-tale complacency markers, such as tiredness, hunger, or shift patterns affecting levels of alertness. E.g., 'Your body feels it before your brain does.'
- **External Distractions** – ten per cent of mentions included environmental or workplace triggers like work overload, personal issues, and lack of breaks.
- **Loss of Drive or Engagement** – nine per cent of mentions included signs of boredom, emotional or mental detachment, and a lack of motivation. Feedback like: 'Sometimes people seem over-relaxed or bored in briefings, lacking drive.'

Many delegates noted that behaviours they observed in others were also familiar on their own lower-performing days. This highlights the importance of self-awareness as a protective tool, especially when supported by the right organisational culture.

OPC's practical tips to tackle complacency

To help delegates avoid complacency, the OPC recommended some practical strategies centred around four key areas. First, building personal awareness requires asking yourself critical questions such as 'How focused am I? Am I rushing? Am I checking properly?' and recognising high-risk moments, which may include certain shifts, repetitive tasks, familiar routes, or tasks you know very well.

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Second, taking deliberate action involves using Risk-Triggered Commentary (RTC) to sharpen focus and situational awareness, as verbalising your actions helps break autopilot and enables you to spot risks more readily. This should be paired with pointing or touching items (if safe to do so) to help re-engage focus, and if possible, briefly stepping away from the vicinity to help break repetitive routines and reset your focus. Additionally, pausing regularly to ask yourself 'Did I really check that?' is essential.

Third, using aids and prompts means relying on tools such as post-it notes, using formation cards to avoid 'stop short' and door release incidents, and using checklists. It's important to stick to the rules and not rely on confidence, schedule 'pause-and-review' points into tasks, and encourage peers to check your work, even when 'it feels fine'. Finally, challenging the norm involves not assuming safety because nothing went wrong last time and challenging or questioning 'it's always been done this way' since you don't need to accept that approach. Throughout all these strategies, it's crucial to treat checking as a strength, not a weakness.

Closing thoughts

The OPC believes complacency is a complex multidimensional issue encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects that can quietly erode safety performance. It may start with small lapses such as reduced vigilance, over-confidence, or a false sense of security. When combined with fatigue, stress or pressure, these tendencies can intensify, clouding judgement, narrowing awareness, and making shortcuts more tempting. Left unchecked, complacency can create performance drift, where critical risks are overlooked and safety standards slowly slip.

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Laura summed up saying: 'It's easy to become complacent without realising it, but it isn't always down to individual failings. Environmental and organisational factors can play a role too. However, by recognising your own vulnerability for complacency and taking simple, deliberate actions, could be the difference between a close call and a safe outcome.'

Bob Coulson, Infrastructure Director at South Eastern Railway summarised the impact saying: 'The new complacency workshop has been hugely valuable. It's helped our people strengthen how we manage daily risks, and particularly the subtle nature of complacency. It's given both employees and leaders practical insight into spotting early warning signs and support to take proactive steps to tackle it, reducing the potential for errors. The findings also highlighted opportunities for us, as leaders to review job design and operational practices, ensuring we continue to protect our people on the ground and build an even stronger safety culture. Alongside the OPC's expertise, we're shaping a safer, more focused railway for the future.'

Want to learn more about how the OPC can support your rail organisations to recognise complacency and prevent Non-Technical Skills gaps? Get in touch with our friendly team.

the occupational psychology centre

Tel: 01923 234646
Email: admin@theopc.co.uk
Visit: www.theopc.co.uk

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