Daily Humanity

CASE STUDY

Implementation of Mandatory HEAT/HEFAT Certification: The Experience of RFE/RL's Ukrainian Service

Hanna Hrytsenko, independent researcher

Author: Hanna Hrytsenko, independent researcher
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> *"This whole huge body of knowledge that you gain over these three days can actually save a life"*
>
> — NATALIA SEMENOVA, PRODUCER OF THE UKRAINIAN SERVICE OF RADIO FREE EUROPE/RADIO LIBERTY (RFE/RL)

Security Context

Russia's shift from localized to full-scale hostilities in Ukraine in 2022 significantly intensified the fighting and, accordingly, the danger for everyone working or living in areas under active shelling. The international company Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty had organized security trainings with foreign specialists for its staff before, involving experts who had worked in conflict zones in other countries. At the start of the full-scale invasion, the skills gained in such trainings proved useful. However, the growing danger and the changing nature of that danger — including new sources of threat such as guided aerial bombs (KABs), Shaheds, drones, and constant remote mining of roads — required a more careful approach to the safety of journalists.

This meant it became necessary to rely not only on basic skills common to any country or context, and not only on the individual experience of journalists who had previously traveled to dangerous areas, but also on specific knowledge that takes the Ukrainian context into account. That is why it became important for expert knowledge to be provided by trainers familiar with this context.

In this connection, the company decided to introduce mandatory HEAT/HEFAT (Hostile Environment Awareness Training / Hostile Environment First Aid Training) certification for all staff working in dangerous conditions. For staff in Ukraine, the training program includes acquiring skills in tactical medicine, mine safety, risk assessment, cybersecurity, response to drones, behavior under shelling, and other skills necessary in field conditions, including relevant practical scenarios based on real challenges.

For this case study, seven interviews were conducted with staff of RFE/RL's Ukrainian Service: with the producer, three correspondents, two camera operators, and the staff member responsible for occupational safety. The task of the case study was to examine the experience of organizing and implementing mandatory HEAT/HEFAT certification, its impact on the organization's internal safety culture and team work, and the positive and negative consequences of this decision.

Organizing Mandatory Certification

Ukrainian legislation requires editorial offices to provide a certain guaranteed minimum of occupational safety, but, as the RFE/RL team points out, meeting these requirements alone is not enough. Mandatory HEAT/HEFAT certification **is part of a broader security policy**, which includes:

In general, the mandatory status of HEAT/HEFAT training for large companies is linked to occupational safety policy, which exists in different countries: in some it is stricter, in others less demanding, but public and state-owned enterprises and corporations typically adopt rules requiring that people sent to work in dangerous conditions be trained in the basics of physical safety and first aid, and be provided with appropriate insurance.

01 Annual first aid and bleeding control training (Stop the Bleed)

02 Training in handling other dangerous situations

03 Provision of personal protective equipment

04 Drone detectors

05 Installation of electronic warfare (EW) equipment on vehicles

06 Extreme-driving training and vehicle safety checks

07 Tactical medicine backpacks (one per team of three to four people)

08 Communication equipment (satellite phones in addition to mobile phones)

09 Necessary contacts for communication

10
Proper preparation of all required travel documents

11
Life and health insurance

12
Checking first-aid kits, with replacement of used or expired supplies

Staff working in the so-called "red zone" receive additional medical insurance covering evacuation and treatment at the nearest stabilization point or hospital.

In addition, since the specific risk profile is constantly changing depending on the section of the front or on the technological innovations being introduced, a significant role in the team's personal safety is played by **ongoing training or retraining with updated content**, as well as by **ongoing consultation with military personnel** who use such innovations. Even the data obtained through such consultation is not standardized, since different approaches, tools, frequencies, etc. may be used by different units in different sections of the combat zone. However, the limitations of this approach also allow adaptation to the specific circumstances of a trip.

The organization's team is also highly motivated to work and, accordingly, to improve their qualifications in the field of safety. Cases of psychological resistance to mandatory training are isolated. Staff members **also train independently**, beyond the training organized by the editorial office, and periodically arrange short (15-minute) **group practice sessions** to reinforce the skills they have acquired.

> *This is a foundation that, it seems to me, should exist not only in the editorial office but with every Ukrainian nowadays. We have a policy that everyone should have the ability to protect themselves, their loved ones, and, ultimately, perhaps to help someone and save someone.*
>
> — ANONYMOUS, CORRESPONDENT OF THE UKRAINIAN SERVICE

> *We even have drivers who are close to 60 years old, and they jump into these trenches and twist tourniquets just like everyone else.*
>
> — ANONYMOUS, CAMERA OPERATOR OF THE UKRAINIAN SERVICE

> *For example, a colleague had a situation like this, and he, in fact, was the only one who didn't get confused in that situation — even the military got a little confused — and he did what he had to do. Thankfully, nothing critical happened, but the fact that he reacted in time, even though he himself was concussed, is quite a telling moment. There was also a situation where my colleagues, while filming at a training ground that was hit by two KABs, with a lot of wounded and killed, also used our whole large medical backpack, which every camera crew has — they applied tourniquets, did everything they could, and directly saved more than one life, preventing pneumothorax by applying occlusive dressings to many soldiers.*
>
> — YEHOR LOGINOV, CORRESPONDENT OF THE UKRAINIAN SERVICE, HOST OF THE PROGRAM "DONBAS REALITIES"

Categories of staff who undergo mandatory HEAT/HEFAT certification: **correspondents, camera operators, drivers** who travel for work to areas of active shelling. However, other categories may also attend, and do attend, these trainings. Certification is valid for two years (before the full-scale invasion — for five years). Repeat sessions ("refreshers") are also available; most often staff undergo training once a year. Having a valid certificate is a **mandatory requirement** for obtaining permission to travel on assignment.

BEFORE 2022
5
years of validity

→

NOW
2
years of validity

The editorial office gives reminders but often does not directly monitor the application of safety rules before a team's departure, relying on trust and the high motivation of the teams themselves to apply the skills they have acquired, which is appropriate in the case of experienced teams (some respondents have been working in the combat zone since 2014–2015). The editorial office also asks the training team for feedback on how well, in their opinion, the training participants practiced their training, absorbed the knowledge, and are motivated to apply it.

Staff who receive the training note that the safety protocols are designed to **avoid excessive risk**, even if this means that the material gathered will be less exclusive or interesting. This also means that in some cases the safety skills acquired are not applied because the dangerous situation was **consciously avoided in advance**. Any dangerous situation that did occur must be reported to the security department of the editorial office's headquarters (in Prague).

After assignments, a debriefing takes place, discussing which skills proved useful in a given situation.

For mandatory HEAT/HEFAT certification, Daily Humanity was chosen as the contractor, as an organization that **monitors updates in the security situation** (in particular, which tools the enemy is using and which tools the Ukrainian military are using) and constantly updates its training program accordingly, while also flexibly adapting it to the client's wishes. Important criteria also included **having former military personnel on the team**, who have already worked with the newest technical developments and can teach how to use them, and the **possibility of participating for free in a situation of financial shortage**. However, the possibility of consulting with other organizations is also being considered, in order to obtain alternative points of view on various security challenges.

Results of Implementing Mandatory Certification

The advantages of mandatory certification for camera crews are faster response in a dangerous situation and better-practiced response skills.

> *In crisis situations there's no time to think — it's just mechanics at work, what has been instilled and drilled to the point of automaticity. It was precisely this elementary, banal application of a tourniquet that very often saved the lives of colleagues and of the soldiers they worked with.*
>
> — NATALIA MOROZ, STAFF MEMBER OF THE UKRAINIAN SERVICE RESPONSIBLE FOR OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY

Undergoing the same trainings under the same conditions has a positive effect on the effectiveness of work within teams that go out on assignment. Although members

of the same team are not necessarily together during the training itself, the overall standardization allows them to **understand things in the same way** — risk assessments and response mechanisms — and to coordinate together without unnecessary disputes. Because the trainings are conducted on the same technical base with the same scenarios, staff members note that this gives confidence that the same skills are being practiced and the same knowledge is being provided, which **reinforces confidence in one's teammates.**

> *Let's say I'll know that someone doesn't know [the skills] — I'll already feel a bit less comfortable, because, God forbid something happens, they'll be fumbling around, hands shaking, and that's it. That is, I understand that my life may depend on this, so the training definitely adds confidence.*
>
> — VASYL MARTYSHCHENKO, CAMERA OPERATOR OF THE UKRAINIAN SERVICE

> *Does it bring the team together? It really does, of course, because there are a lot of practical exercises where combat action or shelling that we come under is simulated, and how we act together, how we interact with each other, the algorithm of actions, what we need to do, the sequence — this sense of a comrade's shoulder next to you — it really helps, in my opinion, it morally brings the team together a lot.*
>
> — YEHOR LOGINOV, CORRESPONDENT OF THE UKRAINIAN SERVICE, HOST OF THE PROGRAM "DONBAS REALITIES"

> *Definitely, when colleagues go through the same trainings under the same conditions, they feel this equality. They coordinate with each other even faster. This kind of synergy happens right after the training.*
>
> — NATALIA MOROZ, STAFF MEMBER OF THE UKRAINIAN SERVICE RESPONSIBLE FOR OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY

The mandatory nature of the certification also **removes the sense of pressure** on individual colleagues or individual teams when it comes to preparing for a trip and the necessary preparatory checks.

On the other hand, in the case of RFE/RL, the employer is willing to purchase standardized and expensive protective equipment, taking into account the wishes and needs of the field teams. For other outlets with a smaller overall budget, such purchases can become a **significant financial challenge.**

> *For the most part, when we reach out and ask for something, it gets done. Maybe not right away and not by some magic wand, but it happens, because after all, it's about safety.*
>
> — ROMAN PAHULYCH, CORRESPONDENT OF THE UKRAINIAN SERVICE

Trainees also express a wish for trainings to be held more often, for individual participants to receive more attention, and for the trainings themselves to be longer or the groups smaller. However, the limitations in this case have a financial reason — **the cost of the training paid for by the company.**

> *From the point of view of a person who attends them, I suppose I would like the company to be willing to pay more for them, so that we come out with more knowledge. Knowledge sticks well when you get emotions from it, when everything around is whistling, flying, exploding, and you're trying to do something under stress. But you also understand that any pyrotechnics, or any grenade with flour or something else dropped from a drone to simulate a warhead, all of that requires money. And the price of the course determines how many resources can be spent on it. Honestly, this isn't really a story about me and my wishes, but about the company's own readiness to pay for it.*
>
> — ROMAN PAHULYCH, CORRESPONDENT OF THE UKRAINIAN SERVICE

> *I don't see any drawbacks at all, because if we're talking about working in combat conditions, we are obligated to know this — because, of course, we are not combatants, we don't take part in hostilities, but we are together with people who do all of this, we film all of it, we record all of it, and we are essentially in exactly the same conditions as they are.*
>
> — VASYL MARTYSHCHENKO, CAMERA OPERATOR OF THE UKRAINIAN SERVICE

The overall conclusions from the implementation of mandatory certification are positive, and the editorial office is considering the possibility of deepening cooperation with security-knowledge providers.

This research was commissioned by Daily Humanity as part of its internal policy for evaluating and monitoring its work, and to raise public awareness of occupational safety in high-risk environments.