Getting Started with Work Safety Management

Why work safety management is important

Why invest in a strong safety culture? Well, if the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that work safety management is important.

Add to that, investing in work safety management pays. Not only does building an effective work safety management program help reduce on-the-job injuries, improve employee productivity, engagement, and morale, but it also keeps claims and resulting insurance costs under control.

The only problem is work safety management isn't easy. Ensuring continuing compliance with safety regulations was a challenge even before the pandemic upped the ante on work safety practices.

Duty of care a major component work safety management

Why's that? By law, persons conducting a business or undertaking (PCBUs) have the primary responsibility for the health and safety of their workers and any other workers they influence or direct – a class which can include contractors, subcontractors, and volunteers, not just direct employees. The duty of care responsibility obligates PCBUs to conduct their business in a manner that is responsible, vigilant, and safe for these parties.

In many jurisdictions, PCBUs are also responsible for the health and safety of people they put at risk from their business. Accordingly, senior officers of those PCBUs are required to demonstrate due diligence to ensure their businesses understand and are meeting health and safety responsibilities. That's where work safety management comes in.

The role of the work safety management system

As the term implies, work safety management is focused on the safety, health, and welfare of people at work. The main goal of work safety management programs is to prevent workplace injuries, illnesses, and death.

One of the means of achieving that goal is the establishment of a work safety management system (SMS). Such a framework enables PCBUs to consistently identify and control their health and safety risks, reduce the potential for safety incidents, comply with evolving health and safety legislation, and continually improve safety performance.

The typical work safety management system will be broken down into multiple components: safety policy, safety risk management, safety assurance, and safety promotion. A summary of what each component means:

Safety policy. Formalises management's commitment to safety and expresses the organisation's safety philosophy. The safety policy itself should adumbrate the methods and processes the organisation will implement in order to reach desired safety outcomes. A typical policy will contain the following commitments by senior leadership: implement and appropriately resource the SMS, ensure continual safety improvement, and make safety the highest priority. Another aspect of safety policy involves the encouragement of employees to report safety issues without fear of reprisal.

Safety risk management. The primary operational component of the SMS. The very success of the SMS depends on properly identifying potential hazards and deciding the likelihood of accidents occurring. That's the essence of safety risk management – so is using information generated through early phases of the safety risk management lifecycle to make informed decisions to mitigate unacceptable risk. The work safety risk management lifecycle itself spans five phases: describe the system, identify hazards, determine risk, assess and analyse risk, and treat (or control) risk.

Safety assurance. A means of systematically assessing how well the organisation is meeting its safety objectives. Safety assurance includes the rudiments of an effective audit program, consisting of self- and external auditing, as well as safety oversight.

The program itself should have developed safety indicators and targets, as well as the ability to monitor adherence to safety policy through self-auditing – these components help validate the overall SMS, with safety performance monitoring, in particular, enabling management to pursue continuous improvements in work safety management.

Safety promotion. Includes safety training and education, communication, competency, and continuous improvement. Safety training, the responsibility of the Safety Manager, exemplifies management's commitment to the safety function. Best-practice training programs will include a documented process to identify training requirements and a mechanism by which the effectiveness of the program can be measured. What's more, the training should be job- and site-specific, combining human and organisational factors, and incorporating the SMS.

Work safety management best practices

Need a way to operationalise your work safety management system? Best-practice standards, like ISO 45001, give PCBUs a common framework for managing work safety risk. What are they all about?

Well, standards like ISO 45001 task senior management, not the rank-and-file, with taking a leading role in implementing the work safety management system. Getting business leaders to take the central role in encouraging a positive work safety culture is meant to embed work safety prerogatives in the fabric of wider business practices and to make work safety matters crucial to running the business.

What's more, best-practice work safety management programs place a proactive and strategic emphasis on risk (not just a reactive approach to hazards). They broaden the scope of parties interested in work safety management and have a keen understanding of the needs and expectations of their workers as well as suppliers, subcontractors, clients, and regulators.

Challenges to deploying a best-practice work safety management program

Of course, achieving a best-practice work safety management program takes effort. Indeed, there are any number of challenges inherent in deploying a best-practice work safety management program, many of which have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 public health crisis.

For instance, it would be safe to say that prior to the pandemic, organisations had largely failed to plan for the potential impact major health incidents, like epidemics, could have on worker health and safety. By in large, businesses hadn't folded public health risk into their work safety plans.

This goes to a broader critique of work safety management programs – that they aren't sufficiently concerned with threats to worker safety emanating from outside of the enterprise. Nor are epidemics the only such threat.

The threat of workplace violence falls into this category, as well. Traditionally, security teams have managed malicious threats to physical assets and people perpetrated by intentional human actors. Of course, those same violent acts can compromise employee safety and wellbeing, as well.

Organisations might be asleep at the switch. But regulators aren't looking the other way, especially after high-profile safety incidents occur. To the contrary, regulators are increasingly cracking down on at-risk PCBUs in at-risk sectors.

Though they vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, the resultant regulatory regimes place a higher burden on safety teams at PCBUs to ensure that their workplaces are free of hazards causing or likely to cause death or serious physical harm, i.e., identifying, understanding, and controlling what have traditionally been security risks liable to cause security crises.

Another compliance challenge for safety managers is the burden to prepare for natural disasters and severe weather incidents that might impact worker health and safety. It is now typical that PCBUs of ten employees or more must, at least, have a written emergency action plan (EAP). Safety regulators also urge senior management at those PCBUs to review that plan with employees, as well as re-evaluate and amend the plan periodically.

What else can safety managers do? Safety teams should be urged to take a more active part in all the stages of the emergency management lifecycle, including consulting with a wider breadth of internal and external stakeholders during an emergency. What's more, PCBUs should undertake the following actions in order to anticipate, prevent, or minimise risk:

Identify and plan for potential emergency situations; integrate emergency exercises into your system

Prepare a planned response to emergency situations, including natural disasters

Periodically test and exercise emergency response capabilities

Evaluate and revise emergency preparedness measures, especially after the occurrence of emergency situations

Provide relevant information to all members of the organisation regarding their duties and responsibilities during an emergency event

– At the very least, organisations should proactively maintain up-to-date contact details of all internal and external stakeholders and procure mass communication tools to be deployed during major emergencies, e.g., earthquakes and storms

Provide emergency prevention, preparedness, and response training

Communicate information to contractors, visitors, relevant emergency response services, government authorities, and the local community

How digital work safety management technology can help

Sounds daunting. But work safety management software can make it easier for PCBUs to enhance their internal work health and safety cultures, remain responsive to the external environment, and comply with work safety statutes. Those software solutions give firms the easy-to-use functionality to keep track of hazards, incidents, injuries, audits, inspections, etc.

Moreover, work safety management software helps PCBUs meet due diligence obligations, monitor health and safety KPIs, control risks, execute duty of care obligations, and manage health records and workplace conditions. But not all work safety management software is created equal. When procuring new technology, PCBUs should keep the following in mind:

To meet the duty of care requirement. The solution should register assets, including plant, systems, and hazardous materials, calendar plant maintenance so as to control risk, and capture all worker records.

In the case of overlapping duties. The technology should help meet due diligence obligations, maintain a safe, collaborative work environment.

To help workers and other parties. The service should help share and coordinate duties and responsibilities, manage content, and risk assessments, as well as task, calendar, and communicate.

To deal with obligations. The solution should facilitate and audit communications, schedule and record committee participation, and track tasks and requests to monitor all follow-up actions.

For volunteer relations. The technology should provide flexible contact management for all stakeholders to capture training, skills, accreditation, permits, licenses, etc., track the allocation of workers and participation of events and reporting.

For risk management. The solution should centrally coordinate risk methodologies following the latest, most rigorous standards, integrate incidents, assets, contacts, and control documents into your risk module, as well as provide for continuous business improvement cycles.

For hazardous materials. The solution should help facilitate the handling of hazardous materials using an asset register and materials safety sheets, as well as integrate risks, documents, contacts, meetings, and communications.

That's only the start. The era of COVID-19 means PCBUs have an extra burden to achieving their work safety management goals. Digital work safety management software can play a key role. But the right capabilities matter.
To get a comprehensive list of those capabilities, download our purchaser's guide to work safety management software.

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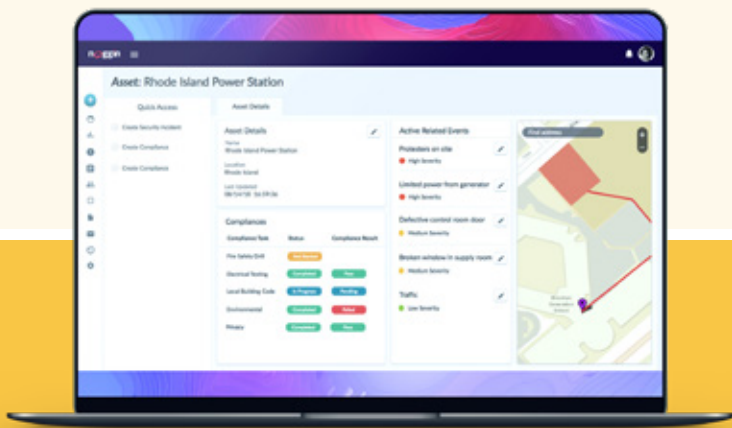
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