

WHS management systems

In this editorial Jo Kitney looks at the main elements of workplace health and safety management system and the importance of the system in protecting health and safety at work, meeting legal obligations and making WHS a part of business and operational management.

A good workplace health and safety management system should protect health and safety at work, ensure the company meets its legal obligations, promote an organisation's reputation, help secure future work and provide evidence and documentation necessary to protect against health and safety prosecution and claims.

The system provides the framework for the way in which an organisation will manage its health and safety. Within manufacturing and across other industries, the system may be as simple as a WHS Manual for a small organisation through to a more complex system for a larger organisation that integrates with other management systems operating across multiple sites and multiple work activities and processes.

Main elements of a WHS Management System

Although systems may appear different in size and scope their purpose is the same. Similar to other systems, a workplace health and safety management system contains a series of elements which when combined function as a system. It is the collective of these elements that makes the system. An organisation can choose how this system will be managed; with the size of the organisation and complexity of its operations often determining this.

A well-designed health and safety management system will contain elements that are common across all types of manufacturing as well as other industries, such as the WHS Policy, allocation of responsibilities, WHS planning and resourcing (not just what will be done, but who will do it and how), consultation and representation, hazard and risk management, training and information, emergency management, fitness for work and health monitoring, inspections and audits, reporting and senior management review. These main elements come from health and safety legislation as well as the International and Australian standards for occupational health and safety management systems (OHSAS 18001 and AS 4801).

Managing specific hazards and risks

Once the initial framework for health and safety management is established, it sets the scene for the operational controls needed to manage the specific hazards and risks associated with a particular business. It is important that the WHS hazards and risks for the organisation are recognised and understood, in order for health and safety management to be established.

A health and safety hazard and risk register is an essential part of the management system and is used to identify and assess health and safety hazards and risks. This may be through inspections and audits, incident reports, workers compensation claims, talking with workers, training and referencing health and safety legislation.

Operational controls may be common across many manufacturing companies (such as noise, manual handling, plant and equipment, electrical safety and preventing slips, trips and falls, fatigue management) and may be specific to certain operations and associated hazards (such as welding, traffic management, fork lifts, nanotechnology).

With some manufacturing companies providing on-site installations, maintenance and repair, the health and safety management system should also provide for off-site, remote and lone workers and those working on others premises. The duty for employers extends to all workplaces and work activities and the system must take these circumstances into account.



WHS Management Systems – no ‘one size fits all’

Common to all good health and safety management systems, are the documents that an organisation will use to manage its health and safety. These are a collective of the main elements of the management system and the documents that lay down the operational controls for managing specific hazards and risks. Whilst the elements may be similar, there is no ‘one size fits all’ for health and safety management.

An organisation will need to decide what goes into the management system and how it will ‘look, feel and operate, so that it suits both business management as well meeting the needs of the end user. Talking with workers, supervisors and leading hands provides information needed to ensure the health and safety management system has a good ‘end-user’ fit. This is vitally important as it is these individuals who are, for the most part, exposed to hazards at work and, in most instances, the persons injured where health and safety management fails.

Managing the WHS Management System

Whether a business' health and safety management system is manual and operated through hard copy paperwork, internally managed through the organisation electronic directory structure or intranet or externally hosted by a management system provider, what is important is that the system is managed as a part of business management.

The employer or person conducting the business or undertaking (PCBU) holds overall responsibility for managing health and safety, including the management system. Where management is delegated to another, such as a Manager, Supervisor or WHS Advisor, the employer or PCBU still remains responsible and must ensure that management commitment and support is given and visible.

Management commitment is essential for successful health and safety management and for health and safety to be a part of, and not an add-on, to the business.

Jo Kitney is Director – Kitney Occupational Health and Safety, which provides occupational health and safety services, specialising in WHS business management, health hazards and employee health risk management.

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