28 APRIL 2023

World Health and Safety day 2023

Ensuring a Risk Engaged Workforce

ISO/TC 283
Occupational health and safety management systems

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Ensuring a risk engaged workforce

The measure of an occupational health and safety (OH&S) system is not how few injuries occur, but how actively hazards have been managed. Providing a safe and healthy working environment can be primarily achieved by engineering out risks (safety in design) before workers come into the workplace, but the risks that remain still need to be managed. This is where a health and safety system comes into its own.

As with many things, you can assess OH&S system performance based on its failings or its successes. Success in OH&S systems means there is evidence that risks are known, and actively and effectively managed.

There are a wide range of indicators that show if the system is or isn’t working well, beyond simply counting injuries and training sessions. Conversations about safety take place all the time. Monitoring if these are positive (showing problem solving and positive reinforcement) or negative (showing lack of confidence about improvement, or a focus on near misses and injuries) is a quick and easy way to tell if you have a risk engaged workforce.

Listen for what people think

Are there grumblings about PPE inhibiting work, or time taken to fill in risk assessments? Do people talk about the near misses that nearly happened? These can be signs that the system and its tools aren’t right for the workforce, or that the workforce isn’t using the system and tools effectively.

Does management primarily communicate organizational performance measures as cost and profit? This may cause workers to think that time spent on OH&S is seen as less important than working quickly, or that cutting corners to save money is acceptable. It could also mean workers don’t think the company values their wellbeing.

If your OH&S system is effective, you will see and hear different communications. You will hear people telling others how a risk was reduced, and recognizing the workers that fixed it. This might be as simple as thanking someone for cleaning up spilled liquid on the cafeteria floor, or pointing out a flat tire. But it could also be celebrating how many safety improvements have been implemented by a team.

Conversations that show recognition that people look out for each other, are valued, and that safety is easy to implement is evidence that workers know a safe and healthy work environment is both desired and expected by the whole company. Indicators health and safety risks are well managed can also be evidenced by:

- staff retention – people want to work where they are valued and taken care of,

- enthusiasm to make improvements – people like to be recognized for good work and help one another, and

- productivity – people can perform better if they are confident that they won't get hurt.
Ensuring a risk engaged workforce

Although there are specific trainings that are needed for working with various workplace hazards, there are often common elements that can be measured to check that workers gained knowledge. NOTE: This doesn’t mean that workers need to sit tests!

The purpose of an OH&S training is that afterwards workers can:

- better identify the hazard,
- demonstrate they know how to minimize the likelihood of it causing a problem (or escalating to a bigger problem), and
- are confident they can initiate further action to prevent recurrence.

A simple conversation starter asking; “what are the risks in your work today?”, “how do you keep your co-workers safe from your activities?” will demonstrate how well a worker understands and manages the risks in their work.

In summary, having systems that tick all the boxes doesn’t provide assurance that worker risks are well controlled. Listening to, and talking with, workers about risk provides a far better measure of how well a system is contributing to a safe and healthy workplace.

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