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Promotion of the tripartite process in Malaysia for managing OSH in the context of COVID-19

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Occupational health and safety management systems
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In many countries, occupational health and safety (OH&S) is regulated at national level. Nationwide planning and strategies are put in place to reduce workplace incidents and illnesses, raise awareness, ensure competence and instil a culture of safety in the workplace.

In Malaysia, these are endorsed by the Department of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH) and its Occupational Safety and Health Master Plans (OSHMP), which have been in use since 2005. DOSH uses a self-regulation approach, aligned to the Occupational Safety and Health Act (1994). It has established a national council for OH&S (NCOSH), a national OH&S strategy and programme (the ‘OSH Master Plan’) for developing OH&S management systems, which promotes tripartite negotiations and cooperation. Preventive culture is achieved when health and safety elements are integrated into an organization’s day-to-day business. The main focus of the current strategy is to implement self-regulation in managing OH&S risk in organizations, including small and medium enterprises (SMEs). One of the resources used by DOSH in developing public policy is ISO 45001:2018.

Tripartite process and effort in managing COVID-19 in Malaysia

Since March 2020 there has been a lot of effort to share guidance and information about managing COVID-19 in workplaces. The Malaysian government, through the National Security Council (MKN), Ministry of Health (MOH) and Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), provides strategic policies, statutes, standard operating procedures (SOPs), and guidelines. These measures generally include restrictions and recommendations to minimize exposure to the virus by making people maintain a safe physical distance from others, wearing face masks, maintaining good personal hygiene and limiting movement of people. Virus prevention restrictions are also included in the SOPs, especially those relating to social distancing and crowd limits at workplaces and in work-related activities.

Industrial associations in Malaysia such as Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers, Malaysian Employers Federation and the Master Builders Association Malaysia, assist members to implement COVID-19 risk control by sharing sector-specific guidance. They provide a platform for communication concerns and questions raised by members regarding frequently changing SOPs and instructions from government authorities.

Local non-government organizations such as the Malaysian Society of Occupational Safety and Health (MSOSH) and the Islamic Medical Association of Malaysia Response and Relief Team (IMARET) also play a significant role. For example, between 2020 and 2021 MSOSH ran weekly webinar sessions to provide reliable information on COVID-19 SOPs in various languages, making the recordings available on social media platforms for future reference.

Though full adoption of an ISO standard is an excellent and achievable goal, don’t be paralyzed by the fear of making mistakes, or worrying about what will be uncovered when you start. ISO OH&S standards and guidance are built around the principle of continual improvement, meaning an organization can always meet targets and goals, but they should never think of themselves as perfect, or that the work of health and safety is ever ‘done’. Regardless of the size or complexity or your organization, you can engage and consult the workforce, review operations and remedy unsafe conditions as they are discovered.

By involving your workers in this effort, your workers will be safer and healthier, and your organization will be a better place to work.
Management of COVID-19 in workplaces

At the start of the pandemic, many Malaysian organizations depended on the SOPs established by governmental agencies. Using these SOPs as references, organizations developed internal control measures such as reorganizing work to minimize human contact, applying social distancing, limiting the number of people travelling or working together, avoiding the sharing of drinks and food, and applying additional hygiene measures. Steps have also been taken to adapt the layout of premises to increase physical distance, and to improve ventilation and sanitizing of workplace surfaces.

Many organizations establish internal functions to facilitate the management of COVID risk in their workplaces. These vary from appointing a coordinator to setting up a COVID task force composed of different departmental representatives. These functions identify best practices for preventing and managing transmission, disseminate information to workers and provide periodical reporting on control measures as required by law.

Towards the end of 2021, organizations began to implement measures independent of the government’s SOPs. Many continued to allow working from home, despite the government increasing the permitted numbers of workers in one place and relaxing movement restrictions. This illustrated how organizations have developed an understanding of risk-based thinking regarding COVID-19 risk management.

Occupational health, safety and wellbeing have become substantial topics within organizations. This has pushed top management to provide more initiatives to address health, safety and welfare, including employee assistance programmes, stress management initiatives, social support for those working remotely and psychological first aid.

It is evident that a collaborative tripartite approach plays an important role in enabling organizations to implement measures that go beyond compliance in managing COVID-19 risks. But, of course, this only happens because there is accessible guidance, information and knowledge provided by the different groups, including government. The key here is effective communication, participation and consultation between all parties.

Once employers fully understand why certain measures are in place and how they reduce risk to their businesses - including the importance of consultation and participation in making decisions - they are more likely to be engaged and act in a safe and responsible way. Self-regulation is no longer a dream in Malaysia, it is an experience that many Malaysians are embracing.

TC/283 website: committee.iso.org/home/tc283