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The rising need for implementing occupational health and safety at work in Africa

ISO/TC 283
Occupational health and safety management systems

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The rising need for implementing occupational health and safety at work in Africa

Occupational health and safety (OH&S) is well-established in developed countries, but that has not been the case in some developing nations. Southern Africa has been on the back foot on this matter, with South Africa taking the lead with the Occupational Health and Safety Act in 1993, replacing the Machinery and Occupational Safety Act of 1983. Of late, other Southern African nations have been trying to catch up, but with little progress.

The advent of COVID-19 revealed significant gaps in workplaces that did not have an OH&S management system in place. The organizations with OH&S systems struggled to adjust to the new world order of COVID-19 rules, but it was far worse of for those without a structured system. Government departments, state-owned organizations and private companies were caught off guard. Many organizations did not have qualified OH&S practitioners to coordinate and advise on issues of health and safety at work.

Unresourced and unprepared

At the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, some governments implemented emergency COVID-19 legislation that required all organizations to have an OH&S practitioner in their employ. Many organizations complied to this new legislation, but it was mostly to comply to the COVID-19 regulations (ensuring there is enough sanitizer, employees are wearing masks, regular clean-ups are done etc.) and not necessarily for the full scope of OH&S.

This then brings out the importance of organizations to adopt, implement and maintain ISO:45001, the standard providing requirements for an OH&S management system, which requires a well-defined structure that ensures value is derived from having an OH&S practitioner in the workplace, working together with all employees and management through engagement.

OH&S needs to be structured and effectively implemented to be integrated into the company culture. Structure brings about order, respect, open channels for engagement and facilitates growth of the system, thereby preventing injuries and saving lives at work.

ISO 45001 is an effective tool to build a solid and structured health and safety foundation by actively engaging all levels in a business. ISO 45001 offers a comprehensive framework to enable an organization to holistically manage occupational risks, so that the workplace is safe, thereby allowing employees to optimally deliver on the company's operational demands.

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