Insight aims to provide useful information, links and tips in the areas of Risk Management, Work Health and Safety, Business Continuity Management, and other areas relating to management systems and corporate governance.

The Role of Today's WHSO

The role of the Workplace Health and Safety Officer (WHSO) over the last 10-15 years has been somewhat of a hokey-pokey dance, firstly being in, then out, and then in again when it has come to the Queensland WHS legislation. In October 2017, the role was reintroduced following the government's Best Practice review of Workplace Health and Safety Queensland (WHSQ) and, keeping the musical theme going, appears to be a role looking for a vacant chair when the music stops.

So, who or what is a WHSO?

WHSQ have published an *Information Guide* (2018) providing some background and general information on the functions of a WHSO, which include:

- Identifying hazards and risks to health and safety
- Notifying the PCBU about WHS matters
- Notifying the PCBU about incidents
- Investigating incidents or any immediate risks
- Accompanying WHSQ Inspectors during site inspections
- Undertaking an annual assessment that assesses the WHS risks

For someone to be a WHSO, they must also have completed a Certificate IV in WHS (or higher level WHS qualifications) and have a WHSO *Certificate of Authority* from WHSQ.

The legislation even enshrined a level of immunity for WHSO (qualified a little by the 'in good faith' statement), and then went on to say that the appointment of a WHSO does affect the duties owed by other persons under the Act.

Back in the day, it was a requirement for PCBUs with 30 or more workers to have a WHSO. By appointing someone as a WHSO, organisations were able to say that because of their WHSO, they were complying with the legislation. However, in some instances, the end result became a reliance on the WHSO to discharge the duties of the directors and executive managers within the organisation. When the harmonisation of the WHS laws came into force in January 2012, the requirement for a WHSO was removed and the due diligence provisions were increased to ensure these responsibilities remained at the senior executive management level.

Although re-introduced in 2017 (however not mandatorily), in practice the role of the WHSO appears to have been superseded by other WHS-related roles that, both individually and collectively, perform the same functions as a WHSO. These include the WHS Adviser, WHS Coordinator, WHS Manager, and even the Health and Safety Representative, depending on the size and nature of the organisation.

These days, it's rare to see a job advertisement specifically calling for a WHSO. Organisations now recognise their WHS due diligence duties and are wanting more from their WHS personnel, by way of delivering and maintaining a strong WHS framework, providing practical advice to managers and workers that as a minimum is compliant with the WHS legislation and supporting Codes of Practice, and assisting the organisation's accountability holders to manage their WHS risks.

Please contact QRMC for more information.

WHS Compliance Audits vs WHS Maturity Assessments

With the primary objective of workplace health and safety (WHS) being to ensure the well-being of employees and prevent incidents and injuries, both WHS maturity assessments and WHS compliance audits are useful tools to assess and enhance safety management systems. While both approaches aim to improve workplace safety, they differ in their scope, purpose, and methodology.

WHS Compliance Audits

WHS compliance audits focus primarily on assessing an organisation's adherence to relevant laws, regulations, and standards. These audits are often conducted to ensure that workplaces comply with legal requirements to prevent accidents, injuries, and legal liabilities. Compliance audits can be led by external or internal auditors who evaluate an organisation's systems, processes, and documentation to ensure they align with legal obligations.

The key features of WHS compliance audits include:

1. Legal Adherence: The primary goal of compliance audits is to ensure that an organisation meets legal requirements set by regulatory authorities, industry bodies, and standards organisations. Non-compliance can result in fines, penalties, or legal action.

2. Specific Focus: Compliance audits target specific legal and regulatory requirements, such as safe work practices, hazard identification, incident reporting, and emergency procedures. These audits provide a snapshot of an organisation's immediate compliance status.

3. Immediate Remediation: Since compliance audits focus on meeting specific legal obligations, they often lead to immediate corrective actions. The emphasis is on rectifying non-compliance issues promptly.

4. Document Review: Auditors scrutinise an organisation's documentation, records, and policies to verify that they align with legal standards. Proper documentation is crucial to prove compliance.

WHS Maturity Assessments

A WHS maturity assessment is a comprehensive evaluation of an organisation's WHS management system's effectiveness and development over time. Unlike compliance audits that tend to focus on adherence to legal regulations, maturity assessments provide a broader perspective by assessing an organisation's readiness to manage safety risks, and its capacity for continuous improvement. Maturity assessments often utilise maturity models, frameworks, or scales to gauge an organisation's maturity level across various dimensions of safety management.

The key features of WHS maturity assessments include:

1. Holistic Evaluation: Maturity assessments take into account various aspects of an organisation's safety culture, policies, procedures, training, communication, leadership commitment, and more. This holistic evaluation offers insights into both strengths and areas needing improvement.

2. Long-Term Focus: Maturity assessments are oriented towards long-term growth and development. They emphasise fostering a culture of safety and continual improvement rather than just achieving immediate compliance.

3. Benchmarking: By comparing an organisation's safety practices against industry standards and best practices, maturity assessments provide benchmarks for improvement. This aids in identifying gaps and setting realistic improvement goals.

4. Flexibility: Maturity assessments allow for flexibility in the evaluation process, accommodating the unique characteristics of different organisations. This adaptability ensures a more accurate representation of an organisation's safety maturity.

Both WHS maturity assessments and WHS compliance audits play pivotal roles in enhancing safety standards. While WHS compliance audits prioritise legal adherence and immediate corrective actions, WHS maturity assessments offer a holistic view of an organisation's safety culture, practices, and readiness for improvement. Organisations should consider integrating both approaches into their safety management strategies to ensure not only compliance but also continuous growth in safety practices. Ultimately, the synergy between these two approaches can contribute to creating a safer and more productive workplace.

Please contact QRMC for more information.