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.

COVID 19 – Are we focussed on the right risks?

This far into the pandemic, there is a huge amount of information and guidance for organisations around COVID-19 and what needs to be done to ensure compliance with regulatory and health requirements. It does seem at times that organisations are so focussed on compliance, and ensuring the correct policies are in place and records maintained that the focus on managing COVID-19 risks can be overlooked. Many have been too busy to take a step back and look at the actual COVID-related risk, and consider whether is a risk in its own right or a cause that relates to existing documented risks.

When considering risks from the pandemic, the first one most people would think of would be the risk of staff or customers contracting and dying of COVID-19. Statistics in Australia at the time of writing indicate that there have been 28,905 cases, with active cases in the 2 digits range (information here).

With a population of 25 million and the current controls in place, the odds of actually contracting the virus at any given time is thus very low. And then with effective treatment, the recovery rate is very high (although in saying this we do recognise that there are still the long term effects of the virus that are very much an unknown at present). Hence the common perception of risk is mismatched with the actual risk.

When managing any risks from an ISO 31000 perspective, one should first consider the context. In the case of COVID-19, in Australia, the context would include the above facts and statistics.

Following the assessment of the context, one should then be looking at identifying the risks – the ACTUAL risks and not simply the perceived ones. As indicated above, the most credible consequence of contracting the virus in Australia would be 'moderate' to 'minor' (to apply the typical descriptors) at present, with the likelihood being at the 'unlikely' or 'rare' level. Depending on the risk matrix in use, this would typically result in a 'medium-level' risk.

However there are certainly other related risks to consider in the workplace. Additional health and safety risks may include:

- Mental health risks arising from employee anxiety and stress as a result of isolation and the COVID19 climate.

- Musculoskeletal injuries due to poor ergonomics in 'work from home' set ups.

- Fatigue from working longer hours to meet high demand.

- Aggressive customers (depending on the work sector).

- Sensitivities from ongoing use of PPE (gloves, masks, soap or hand sanitiser).

Apart from the health and safety risks there are also a range of broader enterprise risks. Putting aside any direct financial risks, other risks to consider would include:

- Staff travelling interstate and being caught in snap border closures resulting in quarantine stays with the associated costs and time off work. Included in this risk would be the employer's duty of care to the family of staff who have to quarantine because of work.

- Reputational risk to the organisation should an outbreak be linked to it in any way.

- Staff travel to and from work.

- Staff engagement and retention.

- Maintaining a positive workplace culture.

As can be seen from the above examples, the potential risks related to the pandemic are much broader than possible illness / death, and if we focus mostly on that overly simple risk alone, we're in danger of failing to manage many more likely risks.

Whilst there is no direct legislative requirement to maintain a risk register (WHS or otherwise), legislation and good governance, does require that an

organisation identify its risks and then manage them accordingly. The most effective way to document risks during COVID-19 to ensure both compliance with regulatory requirements is maintained and that controls are systemically monitored, would the development of a COVID-19 Risk Register that includes both WHS risks and broader enterprise risks.

Please contact QRMC for more information.

Rules, Rules, Rules

Most organisation have a range of WHS procedures, instructions or rules to drive their processes, with the aim of making the work practices safer and maximising efficiency. These procedures and rules are a defensible response to control WHS risks or challenges within the workplace.

Whether these exist as a disconnected series of procedures and rules, or are framed within a tightly integrated management system, the focus is typically aimed at getting the required processes standardised and documented, whether they be relating to a specific task (e.g. machining a widget) or as part of a WHS system process (e.g. Managing WHS Training).

The drawback with all of these rules and procedures is that they need to be managed and maintained, and re-communicated whenever a change is made, and assessed for effectiveness, and … well the process, goes on! And further work is triggered by changes in regulatory requirements, industry requirements, certification requirements and other external influences. This is a headache for the custodians of the system that have to maintain its currency.

But what about the end-users – how does the array of procedures impact on them?

If too many rules and procedures can be overwhelming for the system custodians to manage, then they are probably equally if not more overwhelming for the workers that have to apply them.

Feedback from workers across a range of audits and reviews over the years highlight a range of concerns – they can be summarised as:

- Too many rules and procedures are hard to remember.

- Too many rules and procedures inhibit application at times.

- With too many rules it's hard to separate the really important ones from the less important ones.

- The blanket rules and procedures don't fit the work being undertaken, often ignoring the risks around us.

- The procedures don't respect the fact that we are experienced and know what we are doing.

Whilst there is a risk of losing detail when decluttering WHS systems, there is certainly a risk from leaving a vast framework of rules and procedures that fail to facilitate point-of-risk workers owning and managing the identified risks.

Please contact QRMC for more information.

Safety Networking Group report

QRMC would like to thank all those who attended last Friday's Safety Networking Group in the city. It was great to finally get together in person for the first time in over a year! Kicking off proceedings, Deanna McMaster, Partner at Minter Ellison, presented a cross-section of legal updates covering WHS due diligence requirements, contractor management and the recent development that sexual harassment is to be treated under the WHS Act. Mike Speter then gave the group an outline on current trends in Mental Health and emerging initiatives and considerations for WHS professionals. We then spent an hour (or more!) sharing a drink and reconnecting professionally. Hopefully there will be no further impediments to getting together throughout 2021 and we look forward to seeing you all again in May – details coming shortly.

ABOUT THE SNG:

In 2005 QRMC founded the Safety Networking Group for senior safety professionals working in the greater Brisbane metropolitan area. QRMC continues to coordinate and arrange for speakers to present at quarterly meetings and discuss information on contemporary WHS issues. Group members also share information from their workplaces or industries, which other members frequently find interesting and useful.

More information on the Safety Networking Group can be found on our website. Senior safety professionals contemplating attending meetings in Brisbane can contact QRMC to express an interest.

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