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.

How does your Safety Management System function when key staff are missing?

This is a pivotal question and one that is integral to the success of WHS management, as an organisation's SMS should not rely on any one person to function.

Perhaps the biggest take-away point from the last couple of the years of the COVID pandemic is that an organisation's ability to function, and to function safely, must not be solely based on key managers or key support staff (or even the WHS Team!) - a back-up or contingency process is needed for every role.

What happens when the Site Manager is not there?

With all due respect to an organisation's individual managers (and, yes, it is acknowledged that they have legislative and budgetary responsibility and a responsibility to make the tough decisions) … but the System should be more important than any manager's role. The management system should provide the insight and the direction so that any manager or supervisor could step up, understand the requirements, and implement the actions accordingly. The management system should present a logical and rationalised view of the legislative requirements into a framework of what needs to be done and by when. It should be accessible and available and most importantly, able to be used.

Over the last couple of years (since COVID) we have heard many clients preferring to reschedule audits / gap analyses / reviews so that the Site Manager would be able to be present. While having concern for the involvement of all relevant people is great, absence of a single person should not be a reason to re-schedule activities that are used to assess the effectiveness of the SMS. We would assert that audits, gap analyses or reviews should not be delayed due to key management's absences / leave, as these processes provide a real opportunity to pressure test the management system processes when a relief or back-up manager is in charge.

What happens when the Safety Manager is not available?

The same applies to the Safety Manager's role. They need leave periods etc., so who is backing them up

at those time? Reliance (or over-reliance) on specific personnel to manage safety is a recipe for inaction (or delayed action) in managing safety.

Just consider, for a moment, what happens during an emergency incident… do we 'reschedule' these to days when the Site Manager is available? No, we prepare for them knowing that that they can occur at any time. Well, essentially the overall operation of the safety management system is the same… the 2IC, back-up and relief personnel need to be in a position to pick things up and run.

If your organisation is not feeling collectively confident that the system will work in managing safety issues in the absence of a key manager, then perhaps this is something that needs to be considered as a key organisational risk and actioned accordingly.

Please contact QRMC for more information.

Does automation undermine workplace responsibility?

With automation having been introduced across most industries to some extent, there is little doubt that it has far-reaching benefits in reducing risks to the safety of workers, with the obvious one being manual handling. However, has automation removed the responsibility of both managers and workers to review safety controls?

An example of this overheard recently related to an automated home chicken coop gate (and for those who have never owned chooks, it is a thing, just Google it!). One brand advertises its benefits as; '*Struggling to get up too early to open the chicken coop door? Forget to close after the sun goes down?*'

These are basic controls to ensure that your chooks can be kept safe from predators in the evening whilst being able to be let out in the morning to do whatever chooks need to be doing outside. The question is, if you have your own flock of birds, with the intent of teaching the smaller, non-rent paying residents of the house a sense of responsibility, are you really teaching them the correct habits by automating the process? Whilst the simplistic answer may seem like a resounding NO, a more philosophical approach may be to look into the future they will be growing up into. Children are growing into a world where automation will be commonplace and the skills to learn may be more technological than just getting up early or remembering to close a coop door. Surely, the world of the future is where we have to integrate our lives with technology, whilst ensuring it is best applied where it adds value. So what is the how does individual responsibility change when automation is in place?

Essentially, the focus shifts to checking that the technology is actually working as it should be. In the home environment this could be by adding layers of safety to the coop gate by asking questions:

- What are the consequences of it failing?
- What can be done to either prevent it failing or to be alerted if it does fail?
- Can alarms be installed to alert you if the gate does not work?
- How about weekly checks on the operation of the gate? (aka getting up early)

Applying the same critical thinking to automation in the workplace should elicit similar responses. Automation should not be blindly trusted. Like any safety control there needs to be levels of review, with checks that it is operating as required.

Another form of automation within the realm of Health and Safety is the scheduling of tasks and activities within WHS software.

Auditors are often faced with the response to queries regarding hazard inspections or legislated plant-type inspections that these are system driven with alerts sent to the end user. Like any control, these systems need to be reviewed and verified to ensure they remain in place and are working effectively.

- Who entered the required prompts and are they correct?
- Is there a review of the frequency or focus of the hazard inspections over time?
- Are there fail-safes in place, with escalations?
- What happens if an inspection is not undertaken as prompted, are there any manual 'sense' checks?
- Has the system been tested?

As a legislative requirement, it is the responsibility of the employer (PCBU) to provide a safe and healthy workplace for their workers, with the concurrent responsibility of the worker to act and work safely. Therefore, whilst choosing a contemporary operational practice such as automation may bring about better safety outcomes for workers, there is an evolving duty to ensure that your organisation keeps abreast (no chook pun intended) of the technology and does not simply blindly install it with the expectation that it will miraculously reduce all risks and continue to work in perpetuity without any interventions. Organisations need to train managers and workers on the how the technology works, including the benefits, limitations and operational/maintenance requirements. And there is a need to periodically review and monitor the processes to ensure that these controls are working as planned, similar to the way you would monitor and review other safety controls such as physical barriers, machinery guarding and warning signage.

Please contact QRMC for more information.