



Making workplaces safer



Accidents do happen –often. Limiting them in the workplace is not only better for employees and their supervisors but is good for business. That means it shouldn't be treated as an afterthought.

It has been estimated that the costs of deaths, injuries and illnesses caused in New Zealand workplaces is between \$4.3 billion and \$8.7 billion a year. More people are injured from work –related causes than in road accidents. International statistics tell a similar story. In 2000 the European Union estimated that the cost of occupational accidents was 55 billion euros (\$109 billion) a year, and it believes this figure to be an underestimate.

The World Health Organisation has estimated that 37% of low back pain, 16% of hearing loss, 13% of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, 11% of asthma and 8% of injuries are related to work.

But while the statistics are compelling cause for concern, historically workplace health and safety has been seen as an afterthought, a box to tick, or simply an optional extra after day-to –day business has been taken care of.

Clearly there is a need for culture, change but how?

A shift in regulatory requirements has put a great burden of responsibility on employers. While in the past legislation was primarily prescriptive, now the emphasis is on a duty of care and identifying and addressing potential health hazards. And as well as addressing the potential for physical injury, the Health and Safety in Employment Act requires employers to seek out and remedy possible causes of mental harm.



These changes have been reflected in some key judicial rulings. Court-ordered compensation payments in 2005 included the record \$195,000 (more than twice as much as the previous highest fine) awarded to a deceased employee`s family in June following a fatal commercial fishing accident and a landmark \$8000 awarded to an accounts clerk in April for stress-induced pain.

But regulatory measures are a negative incentive for change, and are ultimately limited in their effectiveness.

A survey showed that although 97% of employers surveyed had health and safety systems in place – as required by law – 50% said they believed they had only an average general knowledge of health and safety in their workplace.

In reality there are much better reasons for employers to rethink their approach to health and safety.

Aside from the fact that it is intrinsically good for people to be fit and well, happier and healthier employees are more productive and productivity is, of course, good for economic growth. An obvious positive outcome of safer workplaces is fewer lost-time injuries. People who are unfettered by stress are able to concentrate better and work more efficiently. And in the long-term, health and safety is a core component of corporate social responsibility and a factor influencing reputation. Prevention is better – for people and business alike – than a cure.

Recognising the positive benefits of an effective health and safety regime, the challenge for managers and executives is to transform attitudes within their organisations and to introduce effective health and safety practices. This has to start at the top. A company`s health and safety initiatives will only ever be successful if they are genuinely reflected in the attitudes of senior management. This is true not only because managers have control over the work environment and operational practice, but because the priority other staff members place on health and safety will directly reflect the attitudes of their seniors.

Once the decision has been made to think differently, there are many ways an organisation can make a focus on health and safety pervasive. While health and safety is the responsibility of all employees individually, committees and site safety representatives can help lead internal discussions on health and safety issues. In keeping with a top-



down approach, in corporate business this leadership-driven model should include discussions at board level.

Well-defined health and safety policies and processes will help to drive action. A clear commitment by management should be made in a written statement and maintained through regular comment on key performance indicators. Standards should be defined and processes outlined for identifying, evaluating, preventing or controlling workplace-related hazards. Equipment observation and inspection schedules should be established and staff assigned areas of responsibility with specific tasks. Protocols should be put in place for dealing with accidents, or the sudden awareness of a hazard. Regular checks to confirm these measures are being implemented appropriately are critical.

A level of first aid training and education can be maintained across the organisation by including appropriate training as part of staff induction processes. Induction should also be used to outline potential hazards in the workplace and to introduce new employees to the organisation's commitment and practices to maintain workplace safety.

And while safety audits and specialist advice can be helpful, health and safety initiatives do not have to be costly or complicated. Dealing with stress, for example, need not require a reallocation or reduction in workloads. Researchers have advised that anxiety is often a result of people ruminating on their problems and that employers can address this through good communication and training.

The bottom line is that while there needs to be an organisation-wide emphasis on health and safety, it doesn't have to be costly, and can bring significant benefits to workers and business performance. Looking back, we are making progress: the death rate from workplace injuries is at least 40% lower than it was 30 years ago. There are also some positive comparisons to make with our contemporaries: our current rate of worker's compensation claims is less than the average for all Australian states.

But to achieve the full benefits of better health and safety practices in the future, the next step is to change how we think.

To talk about a solution that will work for you and your team please contact us for free 1 hour consultation on request@integrityrehab.co.nz