Supervisors and risk management

A case study in the manufacturing industry

In a three year study, Workplace Health and Safety Queensland explored the influence of supervisors on an organisation’s work health and safety performance in the manufacturing industry.

With a focus on musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs, or sprains and strains) prevention and management, the study looked at:
- the role of supervisors in the early identification and management of hazardous manual task (HMT) risks
- the impact of improved supervisor HMT risk management capability
- how to improve advice and guidance for businesses.

Why did we do it?

- Supervisors have a critical role in worker participation and in the prevention and management of MSDs.
- Risk profiles and workers’ compensation claims data show that MSDs are a critical issue in meat and metal manufacturing.
- Focus group results in the meat and metal manufacturing industry highlight issues with MSD prevention and management.

Who participated?

- Two red meat processing plants and one metal manufacturer.
- 349 workers via surveys and interviews.
- Approximately 80 supervisors through training and assessments.
- Senior management through surveys and interviews.

What did we do?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase one</th>
<th>Phase two</th>
<th>Phase three</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safety management system review.</td>
<td>HMT training for supervisors.</td>
<td>Repeat safety system review.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Worker feedback on HMT management.</td>
<td>Supervisor focus groups to draw out issues with management of HMT risks.</td>
<td>Worker feedback on phase one.</td>
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What did we find?

Training supervisors in HMT risk management has some short-term benefits, however additional organisational system improvements are required for these benefits to be sustainable.

Strong leadership and commitment to safety from the most senior level is needed to address safety systematically. A supervisor is most effective when their role is embedded in the system and they are provided sufficient authority and accountability to actively apply their improved safety knowledge.
### Supervisors:
- Have challenges supervising work teams of varied ages, experience, health status, literacy, numeracy, and non-English speaking backgrounds.
- Prioritise production pressures — breakdowns and blockages are often out of a supervisor’s control.
- Have limited awareness of injury management and return to work processes.
- Are often recruited from production based roles and have good technical knowledge but limited consultative and leadership skills.
- Have limited role integration with broader safety systems.

### Workers:
- View work as unavoidably heavy, physical and repetitive — they have a high risk acceptance and low risk perception of MSDs.
- Receive limited feedback when safety issues are reported.
- Need greater confidence in safety commitment from leaders.
- Want more training and support beyond induction.
- Are concerned about work design issues such as pace of work.
- Have high turnover rates and absenteeism.
- Want health assistance such as drug and alcohol support.

### Safety systems:
- Have varied accountability and lag performance measures.
- Have minimal worker involvement.
- Focus on worker behaviour rather than engineering controls.
- Focus on HMT lifting training rather than sources of risk.
- Don’t allow for unplanned absences, increasing workloads for others.
- Have limited depth to processes including internal auditing and incident investigation.
- Often have informal contractor management procedures.
- Experience breakdowns in safety reporting between work health and safety and maintenance/engineering.

### Improvements
**Businesses made several improvements over the course of the study, including:**
- Safety reporting and communication at senior levels.
- Building a culture of reporting hazards and incidents, for example, providing a prompt sheet to supervisors to have regular safety conversations with workers.
- Providing people management training for supervisors.
- Providing consultative performance management training for supervisors.
- Making supervisors accountable for the safety performance of their work area.
- Translating training and procedures into other languages.
- Implementing early intervention programs.
- Incorporating work design and psychosocial factors in investigation tools.

### Recommendations
**Recommendations and considerations for your business include:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commitment and leadership</th>
<th>Training, support and resources</th>
<th>Risk management tools and systems</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Ensure top level leadership and genuine commitment to address MSDs.</td>
<td>• Professional development for supervisors including management of risk, injury and people.</td>
<td>• Increase worker participation in safety activities such as training and inspections.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Raise the profile of MSDs through performance measures.</td>
<td>• Enable supervisors to prevent and manage work health and safety risks. Consider staffing, work demands and the level of support required.</td>
<td>• Use risk assessment tools designed to target MSD risk sources.</td>
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<td>• Improve benchmarking capability by recording and actioning data.</td>
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<td>• Focus on higher order controls for MSD prevention and management.</td>
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<td>• Increase accountability of supervisor roles.</td>
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<td>• Consider broader organisational factors that contribute to MSD risks including workload pressures, stress, work flow and design.</td>
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<td>• Challenge poor safety culture and shift low risk perceptions of MSDs.</td>
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<td><strong>Get started</strong></td>
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### What’s next for WHSQ?
- Learnings will be applied to future projects, interventions, assessment tools and advisory resources.
- Tools and resources including leadership toolkits will be promoted to industry.

### More information
Call 1300 362 128 or visit the [manufacturing industry webpage](#).