

Playing it safe

Having effective rehabilitation and return to work programs in place is vital to the successful management of OHS risks. Melinda Finch considers a number of trends in the area and outlines some of the common pitfalls for OHS and HR professionals

The operational and financial wellbeing of your organisation could largely depend on the strength of your occupational health and safety (OHS) management system. Yet with so many technical and human factors complicating things, it's worth building with the basics.

For a start, many other aspects of OHS such as rehabilitation and return to work schemes can't operate effectively in isolation. They have to be integrated into existing quality management programs; they also have to be monitored and measurable. Organisations that are managing OHS matters like workers compensation and return to work processes well are those with good communication between and commitment from the management and the board.

Insurance Group Australia (IAG), for example, offers an OHS **manager training program to all managers across the business** to ensure its people are educated and aware of their specific OHS responsibilities for the firm's employees. This is no mean feat considering the Australasian general insurance company operates hundreds of worksites with nearly 10,000 employees in Australia. "The main issues that we had to pay close attention to related to the size of the organisation, the logistical challenges of communicating to all employees spread over approximately 280 worksites around Australia, and the culture of our people operating under a number of different brands (NRMA Insurance, SGIO, SGIC, CGU Swann insurance & State)," says Michael Johnson, IAG's national OHS operations coordinator.

There is also support from the top beginning with the CEO. "Without this level of commitment to safety an organisation is unlikely to bring about increased employee engagement to drive a positive cultural change over the long-term," he says.

Many organisations take a strategic corporate approach to managing OHS risks. This usually involves the identification of key outcomes required, setting of targets and the monitoring of performance against these targets, according to Robyn Perkins, principal, workers compensation solutions, at Aon Australia. "The targets are varied and measured at different levels within the organisation. They are set as more than just key performance indicators (KPI) on lost time injuries and move to include injury management and workers compensation outcomes as well. An organisation with a strategic approach will also be looking to implement a reporting program on the risks being identified and will implement strategies to deal with the people related risks to the business. Part of the strategic management will include senior management, executive and board reports to ensure top level support for improvements," she says.

One organisation that takes this approach is the world's second oldest airline and one of the great pioneers of long distance air travel, **Qantas**. Faced with recurring issues such as transport, hazardous substances, refuelling, plant and equipment, security and radiation, the airline's management takes the OHS issue – and its impact on the bottom line – very, very seriously. "The board sets a clear direction for continuous safety improvement," says Graeme Peel, head of occupational health services at Qantas. This is because "enhanced OHS performance results in increased productivity, better industrial relations and cost savings, all of which assist to motivate

A workforce of more than 38,000 staff across a network spanning 145 destinations all had to be factored into the management of OHS risks at Qantas. There was also a fleet of 200 aircraft making nearly 5,200 flights a week to contend with. As a result a S.A.F.E. (Safe Airline For Everyone) program commenced in 2001, as well as the People Safe program in March 2002, and the Alcohol & Other Drugs program in December 2003. All these programs were brought under one banner – be safe! – in July 2004. This program includes an OHS management system, behavioural safety program, and a range of supporting tools and resources. Among them are safety policies and beliefs, cardinal rules, a team of specialist advisers, continuous monitoring and communications/promotional support.

Prevention better than cure

Without stating the obvious, “a less is more” commitment must underpin any rehabilitation and return to work program. That is, fewer workplace injuries and illnesses to start with are more important than dealing with the outcome. Less pain and heartache for the worker involved, less cost to the employer and less pressure on OHS systems.

Fortunately research on occupational injuries and diseases suggests organisations are getting better and better at prevention. Data compiled by the National Occupational Health and Safety Commission (NOHSC), now the Australian Safety Compensation Council (ASCC), shows rates of absence have been consistently, albeit marginally, declining in Australia in recent years. In 2003 there were 138,945 workers off work for longer than a week due to injury or illness. That was down 2.7 per cent on the year before (142,833) and 8 per cent on the 2001 total of 151,066, based on information supplied by Commonwealth, State and Territory workers’ compensation authorities.

“There has been an increasing trend on prevention which is always a pleasing result,” Perkins says. “However, there needs to be some balance in the equation and the best performing organisation will have a balanced and equally responsive ‘cure’ program. Unfortunately, despite all the best will in the world, incidents do occur and organisations need to focus as effectively on how to manage the consequences of the incident as they do on how to prevent it.

“A classic example of the approach that needs to be adopted is the business activities that took place around Y2K issues. Companies assessed the risk, identified contingency strategies, implemented change programs to prevent some of the disaster and then had an effective program to ensure if there was a problem, everyone knew what was required, expected and how to react to the situation. This approach is not typically taken on OHS and the management of injured workers,” she says.

Also in some instances, long-standing cultures of accepting workplace injuries and illness have to be overcome before incidence rates can decrease. This is particularly the case in high risk industries such as manufacturing, which had a massive 28,843 cases of workers taking more than five days absence because of injury or illness in 2003.

However, Perkins believes the regulatory environment has gone a long way to drive improvements in attitudes to workplace injury and illness. “Stronger linkages between prevention of incidents and the management of consequences of those injuries and placing accountability at the right, and multiple levels within a company will address

this," she says.

The complexities of incorporating OHS initiatives are also being addressed. "OHS had to be added to the existing dominant values of flight safety, customer service and on-time departures," says Peel. "The creation of the be safe! program with all its diverse elements was itself a massive undertaking. Managers had to be trained and developed and held accountable to manage safety as well as other aspects of their businesses, and supervisors and employees had to be trained in their respective roles – this was a large ask given the workforce."

The OHS program suite at Qantas was also structured to drive legislative compliance and develop best practice. "The impetus was, firstly, because safety is and always has been paramount at Qantas and, secondly, a recognition of the cost factors [lost productivity] associated with OHS," says Peel. The results speak for themselves. Total injury rates at Qantas over 2004/05 were 34 per cent lower than the previous year. Days lost as a result of injuries continued a steady downward trend, with an overall improvement of more than 40 per cent over the past four years.

However proactive the strategy, Qantas has also been reactive where necessary and rehabilitation and returning to work are top priorities. "In conjunction with the implementation of be safe! ... there has been an increased focus on rehabilitation by line management, supported by the OH Services and Workers Compensation departments," Peel says. "Responsibility for implementing injury management systems and the day to day case management has been devolved to the business units where it is most effective." With a complex structure and diverse workforce consisting of the obvious – pilots, flight attendants, engineers, telephone sales and airline service operators such as baggage handlers and cleaners -- and the not so obvious – flight instructors, drivers, accountants and project managers – this **assigning of specific OHS responsibilities to line managers and unit heads is critical.**

In addition injury management advisers support the business units by providing higher level advice on management of return to work, and also ensure compliance with legislation and local WorkCover audit requirements. "The marked reduction in the LTIFR (Lost Time Injury Frequency Rate) and days lost through workplace injuries are due, in part, to the improvement in the return to work process," Peel says.

Ultimately the message any OHS program sends out should be clear and consistent. Create and sustain a strong risk management culture within a company, keep a close eye on the legislative ball and an even closer one on your staff and the benefits of playing safe will follow.