

Summary

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?

Phase one

- Safety management system review.
- Worker feedback on HMT management.

Phase two

- HMT training for supervisors.
- Supervisor focus groups to draw out issues with management of HMT risks.

Phase three

- Repeat safety system review.
- Worker feedback on phase one.
- Supervisor feedback on training, changes made and continuing challenges.



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:	Workers:	Safety systems:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.

A large employer that participated in the study experienced more than a 65 per cent reduction in workers' compensation claims over the three years – from 135 in 2013 to 46 in 2016. The company attributed this to its focus on internal leadership and supervisor skills within the organisation.



Recommendations

Recommendations and considerations for your business include:

Commitment and leadership	Training, support and resources	Risk management tools and systems
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure top level leadership and genuine commitment to address MSDs. • Raise the profile of MSDs through performance measures. • Improve benchmarking capability by recording and actioning data. • Increase accountability of supervisor roles. • Challenge poor safety culture and shift low risk perceptions of MSDs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional development for supervisors including management of risk, injury and people. • Enable supervisors to prevent and manage work health and safety risks. Consider staffing, work demands and the level of support required. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase worker participation in safety activities such as training and inspections. • Use risk assessment tools designed to target MSD risk sources. • Focus on higher order controls for MSD prevention and management. • Consider broader organisational factors that contribute to MSD risks including workload pressures, stress, work flow and design.
Get started ➡	Get started ➡	Get started ➡



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](#).