March 2015 – starting work safely doesn't need lots of paperwork!

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SHE & HV advisory services

How many forms does your workforce have to sign on a daily basis before they start work? My guess is there won't be many from the following list that you don't recognise?!

- Site attendance register
- Daily briefing
- Permit to work
- Working party register
- Risk assessment
- Method statement
- Point of work risk assessment
- Job card

The next question is how many of the above do you think are actually read, roles are understood and responsibilities fully implemented? You know the answer, yet organisations continue to add to this bureaucratic mountain of paperwork in the vain hope that it will make a difference to the health and safety of the workforce.

Of course organisations need some level of assurance of legislative and procedural compliance, delivered through implementation of procedures as part of fully implemented safety management system. However, pieces of paper keep no-one safe! Systems and procedures rely on humans to comply with and implement the requirements contained within them and there-in lies the issue that organisations need to recognise and address.

How is the right balance achieved between the ability to demonstrate compliance with a robust safety management system and providing employees with a working environment where they feel trusted and empowered to work safely?

The starting point must always be legislative and procedural compliance, delivered through organisational and individual competence and confidence in a practical and pragmatic safety management system. Having achieved this step, there is a continual need for the organisation and employees to challenge and to be constantly vigilant regarding potential failures (mindfulness).

The next steps are easy to achieve – yet so difficult for some to consistently deliver.

Firstly, the leaders in the organisation need to recognise the need to change and to commit to delivering the desired culture. They then need to be vocal and visible in demonstrating the desired behaviours.

The next steps depend on the current culture within the organisation and how 'mature' the approach is to health and safety. However, the desired objectives need to include:

- Build trust between employees and management through a 'Just culture'

- Great communication
- Employee engagement in health and safety decisions that affect them (eg risk assessment)
- Everyone taking responsibility for the safety of themselves and their colleagues
- Consistency
- Reporting of all events
- Feedback on actions taken
- First line supervisors acting as safety leaders

There are no 'quick wins' but organisations will see a gradual improvement in engagement on health and safety which will lead to a safer workplace and reduction in incident and injury reports. The added benefit will be improved efficiency and effectiveness when employees feel motivated to suggest improvements and feel empowered to do the right thing, even when no-one is watching.

Why would organisations continue to waste time and effort with endless bureaucracy and paperwork? The implementation of a few relatively simple changes could have a huge impact on safety performance, with the added benefit to the business of improved reputation with stakeholders, improved employee engagement, more efficient operation and ultimately increased profit.

The content of this article is intended to provide a general guide to the subject matter. Specialist advice should be sought about your specific circumstances.

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