

Developing a safety management system for your small business

by Jane Melross, Principal Consultant, The Write Solution

Most operators take care to ensure their small business is safe and if you asked them, would say they had the right procedures in place. Yet if an incident occurred, many would have difficulty proving the safety of their workplace according to legal requirements.

A safety management system is the best way to demonstrate that you, as an employer, have taken reasonable steps to make sure you have a safe and healthy workplace and, if an incident does happen, that your system was being actively implemented.

Many small business owners are busy enough just running their operation so the idea of developing a system can seem daunting.

Here are a few simple steps to help you put together an effective safety management system.

Step 1 – Talk to your workers

Talking to your workers makes it clear that you take safety seriously, but your workers are also often the best people to tell you where things are working safely – and where they're not. Working with your staff members to develop a system that keeps them safer is a great start.

Step 2 – Write a policy

Writing a policy may sound hard, but it's really just expressing your commitment to a safe and healthy workplace in writing and listing who is responsible for what. A policy generally acknowledges the work health and safety (WHS) legislation in your State, and your commitment to ensure you meet its requirements. Your policy could also include specific areas you want to highlight, such as your position on drugs and alcohol in the workplace.

There are a number of sample policies available that you can adapt for your own workplace. WorkCover Tasmania produces a great publication called *Making Your Small Business Safer and Healthier* (www.workcover.tas.gov.au), which includes sample policies that you are free to adapt. Other State OHS authorities have similar publications as well.

While a sample policy is a great starting point, it's important that it suits your specific workplace needs, that you and your workers truly believe it makes them safer and that there is a sense of ownership about it.

Step 3 – Write your safety procedures

The next step is to write down how you expect things to be done in your workplace. This is best done by talking with workers and will include writing down:

- how you will communicate and consult with your workers
- your first aid procedure
- how you will induct new workers and record when they have been inducted
- how you will assess the competence of your workers and how they will be trained. This should include how and where you will record this information
- how you want incidents and near-misses to be reported
- your procedure for reporting hazards and fixing them
- how the level of risk associated with hazards in your workplace will be assessed
- your procedure for managing contractors who work for you

- how you will deal with an emergency
- how specific tasks will be done, particularly those that are high risk. This could include working from heights, hazardous substances, electricity, plant, tractors, quad bikes, noise, tools and housekeeping hazards. The WorkCover publication *Making your small business safer and healthier* (www.workcover.tas.gov.au) has a number of checklists that can help you identify hazards.

These procedures don't have to be long. Some may only be a paragraph while others may refer to other documents that you have in place, such as registers or forms. If you do refer to any of these things, make sure you keep track of where they can be found.

You should also consider whether you need professional assistance to determine the safest way to work. You can contact the safety authority in your state or there are a number of private consultants around who can give OHS advice. You can also contact the WorkCover Advisory Service in Tasmania for specific information on 1300 776 572 or (03) 6233 7657 (outside Tasmania).

Step 4 – Make the system work

Once you have written your policies and procedures it's essential that these are integrated into the workplace and become part of your culture. Your policy and procedures need to be supported by the things that will make them work as a system, for example:

- a training register to record induction and training
- regular meetings where you and your workers have the opportunity to discuss safety issues (these can just be over a cuppa or at a toolbox meeting)
- a mechanism to report incidents and near misses that your workers are aware of
- a risk register where you can record the controls in place for high risks in your workplace.

The folder where you file your safety management policy and procedures can be a useful place to store these other documents. The WorkCover Tasmania document *Making your small business safer and healthier* includes useful practical sample documents that you can adapt and use at no cost.

Should an incident occur at your workplace and you are investigated, safety inspectors will not only review your written documentation but also look at how it is implemented in the workplace. They will seek evidence such as completed registers, completed risk assessments and minutes of meetings, and check that your workers understand the safety procedures at your workplace.

Step 5 – Review and monitor

Once your safety management system is in place, it's important to review it regularly – at least every 12 months. Putting the review date in your diary is one way to make sure it doesn't get lost. You should also review your safety management system whenever a significant event such as an incident or the purchase of new equipment occurs.

This article is for guidance only and should be read in conjunction with relevant OHS legislation.



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Jane was in charge of the high profile, award-winning Workplace Safe campaign with the Tasmanian Government for eleven years. She managed the WorkCover Safety Awards from their inception in 1996 and was a founding member of the national committee that initiated the Safe Work Australia Awards. Prior to this Jane worked in television production and the casino industry in Tasmania and South Australia.

Jane has tertiary degrees in teaching and information studies and a graduate certificate of management. She is a member of the Australian Institute of Human Resources (AHRI) and the Society of Editors (Tasmania). Jane was State Manager of the Australian Marketing Institute in 2007.