



#safeworkmonth #safetytogether

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National Safe Work Month – Why is it Important?

This October is National Safe Work Month by Safe Work Australia and focuses on the theme of “Work Health and Safety through COVID-19”.

The construction industry in particular requires employers to meet the highest standards for maintaining a safe and healthy workplace.

In light of the challenges faced by the construction industry this year due to COVID-19, the Safe Work month acts as a reminder of the importance of fostering safe practices in the workplace and the constant improvements that every employer should strive for.

Navigating Mental Health in COVID-19

As part of NSWM, Safe Work Australia recommends that employers take the following 4 steps to prevent psychological injury at work:

- Identify hazards by talking and listening to employees, noting their interactions and social dynamics, inspecting the workplace, and reviewing reports and records
- Assess risks by considering what the consequences may be if employees are exposed to the identified hazards
- Control risks by eliminating, or where this isn't possible, minimising hazards for far as is reasonably practicable through planning and prevention
- Review and maintain control measures regularly to ensure they remain effective, and consult employees throughout the process

Using Data to Make Workplaces Safer

It is vital that employers familiarise themselves with the statistics surrounding WHS.

According to the Key WHS Statistics of 2020 ('the Statistics') the construction industry has the 5th highest incidence rate of serious injury at 15.2 per 1000 employees.

In addition, 3 out of the 4 occupations most affected by serious injury in the workplace are related to the construction industry:

- Labourers – incidence rate of 23.7 per 1000 employees;
- Machinery Operators and Drivers – incidence rate of 19.9 per 1000 employees; and
- Technicians and Trade Workers – 13.3. per 1000 employees.

The Statistics also outline the various “mechanisms of incidents” which are the most responsible for serious work-related injuries, many of which are capable (or even likely) to occur in construction workplaces from time to time. The most common of these mechanisms are:

- Body stressing – accounts for 36% of serious injuries;
- Falls, trips and slips of a person – accounts for 23% of serious injuries
- Being hit by moving objects – accounts for 16% of serious injuries

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Prioritizing WHS in the Workplace

This year has presented employers and employees in all industries with unprecedented challenges in the workplace, and the construction industry is no exception. It is therefore necessary that employers review and adjust their safe work practices to combat these challenges, particularly the significant increase in psychosocial hazards caused by COVID-19.

The first step involves employers reminding themselves of their legal duties under WHS laws and informing their employees of their own responsibilities in maintaining a safe workplace.

Under WHS laws, the person conducting a business or undertaking ('PCBU') has the primary duty of care to ensure the health and safety of its employees and to prevent other people from being put at risk by their work.

Officers (defined as anyone who makes significant decisions at work) have a duty to exercise due diligence and ensure that the PCBU complies with its primary duty of care.

Employees also have a duty to take reasonable care for their own health and safety, and to ensure that their actions at work do not put others at risk.

The second step involves employers undertaking continuous risk management to assess the physical and psychological risks associated with the nature of the work and workplace, then to implement control measures to manage these risks.

Employers should also consult with their employees on WHS issues and provide them with opportunities to express their concerns, particularly when deciding on control measures and the adequacy of welfare facilities.

COVID-19 has forced many employers to make substantial changes in the structure and operation of their businesses. While such changes may have had a negative effect on both employers and employees, they have also provided employers with the opportunity to re-evaluate their workplaces and implement better and safer practices. This should include designing "good work" which considers:

- The work and work systems – e.g. task duration and complexity, physical and mental demands
- The physical working environment – e.g. the equipment and materials used, the structure of the workplace
- The workers – e.g. physical, emotional and mental capacities and needs

Key Takeaways

- Although NSWM only occurs for one month per year, the issues it raises and practices it promotes should be seriously considered by all employers in the construction industry, all year round.
- COVID-19 has led to a notable increase in the number and severity of 'psychosocial hazards' in the workplace. The best way for employers to mitigate such hazards is to identify them, assess the risks, implement control measures, and frequently review those measures.
- It is important for employers to understand the data on work-related injuries, particularly in the construction industry, so that safer workplaces can be created.
- Employers should keep WHS a constant priority in the workplace, particularly in light of the new challenges and risks created by COVID-19. This involves them understanding their legal duties in relation to their employees, undertaking continuous risk management and engaging in "good work" design.

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