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Health and Safety in the Workplace - what is the benefit of OHS Consultants?



The Occupational Health and Safety Act (“OHSA”) requires employers to appoint safety representatives (SHE Reps) for workplaces with more than twenty employees.

The OHSA tasks these SHE Reps with certain duties and responsibilities.

In a previous article, we discussed *employer responsibilities for health and safety in the workplace*.

In this article, we will touch on the responsibilities of safety representatives or SHE Reps in the workplace, as well as the benefits associated with outsourcing OHS to industry experts or OHS Consultants.

What are the responsibilities of SHE Reps in the workplace?

Their responsibilities include, but are not limited to–

- inspecting the workplace for any hazards.
- investigating OHS-related complaints from employees.
- reviewing the effectiveness of the current safety system
- making representations to the employer regarding OHS-related matters.

Which drawback apply when employers appoint existing employees as SHE Reps?

The employer is subject to certain drawbacks pertaining to the employee who may be appointed in this position. The main criterion is that the appointed person should be a permanent employee within the organisation, which will ensure that he or she is familiar with the workplace, activities, and processes.

This notion, although practical, poses certain safety risks that may not be immediately obvious.

The word “Complacency” is defined in the Merriam Webster Dictionary as an instance of usually unaware or uninformed self-satisfaction.

Randy Boss wrote: *“When you begin to work in an automated mode and stop thinking about what you are doing, you can make mistakes and take unnecessary risks.”* (Boss, 01/02/2022) This is a critical consideration, not merely for work activities but also the process of Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment.

Where a hazard is permanently present, the risk of the SHE Rep becoming complacent is extremely high. The alternative is that the SHE Rep acknowledges the hazard, but the Risk is systematically diminished.

How will productivity be impacted when appointing existing employee(s) in the health and safety role?

There are two further challenges with the appointment of permanent employees in a health and safety position.

Firstly, in most cases the employee(s) will be performing the role in addition to their day-to-day position within the organisation, which could result in failure to perform their safety function, or doing a rushed job to enable them to return to their organisational work.

Secondly, the employee may be reluctant to report any hazards or be truthful regarding their findings when conducting their investigations. This could be due to several factors, including–

- fear of disciplinary action.
- fear of victimisation.
- reluctance to identify a colleague or colleague's work area.
- the assumed lack of action by the employer on reported matters.

The use of a specialised OHS consultant that is both unbiased and experienced could assist in eliminating some of these elements as the consultant will be able to assist the SHE Rep and the organisation with the HIRA process, providing a “fresh” perspective of the workplace and issuing comprehensive reports without the fear that the SHE Rep may have.

In conclusion

Using an OHS consultant could save you money as the organisation would not be liable for the training of the consultant and could also reduce the work hours the SHE Rep loses when performing OHS functions. An OHS consultant will also bring best practice, knowledge, and expertise into the organisation, which would allow for an elevated degree of OHS compliance at a lower cost.

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