

MAKING THE BUSINESS CASE FOR SAFETY: Don't Sacrifice Safety for Operations



One argument sometimes raised when you urge senior management to pay attention to workplace health and safety is that an OHS focus takes away from operational effectiveness. Managers may claim that the company can choose to excel at operations or safety'but not both. However, an alternative view is that operations and safety can be complementary and even synergistic. Supporters of this perspective argue that many of the best practices in quality management are also best practices in safety management. So organizations that implement these practices can achieve excellence on both the operational and safety fronts. A team of researchers that included Institute for Work & Health (IWH) Senior Scientist Dr. Emile Tompa and Scientist Dr. Lynda Robson recently addressed this debate in a study involving nearly 200 manufacturing organizations in Ontario. The team's findings suggest a complementary relationship between operations and safety. Here's a look at the study.

The Study

The findings arise from the second phase of a two-phase research project, which was published in the March 2016 issue of the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*. The first phase was a qualitative study involving 10 workplaces in manufacturing and distribution, both unionized and non-unionized. The interviews conducted at these workplaces revealed two distinct types of employers that differed in culture, management practices and organizational outcomes.

One type of employer had a workplace culture that was committed to safety, exercised discipline in how work was done, embraced employee participation and focused on prevention. These employers used certain 'joint management system' (JMS) practices that supported both operations and safety. They:

- Focused on processes and adhered to rules;
- Held everyone accountable for safety;
- Explicitly considered safety in the design of work;

- Supported frequent communication from managers about the importance of safe work; and
- Incorporated safety considerations into the HR processes of performance appraisals and promotions.

In addition, these employers showed superior performance in both operations and safety.

The other type of employer had a 'day-to-day' approach that emphasized meeting daily production goals. Employers in this group were relatively undisciplined and reactive in focus; they weren't committed to safety and didn't encourage employee participation. And this group showed low to moderate performance in both operations and safety. (For more on this first phase of the project, watch [the slidecast of the 2012 IWH plenary](#) on this research or read [the article](#) in the June 2013 issue of *Safety Science*.)

For the second phase of the study, the team recruited 198 manufacturers in Ontario that employed at least 100 full-time workers or equivalent. They asked both operational and safety managers at each participating organization to complete a questionnaire aimed at measuring specific JMS practices, including clearly defining job tasks; identifying and controlling risks to operations and safety; monitoring both operations and safety; and communicating frequently about safety.

The combined answers were used to categorize organizations into one of four groups:

- Group 1 "JMS present,' those given a high JMS score by both managers;
- Group 2 "safety-weak,' those given a high JMS score by the operations manager, but not the safety manager;
- Group 3 "operations-weak,' those given a high JMS score by the safety manager, but not the operations manager; and
- Group 4 "JMS absent,' those given a low JMS score by both managers.

The survey included questions about how the organizations were seen to perform compared to their competitors in terms of cost, quality, delivery and flexibility. The team compared answers among the groups and examined injury claims rates from the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (compared to the average in their sector) to assess how organizations in Groups 1-4 performed in terms of claim outcomes.

The Results

In operational performance, Group 1 ('JMS present') performed better than either Group 3 or 4, in which the operations manager assigned low scores for JMS. But the operational performance of Group 1 was also indistinguishable from that of Group 2 ('safety-weak'). This result suggests there was no additional benefit to operational outcomes in having a 'safety-weak' JMS.

In terms of safety performance, the researchers saw a similar pattern. Group 1 performed better, for example, it had a lower standardized lost-time claim rate, than either Group 2 and 4, in which the safety manager assigned low scores for JMS. And safety performance for Group 3 ('operations-weak') was no better than that of Group 1, suggesting there was no additional benefit to safety outcomes in having an 'operations-weak' JMS.

The study's findings support the idea that organizations with JMS practices can be competitive and, possibly, even leaders in both operations and safety performance, says Tompa. He adds that the overall findings also suggest there's no trade-off between safety and operations. Rather, organizations that focus on *both* operations and safety can do well on both fronts.

Insider Says: Robson will discuss the findings at the 2016 Canadian Association for Research on Work and Health Conference in Toronto on Oct. 16-18, 2016.

BOTTOM LINE

The lesson from this study is that organizations that focus on *both* operations and safety through JMS practices achieve the same operational outcomes, such as better cost, quality, delivery and flexibility outcomes, as organizations that emphasize operations over safety and many of the same OHS outcomes, such as fewer lost-time claims, as those that emphasize safety over operations. *Bottom line:* Employers that adopt the JMS approach, which allows for the coordinated management of both operations and safety, do significantly better across the board compared to those that don't. Safety professionals can use this research as empirical evidence when trying to convince senior management to support the integration of safety into operations.