

MANAGING YOUR OHS PROGRAM: Answer 8

Questions to Measure Your Safety Culture



Studies have shown that there's a connection between a company's safety culture and the number of injuries, illnesses and fatalities it experiences. But if you measure a company's safety culture, will that assessment predict its workplace injury/illness performance? A team of researchers from the Institute for Work & Health (IWH) and Ontario's OHS system investigated that question and concluded that the answer was yes. In doing so, the team developed an eight-item questionnaire that assesses the degree to which organizations adhered to optimal OHS policies and practices. Here's a look at the IWH team's goals and approach, the questionnaire and how you can use it to measure your company's safety culture.

The IWH Team

The team was tasked with developing a tool to assess the safety culture in companies across sectors by measuring leading indicators of organizational OHS performance. The team's goals included:

- Providing a tool for consultants to engage companies in discussions about health and safety practices to help them reduce injuries;
- Identifying performance measures in addition to reductions in lost-time injury rates;
- Identifying leading indicators that will help identify appropriate health and safety interventions for companies; and
- Gaining an understanding of the cause-and-effect relationship between OHS performance and outcomes.

The team decided that, rather than develop a detailed audit tool, it would focus on creating a rapid assessment tool that would capture information about OHS programs, policies and practices and allow for a quick differentiation of OHS performance among companies.

The Organizational Performance Metric

Based on the above, the IWH team developed a questionnaire named the Organizational Performance Metric that covers these eight items:

1. Formal safety audits at regular intervals are a normal part of our business;
2. Everyone at this organization values ongoing safety improvement in the organization;
3. This organization considers safety at least as important as production and quality in the way work is done;
4. Workers and supervisors have the information they need to work safely;
5. Employees are always involved in decisions affecting their health and safety;
6. Those in charge of safety have the authority to make the changes they have identified as necessary;
7. Those who act safely receive positive recognition; and
8. Everyone has the tools and/or equipment they need to complete their work safely.

To assess the questionnaire's effectiveness, the team collected 808 completed questionnaires from companies in various sectors and compared the responses to workers' comp injury and illness data for the respective companies. The questionnaires were completed by workers, supervisors, managers, owners and other workplace stakeholders. Respondents who took the questionnaire were asked to rate the extent to which their companies engaged in the above practices, which are considered the hallmarks of a quality safety culture. The possible total scores ranged from eight to 40.

The team found that the eight items together provided a reliable measure of a company's OHS performance. *Key findings:*

- A company's score had an inverse relationship with its historical injury experience that is, the higher the score, the lower the injury rate. The total range in scores reflected a 25% difference in total injury rates.
- The scores didn't vary in meaningful ways across sectors or company size.
- In general, it didn't matter who in a company answered the questionnaire (worker, supervisor, manager, owner or other). A worker was just as likely as a CEO to report that the organization was performing well or poorly. But people with OHS responsibilities scored their organizations higher compared to others.

SAFETY CULTURE QUESTIONNAIRE: At OHSInsider.com, you can download an adapted version of IWH team's eight-item questionnaire and use it to assess your company's safety culture. Download our eight-item questionnaire.

BOTTOM LINE

You can use the eight-item questionnaire discussed above to assess your company's safety culture and then compare it to the company's injury and illness

rates. If your safety culture scored low, odds are your injury/illness rate was also poor. This information may help you make a compelling case to senior management that steps need to be taken to improve the company's safety culture and overall OHS performance.

INSIDER SOURCE

'Benchmarking organizational leading indicators for the prevention and management of injuries and illnesses,' Institute for Work & Health, January 2011