

Are Your Safety Documents Too Complex for Workers to Understand?



You probably take steps to ensure that your safety documents, such as your policies, rules and procedures, comply with the OHS requirements in your jurisdiction. But do you also make sure that these documents are easy for workers to understand, especially those for whom English may be a second language or who have literacy issues? If not, workers may not actually understand the safety information that you give them and thus be at risk on the job.

This problem may be more common than you think. In fact, a [recent study](#) by researchers in New Zealand found that most workers didn't understand their employers' safety documents.

The researchers showed 466 workers in 23 manufacturing, warehousing, hospitality and other workplaces a sample of their company's core health and safety documents and assessed what they could understand of this content. Most of the workers (82%) were in front line roles but 18% were lead hands, team leaders or supervisors.

The majority of the workers in the study'65% overall and 70% in the manufacturing sector'didn't fully understood written information about their employers' OHS policies and rules, hazard information and safety procedures. For example, the workers:

- Didn't understand the purpose of the health and safety documents
- Couldn't identify the important points in long or complex documents
- Couldn't accurately explain what the documents meant.

In addition, 80% of the workers couldn't accurately complete a hazard report form. For example, some didn't understand the form's purpose and intended audience or why the required details were important.

Adding to the problem is the fact that although supervisors' literacy levels were generally higher than those of workers, 19% of supervisors also struggle to read and complete OHS information and paperwork, which affects their ability to convey important health and safety information to their teams.

The study also analyzed the companies' OHS documents and found that they were:

- Consistently very complex in nature
- Used dense, indirect and technical language that wasn't known by many workers
- Used unfamiliar vocabulary, which caused additional difficulties for workers with English as a second language.

There are two important takeaways from the study's results:

1. Employers must make their OHS documents easier to read and understand, especially for those at a low reading level or who don't speak English as their first language; and
2. Employers should also take steps to address literacy issues in the workplace that impede workers' ability to comprehend important safety information.