

Approaches to Intervention to Improve Workplace Health and Safety

In working towards the three outcomes in the Workplace Health and Safety Strategy, we need to achieve an appropriate balance in the intervention approaches we use. These include:

- sound research and evidence
- capability development
- social dialogue
- good governance
- better design and technology
- appropriate incentives, and
- effective regulation.

These intervention approaches reinforce each other and need to be well integrated. For example, developing capability in workplace health and safety is best underpinned by sound research and evidence, while social dialogue processes help create a climate that supports effective regulation and the use of appropriate incentives.

A number of government agencies have responsibilities for promoting workplace health and safety, including OSH and ACC. It is critical that they co-ordinate their complementary roles and activities for best effect and resource use. This co-ordination should also extend to local government and non-government organisations.

The implementation schedule (to be released with the final Strategy) will support these broad approaches and build on past achievements by identifying specific new actions for implementation.

Sound research and evidence

Sound research will give us more useful and reliable evidence on which to base decisions about strategies and activities. Research adds to the quality of information and advice available to support effective workplace health and safety practices.

If we are to raise awareness of workplace health and safety, we need sound evidence on the size of the problem nationally as well as for particular industry sectors and groups of people. However, there is little reliable information on the extent, impact and cost of workplace health and safety for New Zealand society, largely owing to difficulties in measuring occupational disease.

Research by the National Occupational Health and Safety Advisory Committee (NOHSAC) will help in this. The Committee, formed in 2003 to provide independent advice to the Minister of Labour, intends every three years to produce a report on the current overall burden of occupational injury and disease in New Zealand.

Raising businesses' awareness about the benefits of workplace health and safety requires more evidence and examples of the links between health and safety and workplace productivity. This could be through case studies of New Zealand businesses as well as better ways of measuring productivity losses due to poor workplace health and safety.

We need more effective surveillance systems so we can monitor trends and identify new risks, particularly to health. This has been greatly enhanced by the appointment of an Injury Information Manager at Statistics New Zealand, who will take work-related injury data from at least six

government agencies and produce a coherent set of national statistics and indicators, as well as a research database on injury-related information. We now need to ensure better surveillance of occupational disease.

Information from surveillance systems can also help us monitor and track progress on the Strategy's vision, such as with deaths, hospitalisations and work days lost. However, the indicators we use must be valid and reliable and able to be measured using readily available data.

We need to apply research and development resources to finding solutions to common and significant hazards for particular industries. This requires systematically identifying problems and developing, trialling and evaluating potential solutions. Generally, we know little about the effectiveness of particular workplace health and safety interventions. We need to give more attention to ensuring major programmes and initiatives are evaluated.

We also need to make better use of research results, present them in more meaningful and useful formats, and disseminate them more effectively so that more people can benefit from them. Government agencies and health and safety professionals need to try harder to base their information and advice on sound evidence, and to distribute their research findings to relevant communities.

The Government has an important role in providing research funds, but industry also needs to encourage and support research on workplace health and safety as an investment in improved productivity. The limited resources available for this research need to be directed towards important issues and priorities. The outcomes and priorities in this Strategy indicate the focus required.

Capability development

Capability development involves equipping people with knowledge, skills and access to resources so they can manage workplace hazards more effectively. This Strategy highlights the importance of developing capability among a wide range of groups including:

- students and trainees, so they will have healthy and safe work habits when they start work
- workers (particularly those with special needs, such as young people and new migrants), so they know how to work in a healthy and safe way and are aware of emergency procedures
- health and safety representatives, so they can undertake this role effectively
- managers and self-employed people, so they know how to manage health and safety effectively
- company directors and senior managers, to ensure good governance of workplace health and safety, and
- architects, engineers and product designers, so they can design better products and systems.

It is particularly important that workers are able to work in a healthy and safe way. This can be achieved through a mixture of in-house training, supervision, information provision, industry training and institution-based courses. Small businesses in particular need to be encouraged to invest more in skills development.

New Zealand has a well-developed industry training system, comprising industry training organisations, unit standards within a qualifications framework and programmes such as Modern Apprenticeships. However, existing industry training needs to incorporate an appropriate focus on workplace health and safety, with a more extensive integration of workplace health and safety into unit standards, curricula and training programmes. We also need to ensure training addresses groups with special needs and the significant hazards identified in 'National priorities' on page 19. This also applies to institution-based courses.

We need better infrastructure, and innovative and relevant mechanisms, to develop the capability of those who are currently 'hard to reach' – because, for example, they are widely dispersed (such as small businesses), experience cultural or language barriers when accessing information and services, or operate outside the scope of traditional education systems.

Improved health and safety at work needs to be supported by hazard/risk management skills developed from an early age. The NZIPS includes general education in injury prevention and risk management as an objective, and educational programmes and resources are being developed for early childhood education and primary and secondary schools. This Strategy could contribute to the secondary school component as this will more specifically address workplace environments. Education at secondary school will also help people stay safe and healthy during their early work experiences and in the transition from school to the workplace.

We also need to strengthen the specialist competence of New Zealand's occupational safety and health practitioners. This can be achieved through professional certification programmes with international-standard criteria to which the content of professional education and training programmes can be aligned. Certification programmes help set a level of competence or training towards which intending practitioners can work.

Social dialogue

Social dialogue involves information sharing and consultation with groups and individuals with a common interest. For health and safety in the workplace, the key parties are managers and workers and their unions, with government agencies, health and safety professionals and members of the wider community also potentially involved. Social dialogue processes can range from simple and passive information exchange to formal structures and arrangements for networking, consultation and negotiation.

Social dialogue is critical to this Strategy because it can raise awareness of workplace health and safety within both workplaces and the wider community. Social dialogue processes can also increase understanding of key issues, promote involvement and participation, enable consensus to be reached, and increase buy-in to a course of action. We particularly need to engage groups with specific needs, such as small businesses, self-employed people, Māori, Pacific people and new migrants.

In workplaces, informal discussions, staff meetings, health and safety committees and board and senior manager meetings offer excellent opportunities for social dialogue. Their effectiveness needs to be improved, such as through easier access to information and more available trained health and safety representatives.

At an industry level, social dialogue can best be achieved through industry groups and partnerships that focus specifically on workplace health and safety (although general business networks also have a role). To be effective, these groups should have both business and worker/union representation, and be actively supported by the Government. They can play a key role in developing and promoting industry-specific advice through guidelines and codes of practice. Their roles can also be extended to include promoting health and safety within the industry generally and developing industry-level action plans. The Agricultural Health and Safety Council is an example.

It is possible to have a wider public debate about workplace health and safety. This will be required if we are to shift business thinking away from a negative focus on cost and compliance and towards recognising the benefits of improved workplace health and safety. The debate may also lead to agreement about combined action.

Debate can also take place at different levels of government, i.e. among Ministers, agencies and local government and during critical decision-making forums. Some will cut across government or provide an interface between government and communities.

Good governance

Good governance is about ensuring effective leadership of health and safety activities within business and government.

Governance involves giving direction to an organisation, or group of organisations, to ensure that desirable results are achieved. It tends to involve larger decisions about strategy, direction, roles and resource allocation and has a major effect on what happens in the rest of the organisation.

Governance is a key function of:

- company directors, business owners and shareholders in the private sector
- mayors, councillors and senior managers in local government, and
- ministers, chief executives, senior managers and boards of directors in central government.

Given its significant impact on people and workplace productivity, health and safety needs a higher profile at these senior levels. It is important that leaders are aware of their legal obligations to keep people at work healthy and safe and that they move beyond a compliance focus to recognising the strategic benefits of workplace health and safety and how it contributes to business goals such as productivity, quality, brand value and customer satisfaction.

The Strategy also provides a mechanism for raising the profile of workplace health and safety within government. It will particularly help government to:

- focus on important outcomes
- establish priorities for workplace health and safety
- identify the most appropriate balance of intervention approaches and resources to improve workplace health and safety
- develop structures and processes so that parts and levels of government can work better together, and
- monitor progress and achievements.

In addition, existing governance mechanisms should promote improved systems for managing health and safety in government workplaces, through, for example:

- performance expectations, e.g. letters of expectation and procurement guidelines
- routine government reporting, e.g. reporting against accountability documents and annual reports, and
- performance assessments, e.g. assessment by central agencies and external auditing.

Better design and technology

Design and changes in technology are powerful intervention approaches.

Major improvements in workplace health and safety have been possible because changes in design and technology have either eliminated hazards or offered greater protection – for example, vehicle improvements and aircraft redesign have contributed to increased safety in workplace transport.

Through better design or more appropriate choices of technology, we can prevent many illnesses and injuries or reduce their severity.

However, while technology changes can eliminate hazards, they can also create new challenges for workplace health and safety. For example, the rapid growth in information and communications technology has resulted in lower physical workloads and increased mental workloads, changing competency requirements and greater time pressures. Changes like these, which can outstrip people's ability to cope with work demands, increase the risk of health problems, safety issues from human error, and productivity losses owing to poor performance.

Technological development and increasingly complex work systems highlight a need to design things better, particularly by considering human beings and their characteristics. This requires us to employ user-centred design approaches such as ergonomics, human factors engineering and human-computer interaction.

To achieve better technology we need to develop our capability for designing systems and products that promote workplace health and safety. The design professions (including architects, engineers, product designers and information technology professionals) need a greater awareness of and skills in user-centred design approaches. Managers and other key decision-makers in workplaces also need to be more aware of the importance of healthy and safe design.

In addition, we need to continue exploring the use of incentives and regulation to encourage better design. Designers, manufacturers, constructors and suppliers should be encouraged to design with health and safety in mind so that potential hazards are eliminated or controlled at source.

Finally, businesses should give adequate attention to workplace health and safety in purchasing by assessing new technologies and alternative products and system designs for their potential impact on health and safety (and the flow-on effects on performance and productivity). This Strategy focuses on the Government demonstrating leadership in this area.

Appropriate incentives

Incentives are rewards designed to create a positive motivational influence. They can be financial or non-financial and include discounts, awards, grants and recognition systems.

Well-designed incentive schemes focus on rewarding desirable health and safety behaviour – for example by encouraging near miss and minor injury reporting and promoting employee involvement. Poorly designed programmes, which link rewards too directly to reduced illness and injury rates, run the risk of encouraging workers to hide incidents and errors. This behaviour does not support the learning and improvement processes necessary for achieving excellent workplace health and safety practices.

ACC offers powerful financial incentives through a range of programmes encouraging workplaces to implement health and safety management systems. The main programmes are:

- the ACC Workplace Safety Management Practices programme: in return for having systems and processes for managing and improving workplace safety, employers receive 10% to 20% discounts on the standard ACC levy
- the ACC Partnership Programme: employers act on ACC's behalf by taking responsibility for work injury claims by their employees, including the delivery of all statutory entitlements. In return, employers receive a 30% to 95% discount on their ACC levies, and
- the ACC Workplace Safety Evaluation Programme: this targets employers with significantly more or more severe work-related personal injury claims than other employers in the same industry.

ACC can upwardly adjust an employer's ACC levy by 50% if they do not have adequate safety management practices.

The first two programmes tend to motivate medium to large business. Further work is underway on incentives to motivate small businesses effectively, including the self-employed.

The Strategy provides an opportunity to assess whether current and proposed incentive-based strategies and programmes target the right groups, are aligned to the Strategy outcomes as well as the national priorities, and provide the right mix of incentives.

Overall, we need to be mindful of current incentives in the New Zealand environment. Where possible, incentives for businesses and the labour market need to be considered when decisions are first made about new initiatives, then structured most effectively for the target group. What acts as an effective incentive for one group (for example, large business) may not work for others (for example, small business).

Incentives can also provide a disincentive for unwanted (or illegal) behaviour. For example, fines or penalties for breaking laws or regulations are designed to act as a disincentive for such behaviour. These are discussed below.

Effective regulation

Regulation involves setting and enforcing standards. It is an important intervention approach for this Strategy given its ability to motivate good business practice.

The HSE Act (amended in 2003) is the key standard for workplace health and safety in New Zealand. Although further work is needed to update regulations to this Act, the main gains over the next decade will come through improvements in regulatory practice. In New Zealand, the key regulatory agencies for workplace health and safety are OSH, the Maritime Safety Authority, the Civil Aviation Authority, ERMA New Zealand, the Land Transport Safety Authority and New Zealand Police.

Effective regulation requires community support for the existence of standards and the actions of regulatory agencies. Regulators need to build trust and respect in the community for their work, and use strategies that are effective. This Strategy provides an opportunity to ensure regulators are effective in achieving important outcomes and that their contributions are viewed more positively.

A 'responsive regulation' approach assumes that most businesses are 'good citizens' and will make the right moral choices as long as they are able to. For example, a large number of businesses will be prompted by the mere existence of standards (as legislation, codes and guidelines) and use them as guidance on behaviour. Regulators should therefore seek to raise awareness of standards and the availability of guidance material.

Persuasion by the regulator combined with an underlying threat of punishment will be enough to ensure compliance by most other employers. Stronger enforcement actions will be required, however, for businesses that purposefully breach the law. Regulators must target the worst offenders and eliminate their negative influence on the rest of the business community. This will help lift standards across the board and provide a stronger culture of compliance.

Given the above, we need to ensure that:

- standards are relevant, effective, clear and understood by all
- support and guidance information is easily accessible and specific to hazards and industries

- enforcement is targeted at the worst offenders, including those responsible for the greatest number and severity of work-related illnesses and injuries
- regulators deal with offenders effectively, fairly and visibly, raising the expectation of appropriate but inevitable enforcement, and
- regulators use a flexible approach to intervention, depending on the motivations and responses of individual employers.

New Zealand workplace health and safety regulators need to co-ordinate their efforts and agree/align on roles and activities to ensure seamless and efficient coverage and consistency. Regulators also need to closely work with other agencies with an interest in workplace health and safety, particularly ACC and the Ministry of Health. This co-operation could involve:

- sharing intelligence and agreeing on the priority problems to be addressed
- providing clear and consistent information and guidance about standards
- agreeing on the best approaches for holding the worst offenders to account
- underpinning enforcement actions with targeted provision of encouragement, advice and assistance, and
- sequencing the different approaches, allocating them across government agencies, and involving key business, union and community leaders.

This approach to regulation is co-ordinated, targeted and aligned to workplace health and safety outcomes and may require a repositioning of regulatory agency priorities.