Embracing Technology for ISO 45001 OHS Standards

The mission to assure the health and safety of workers is essential and requires applied policies and processes to reduce overall injuries in the workplace. Since the passage of the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Act in 1970 employers have made significant progress in ensuring work areas are free of recognized hazards. Nevertheless, the International Labour Organization, an agency of the United Nations, estimates that 2.78 million fatal accidents and 374 million non-fatal injuries happen at work each year.

The International Organization for Standardization or ISO, an international organization that develops standards to facilitate industrial and trade standardization, in March 2018 published ISO 45001:2018. Completed after five years of deliberation and applicable to all organizations, this new ISO standard sets forth a framework for management systems used for occupational health and safety (OHS) and its improvement. According to the ISO, 45001 is intended to provide a set of international guidelines that organizations can use to develop a consistent framework for the management systems used to assess and improve health and safety in the workplace.

The standard builds on the 2007 British Standard OHSAS 18001, which called for more methodical management of occupational health and safety. It advances OHSAS 18001 by specifying requirements to ensure that workers, suppliers, subcontractors, clients and regulatory authorities all are aware of their responsibility to know about and act upon risk and opportunities, and that organizational leadership engages in – and takes accountability for – the OHS management system. This process-based approach to mitigating risks and examining opportunities better enables all interested parties to significantly improve workplace safety.

ISO 45001 recommends that organizations have a management system that can support both internal and external processes related to occupational health and safety and the supply chain. However, that is only the beginning of what we believe organizations must do. They also need a centralized and easy-to-use technology environment within which to capture, store, analyze and guide their health and safety efforts. This in itself is a good business practice and one that supports the commonly embraced PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) model, which goes beyond just assessment to include actions for improvement.

ISO standards such as 45001 also require a common context with common terms and definitions, for example, Annex SL. Organizations should have a single system to support these requirements and manage the qualification process for all parties, including workers for third parties that are contracted directly or through outsourcing, as well as all associated documents. They also must ensure that employees have been adequately trained and certified to perform their responsibilities safely and that all suppliers, contractors and third-party companies, comply with the standards. Improvement requires worker involvement to

not just support but advocate for and be involved with performance evaluations and improvement efforts.

A management system should be built on a platform that enables organizations to assess and improve on metrics that gauge compliance and also to identify areas of potential improvement to reduce risk across the entire supply chain, not just one department or division. Compliance with ISO 45001 thus will require organizations to adopt enterprise technology that can help manage the supporting information and metrics; doing so will not only ensure good management of auditing and operations but will simplify annual recertification and guide future risk mitigation and operational improvements.

As is the case in the management and leadership of any of an organization's business processes, having dedicated applications that support OHS and can interoperate on a common platform will increase business efficiency and reduce risk in operations; it also will simplify compliance with the standard's required continuous assessment and improvement. Without a common technology platform, compliance will require more work and expose the organization to increased risk as well as diminished agility. In designing such a system, organizations should avoid reliance on disparate sets of documents and spreadsheets as the potential for multiple sources of information and lack of audit capability cannot promote confidence in the accuracy of occupational health and safety efforts.

Following up on 45001, ISO established a specification called ISO/IEC TS 17021-10 to help organizations ensure that auditors are qualified. This is important to ensure high-quality and consistent audits across supply chains worldwide. In my view, auditors also should use a common and shared set of methods and data to assess and guide organizations' electronic efforts and should work with the dedicated technology used to support ISO 45001.

Understanding and applying ISO 45001 not only can save lives and reduce injuries; it establishes a culture of prevention and improvement across the entire supply chain. Moreover, embracing the ISO standard can have significant economic benefit. The continuity the standard demands is good business sense because it is driven by a people-first approach that can improve productivity and the worker experience and also contributes to better financial performance due to increased business continuity. Good prevention practices and processes can decrease operating costs by reducing the number of incidents and claims. A management system should ascertain, control and help organizations understand the risk from outsourced business processes with work and workers involved.

Considering compliance with the standards set forth in ISO 45001 requires that you explore acquiring the relevant technology that can interoperate with a multitude of systems and provide information that is readily available, easily accessible and properly applied to your processes. In my view, establishing a safe place to work is not just a marketing and employment slogan but an organization-wide and top-down approach, one that should be backed up by processes and systems and embraced by management, one that supports occupational health and safety and mitigates risk across employees, third-party and external workers to ensure the best possible accountability.

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