

Profit from managing workplace safety with technology

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Successful management of occupational health and safety (OHS) is a critical factor for long term success in the industry. For many companies, quality OHS systems provide increased margins on contracts and create a competitive edge when tendering. On the other hand, poor management of OHS creates a burden of costs - from distracted management pulled from productive activities to long term overheads of increased insurance premiums, higher excesses, and increasing numbers of claims under both public liability and workers compensation policies.

Technology tools have become a core part of creating a higher quality, efficient OHS system. Technology solutions bring productivity, consistency, and efficiency to the management of OHS. Additionally, technology based approaches create scalability that works across a large number sites and grows in efficiency as a business grows. Like all tools, the way that technology solutions are deployed has a major impact on the benefits - the training, support and communication are critical to the long term success of any innovation. In this article we'll examine the critical factors for any technology to have a positive impact on OHS, as well as looking at some of the options in the marketplace.

Focus on where it happens

It is fair to say that most OHS and liability issues occur on sites - whether a worker's comp claim from an employee, or a public liability claim in a shopping centre. Similarly the best technology solutions capture activity and create efficiencies starting at the site level, and work up towards a management view. Just like choosing a good employee, there are key attributes you should look for in a system for your sites.

Audit Trail - the ability of the solution to hold data securely, so it provides a secure and verifiable audit trail if required in court or in the process of managing a claim or incident.

Ease of use - for all staff that will be using the system. This is critical as many people in the industry have limited computer experience and can be easily put off by complex systems. Additionally, an easy to use system will get picked up by staff more quickly, leading to a faster return on investment.

Flexibility - while OHS is a focus, the best systems will provide for other operational benefits and efficiencies either in a modular approach or as a core part of their functionality.

Rules for consistency - the ability of the system to enforce consistent action by the users, and ability of these rules to be customised to suit your operations. Consistency can be core data that must be gathered, forms that have to be followed up, or critical communication protocols that must be followed. The key is to have a technology solution that can help you to enhance your systems, allow you to enforce your standards and maintain a consistent approach across all your sites.

Scalability - the ability of the solution to grow with you - from 1 site to 100, and across sites of various sizes. Scalability can be influenced by the core technology and solution chosen - is it web based, open, networked or, stand-alone, isolated, duplicated? The most scalable solutions are often software-as-a-service, where a small per user or per site fee applies each month - this approach to billing allows the solution to be deployed to one site or many as systems that have large up-front license fees become too expensive for single sites or smaller operations.

Speed of communication - ability of systems to work with wireless or internet based communications, so that information captured can be quickly and easily transmitted. Being able to move information from the sites to management and related parties is critical to creating an efficient OHS system. Many incidents, if reported quickly, can be managed to stop them from escalating to claims.

Also recognise that after the initial roll-out of any system, over time staff will change so it is important that training staff in using the technology solution needs to be a core part of inducting and training new staff. Often it is best to create a "champion" who can provide internal support and on-going training for staff - usually a person in the operational, IT, or administrative side of the business.

Flexibility and Consistency can at times be difficult attributes to reconcile. The best systems will allow the system to be customised in some ways that match your current processes and systems. Often, current systems for site management and OHS need to change to become more efficient - don't be afraid of trying something new or implementing new procedures to make the most of your technology. A good approach is to set up a trial of the system and the new procedures on a site, and work through the issues before rolling the solution out to all your sites. This approach will provide critical insights on what is

required for a successful roll-out to your other sites, including procedures, training, and content of the system.

A range of solutions

Over the last five years or so a range of solutions have evolved to assist the management of OHS. While avoiding the discussion of any specific brands, solutions in the industry generally attack one or more of these core management issues for sites:

HR/Staff management - management of staff training, qualifications and skill sets can be critical for the effective management of OHS. It is important that this information is available on site - allowing for the effective allocation of work to people with the appropriate skills and qualifications. Automated tracking of qualifications, expiries of first aid and other training can be critical - ideally with alerts that allow for the staff and management to be notified prior to expiry.

Loops - systems to record loop times can be passive, recording staff activity as they go around a site, or active - requiring staff to "hit" a wand point or scan a reader at specific points in their rounds.

Log-in/log-out systems - in addition to managing time and attendance, a new breed of systems also provides pro-active management including alerts if staff do not arrive at work, and alerts if they don't sign off (or leave). This assists in managing core duty of care responsibilities to make sure staff arrive and leave safely. These systems can also provide excellent remote management of smaller sites where staff have no immediate supervision.

More advanced systems include interactive kiosks, and can provide a range of information about site safety. Additionally, these solutions may be able to validate the bone fides of arriving staff and contractors - checking contractor (and sub-contractors) company insurances, individual inductions and qualifications.

Mobile reporting/inspections/audits - the ability to collect information on the move on a smartphone greatly enhances any OHS system, providing a platform for conducting regular compliance inspections on sites. These often include cleaner's room inspections, equipment audits, OHS focused site inspections, reporting of incidents. Most mobile inspection systems will allow for quality assurance inspections as well as general operational functions. The best allow for a large range of data to be collected (including pictures), provide an audit trail, and can be customised to your requirements.

Safe Work Method Statements/work orders/site information - a core requirement of a good OHS system is to collect a range of information about activities on sites. The best systems will have ways to collect safe work method statements and track them against specific jobs performed. Additional information about permits and site requirements can also be tracked and recorded, and some systems have the ability to display site specific information such as hazards register or specific procedures for the site (eg. roof access). Ideally, this information can be entered by staff and contractors so that there is no bottleneck in the collection of this information.

Tools are as good as their operators

The variety and scope of current technology solutions allows you to find something that meets your needs and will greatly enhance the efficiency of your operations and OHS systems. Technology solutions excel in providing the core capabilities to have a positive impact on OHS cost. The best provide consistency, easy data collection and reporting. A further benefit from using technology to manage OHS on your site is that best systems will collect a variety of important information on site activity and provide for a strong audit trail, tracking, summary reporting - making it easier to meet regulatory requirements.

Always remember that tools are only as good as their operators, and that any implementation must include training, support and a long term plan to embed the solution in your operational systems. Picking a technology provider who has experience in the industry and can be a successful long term partner can help you reach your goals faster and ensure a long term competitive advantage from your chosen technology.

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