Work Health and Safety Performance

Measurement and Benchmarking

“You can’t improve it unless you can measure it”

Measuring WHS performance is important. Valid, accurate and reliable performance measurement allows managers to identify WHS problem areas and take timely and targeted improvement action. The measurement of WHS performance also provides important feedback about what works and what doesn’t, providing a sound basis for the evaluation of organisational WHS initiatives. Measuring WHS performance is also essential to understand whether organisational WHS objectives are being met.

Why use leading indicators?

Traditional “lagging” indicators of WHS performance, such as Lost Time Injury Frequency Rates (LTIFRs), are very limited. They are ‘after the fact’ measures of things that have already gone wrong. LTIFRs may be an accurate measure of past performance but they may not be a very useful predictor of future performance. LTIFRs are also of questionable statistical validity in many work settings and are subject to random variation. This can cause “knee-jerk” reactions that are not helpful in the pursuit of continuous improvement of WHS.

The effective management of WHS requires more proactive measurement. Leading indicators (sometimes called positive performance indicators) measure the positive steps an organisation is taking to manage WHS before the occurrence of accidents or injuries. Leading indicators provide a more direct measure of the quality of WHS management and an immediate feedback mechanism. Measuring what an organisation is doing in relation to WHS enables organisations to improve WHS processes, before deficiencies result in accidents.

Safety climate measures

The measurement of safety climate provides an indicator of the underlying safety culture of an organisation. Facets of safety climate include,

(i) management commitment to WHS,
(ii) supervisors’ WHS behaviour,
(iii) the relative priority of WHS over production and time pressure, and
(iv) the quality of safety-related communication within the organisation.

Measuring safety climate provides important information about how safety is experienced within an organisation – from those ‘at the coal face.’
The RMIT measurement model

Research shows that there is no single reliable measure of organisational WHS performance.

RMIT University has developed a hierarchical set of linked measures (shown in Figure 1).

The measurement model comprises three levels of measurement of an organisation’s WHS performance: These are:

- lagging indicators (Level 1),
- leading indicators (Level 2),
- safety climate measures (Level 3).

The measurement method

RMIT collects data within participating organisations using the multi-level measures. This data is collated and analysed to produce regular reports. These reports provide a comprehensive analysis of WHS performance at organisational, project and workgroup levels.

The measurement method is streamlined and easy. Data collection is undertaken using a set of developed and automated tools.

The reports identify areas of strength and weakness in WHS processes and identify changes over time. This enables managers to understand areas of relative strength and weakness. Changes in safety emphasis or performance over the life of construction projects can also be carefully monitored.

The reports provide important information that can be used in the evaluation of the quality and effectiveness of organisational WHS programmes. The data targeted new WHS initiatives.

Benchmarking opportunities

The multi-level RMIT WHS performance measurement model is ideally suited for use in industry comparative analysis or benchmarking.

The measures can be used within organisations to compare the performance of different departments, projects or business units.

There is also an exciting opportunity for the measurement model to be used to compare WHS performance between organisations (subject to the agreement of those organisations).

The ultimate goal of performance benchmarking is to learn from others in order to improve performance.

What people have said about the RMIT WHS measurement model

“…the tool has been fundamental in helping promote positive safety behaviours and accountabilities within our business…the Safety Index has continued to provide an excellent barometer, combining critical lag and lead behavioural elements. It has been central in providing genuine impetus for improvement…”

(Victorian General Manager, Baulderstone Pty Ltd)