

Integrating for a Culture of Health and Safety

Human Resources and the Health and Safety Role

by Kim Takata

No one knows an organization to the extent of the human resources department. Through understanding how roles, policies, procedures, business requirements, culture, and structure support the strategic priorities of the organization, HR has the opportunity to partner and influence the leadership team. With an aging workforce, constant legislative changes, and new hazards emerging daily – including fatigue, mental health, violence and harassment, post-traumatic stress disorder, and more – the role of HR continues to shift and expand. While HR leaders may not necessarily know the ins and outs of health and safety from a technical perspective, they are expected to respond accordingly to health and safety needs as they arise. Recognizing the importance of this changing role is critical in promoting and sustaining an effective IRS (internal responsibility system).

Roles and Responsibilities

For smaller organizations, HR is often responsible for health and safety, thus making it easier to address, promote, and identify health and safety issues. However, in larger organizations, HR will often work in tandem with the health and safety manager. These separate roles can become siloed, and perhaps even compete for resources; yet, when integrated, these allied forces can help create a positive health and safety culture. To begin with, some of the responsibilities of HR are:

- ▶ recruitment and selection;
- ▶ performance management and development;
- ▶ employee and labour relations;
- ▶ policy development;
- ▶ organizational and employee effectiveness; and
- ▶ compensation and benefits.

Responsibilities of the health and safety manager are to plan, implement, assess, and review protective and preventative safety measures. The role may encompass:

- ▶ health and safety training;
- ▶ legislative compliance;
- ▶ risk assessments;
- ▶ hazard identification and investigations;
- ▶ health and safety policy and program development;
- ▶ joint health and safety committee metrics; and
- ▶ claims and disability management.

So, how can an organization integrate the roles and responsibilities of both to provide innovative solutions for workers? How can health and safety leaders work optimally in partnership with employers, employees, and unions to mitigate operational losses, occupational health issues, accidents, and injuries?

Alignment and Integration

Since health and safety has long been viewed as the role of everyone in an organization, HR can play a key role in bringing alignment and facilitating conversation. HR can work alongside

the health and safety manager to support and be part of the joint health and safety committee (JHSC). Both roles can work together to develop policies and help advocate, while overseeing communications and reporting. Alignment where there is overlap will also assist with a more engaged workforce when it comes to health and safety. HR is also an important part of representing workers, providing support for safety concerns, coaching, and additional health and safety training.

In an article in the October 2015 issue of *Municipal World* (“Laying a Foundation for Success: Solutions to prevent and manage the new wave of workplace health and safety issues,” p. 27), Monica Szabo suggested ways to prevent and manage the new wave of workplace health and safety issues such as psychosocial hazards. These are fast becoming major issues for Canadian employers, and HR is integral in helping to reduce the stigma where leadership commitment and focus is concerned.



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Nothing is more frustrating than inconsistent messaging, or worse, the perception of being in a queue and being transferred from one person to the next until you finally give up and hang up. By integrating health and safety along with the roles of where responsibilities lie, it becomes part of business planning, which means that accountability can lie throughout the organization. From initial recruitment efforts through to annual planning, health and safety can become an integral part of an organization's culture – and can result in real meaning and value for employees. Cross-discipline and cross-sector initiatives bring new ideas and creative strategies to overall health and safety planning.

Strategies for Success

The following integration strategies can help ensure that the organization is not only focused, but also aligned.

Integrate health and safety into strategy – This will include not only the HR strategy, but strategy across the organization. Goals can then cascade down to departmental plans and individual performance objectives. For example, implementing the psychological health and safety standard could be a goal that is cascaded down to individual objectives (for example, as a commitment to participate in and/or promote psychological health and safety).

Recruit for competency in health and safety – This can be a consideration in hiring staff and management. Develop questions during the interview that focus on awareness and knowledge.

Become an active member of the JHSC – Not only is it important for HR to be an active member of the JHSC, they should also recognize the importance of becoming a certified member.

Measure success – To improve workplace health and safety standards, HR and the health and safety manager should compile and track data – from training compliance to lost time incidents – to help identify priorities on an annual basis. Treat it like a yearly business plan. The focus on health and safety will contribute to productivity and influence positive morale.

Align communication – Align with the health and safety manager on what communication is essential to keeping workers up to date so that HR can effectively interact with each department using company-wide notices. Being transparent and encouraging accessibility is key to ensuring workers have open communication on all health and safety issues.

Manage change together – Change in the workplace can often affect employees. As a result, it is important to take steps to evaluate your organization's health and safety culture on a

quarterly or annual basis. Be transparent and share outcomes with workers to demonstrate solutions and action. Find new ways to keep employees engaged.

Develop leadership – Work together from a place of “reduced” enforcement, to instead incentivize engagement and collaboration when it comes to safety. Encourage and inspire employees to develop their own leadership skill set when it comes to health and safety.

Mentor one another – For larger organization, HR and health and safety are separate departments; and, while they might report into the same leader, the roles have a different set of skills and competencies. The opportunity to work together and develop one another not only provides a growth opportunity, it will ensure that priorities are aligned and common goals are articulated.

Conclusion

Following the roadmap to success will lead to establishing an effective health and safety management system. Through a participatory approach, workplace stakeholders become actively involved in the recognition, assessment, and control of workplace issues. Having both the HR and health and safety staff working together will create a sense of community and shift organizational health and safety culture. *MW*

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