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Safety Ownership in the Australian Workplace and its Application to Road Safety

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Abstract:

Road safety within the community can be enhanced through improvements in work-related road safety. Recent research in the construction industry suggests that the success of safety initiatives within an organisation may be related to the level of ownership of safety management tasks by employees in safety critical positions. In accordance with the Workplace Health and Safety Act 1995, duties of care to workers and third parties are shared by everyone. Therefore ownership of work related road safety should be embraced by all members of an organisation. This qualitative study explored whether organisational differences in safety ownership related to safety practices and processes. Two organisations were recruited to participate in this research. Organisation A was a 'not-for-profit' service provider that operated a fleet in excess of 200 vehicles. Organisation B was a 'for profit' service provider that operated a fleet in excess of 2,000 vehicles. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews with both male and female employees from a range of roles and levels of seniority within each of the organisations and an audit of work related road safety practices and processes. It was identified that organisational practices and processes varied in relation to the position of the person primarily responsible for managing work related road safety and that greater sharing of ownership of safety responsibilities was associated with greater development of work related road safety practices and processes. This paper suggests that advances in road safety can be achieved through educating employees and managers about their Workplace Health and Safety responsibilities and through explicitly including road safety tasks in job descriptions.

Introduction

Motor vehicle incidents are over represented in Australian Workers Compensation claims. More specifically in 2003-2004, vehicle incidents were the most common mechanism for Australian compensated fatalities, representing 35 percent of all compensated deaths (Australian Safety and Compensation Council, 2006). While many organisations are committed to maintaining the health and safety of employees within their workplace, it appears that risk management often fails to include work related road safety. Although common, this is unacceptable in accordance with the Workplace Health and Safety Act 1995. The Act states that 'a workplace is any place where work is, or is to be, performed by a worker or a person conducting a business or undertaking'. This includes 'a vehicle supplied by an employer for use by a worker in the performance of work'. Under the Workplace Health and Safety Act 1995 employers have statutory obligations to provide safe workplaces, safe plant and equipment, safe systems of work and safety information, instruction, training and supervision. Employers who fail to take reasonable care to avoid exposing employees to unnecessary risks of injury can face substantial penalties. Given that vehicle incidents continue to be the most common mechanism for Australian compensated fatalities and employers have statutory obligations to provide safe workplaces, there is a need to understand how work related road safety can be

improved. Research suggests that the level of ownership of safety management tasks may be related to workplace safety.

In accordance with the Workplace Health and Safety Act 1995, duties of care to workers and third parties are shared by everyone. Therefore ownership of work-related road safety should be embraced by all members of an organisation. However in practice it currently appears that ownership of work related road safety is often only adopted by employees operating in specific positions, such as Workplace Health Safety Manager. Research suggests that the department and level of authority of the person taking primary ownership and responsibility for safety may be linked to their ability to execute key management practices in relation to safety (Barrett, Haslam, Lee, & Ellis, 2005; Bentley & Haslam, 2001; Simard & Marchand, 1995).

A study of safety practices adopted by managers of postal delivery offices with either low or high incident rates revealed that several key management practices were associated with low incident rates (Bentley & Haslam, 2001). These management practices included prompt action in response to reported hazards, comprehensive incident investigation, and remedial action taken to reduce the chances of further incidents occurring and frequent safety communication with employees. The job description and authority of the person primarily responsible for safety management may restrict their ability to execute or to influence others to execute key safety management practices. This paper will explore whether organisational practices and processes vary in relation to the position of the person primarily responsible for managing work related road safety. It is hypothesised that work related road safety practices and processes will be more developed in areas that align with the competencies and responsibilities relevant to the position of the primary safety owner. For example it is suggested that if the position of the primary safety owner is a Fleet Manager than the organisation's road safety practices and processes may be more developed in the area of vehicle selection and maintenance than in the safety induction of employees.

In addition to the position of the primary safety owner, it is suggested that the extent to which ownership is shared across members of an organisation may also be related to workplace safety. Research within the construction industry (Dingsdag, Biggs, Sheahan & Cipolla, 2006) has identified 39 safety management tasks that are seen as critical to the management of Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) performance. These tasks have been condensed into seven task categories covering a range of competency areas including:

1. Proactively identifying, assessing and determining appropriate controls for OHS hazards and risks
2. Communicating and consulting with stakeholders regarding OHS risks
3. Monitoring, reporting and evaluating safety program effectiveness
4. Engaging with subcontractors in OHS performance management
5. Identifying and implementing relevant components of the OHS and workers compensation management systems
6. Understanding and applying workers compensation and case management principles
7. Providing leadership and management to staff and subcontractors in OHS performance.

To effectively manage OHS performance it has been suggested that ownership of safety management tasks should be shared by employees in safety critical positions. Safety critical positions may vary between organisations but will typically include: Managing Director/Chief Executive Officer, Senior Manager, Operations Manager, Project Manager, Site Manager, National OHS Manager, State OHS Manager, Regional OHS Manager, Site OHS Advisor, Union Representative, Supervisor and the workers themselves (Dingsdag, Biggs, Sheahan, 2007; Dingsdag, Biggs, Sheahan & Cipolla, 2006). It is suggested that the sharing of safety responsibilities would allow an organisation to draw upon the expertise of employees whose competencies and position responsibilities are best aligned with managing the execution of each work related road safety practice and process. This paper will explore whether organisational practices and processes vary between organisations in relation to the level of shared ownership for managing work related road safety. It is hypothesised that work related road safety practices and processes will be more developed in organisations where ownership of safety responsibilities is shared across many of the safety critical positions.

Method

Participants

Two organisations were recruited to participate in this research. Organisation A was a 'not-for-profit' service provider that operated a fleet in excess of 200 vehicles. Organisation B was a 'for profit' service provider that operated a fleet in excess of 2,000 vehicles. Both

organisations serviced customers in urban, rural and remote areas of Australia and therefore required their employees to operate vehicles in a range of environments.

The selection of participants from within each organisation was a convenience sample and was ultimately determined by the employer. Efforts however were made to obtain a random and representative sample within this real-world context. Participating organisations provided access to both male and female employees from a range of roles and levels of seniority within their organisation. Participants' roles included Fleet Manager, Occupational Health and Safety Manager, Department Manager and operational employees who were required to drive as part of their work. Interviews were conducted with six employees from each of the organisations. Audits of work related road safety processes and procedures were conducted with three managers from each organisation.

Interviews

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed to explore ownership of work related road safety management tasks within the organisations. The formality and depth of interview questions was varied to suit the employees' level of seniority and involvement in driver safety initiatives. To determine the level of current safety ownership, participants were asked to identify the position of the person primarily responsible for managing work related road safety in their organisation. Participants were also presented with a list of seven task categories and asked to indicate the positions of anyone in their organisation who was accepting responsibility for actioning safety tasks in relation to each category. The task categories were selected based on previous research findings that the categories are linked to workplace safety (Dingsdag, Biggs, Sheahan & Cipolla, 2006). Task categories comprised:

1. Proactively identifying, assessing and determining appropriate controls for OHS hazards and risks
2. Communicating and consulting with stakeholders regarding OHS risks
3. Monitoring, reporting and evaluating safety program effectiveness
4. Engaging with subcontractors in OHS performance management
5. Identifying and implementing relevant components of the OHS and workers compensation management systems
6. Understanding and applying workers compensation and case management principles
7. Providing leadership and management to staff and subcontractors in OHS performance.

Several steps were taken to maximise the integrity of the interview data collected. Firstly the interview schedule was piloted and refined based on feedback from employees not participating in the main study. Secondly interviews were conducted face-to-face in a private office on the premises of each organisation to minimise distractions and misinterpretations of information. Thirdly, employees were interviewed individually to minimise any contamination of data arising from potential group bias. Fourthly, it was stressed that participation was voluntary and confidential to encourage participants to openly report their beliefs and behaviours. Finally, consent was sought from participants for the interview to be recorded and notes to be taken during the session. All recorded data was transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy.

Audit of work related road safety practices and processes

An audit was developed to explore work related road safety practices and processes within the organisations. The purpose of the audit was to identify the level at which each organisation was performing at in relation to best practice in work related road safety. For the purposes of this research 'best practice' was based upon elements that have been identified in the research literature (Haworth, Tingvall & Kowadlo, 2000) and Queensland Transport's Workplace Fleet Safety System (Anderson, Plowman, Leven, & Fraine, 1998) as best practice in work related road safety. Practices and processes reviewed in this audit were grouped into eight categories comprising:

1. Having a written Fleet Safety Policy in place that clearly defines safe driving responsibilities and communicates to employees the organisations commitment to safe driving
2. Recruiting and selecting drivers based on safe driving records and awareness of safety issues
3. Inducting all new employees and supervisors using a formal induction program containing work related road safety and safe driving components
4. Conducting fleet safety training needs analyses and providing and evaluating any required fleet safety training and education

5. Recognising good and poor driving behaviours through an official scheme of incentives (not rewards) and disincentives
6. Eliminating or minimising exposure to road hazards when planning and managing road journeys
7. Selecting vehicles based on safety features and documenting maintenance procedures
8. Recording and monitoring individual driver, individual vehicle and overall fleet incident involvement and managing identified high risks

The audit consisted of four phases. Firstly all organisational documents pertaining to work related road safety were reviewed in relation to best practice. Secondly audit interviews were conducted separately with two managers. Combinations of open and closed questions were used in the audit to clarify organisational procedural aspects and to elicit sufficient information to assess practices and processes. Consent was sought from participants for interviews to be recorded and notes to be taken during sessions. All recorded data was transcribed verbatim. Thirdly, once all audit data was collected, the organisation's practices and processes were compared to best practice criterion to determine audit ratings. Audit rating levels included 'practice not in place', 'limited practice in place', 'moving towards reduced harm' and 'moving towards zero harm'. Finally a draft of the audit results was sent to a third manager to verify the accuracy of the audit assessment.

Results

Audit of work related road safety practices and processes

Organisation A has less practices and processes in place to manage work related road safety risks than Organisation B. For example in relation to recognition of good and poor driving behaviours, Organisation A does not monitor driver performance. Alternatively Organisation B has documents stating that "vehicle use which departs from organisational standards will be managed in accordance with the organisation's performance management process." This may include drivers funding payment of infringement notices, the General Manager meeting with drivers who were responsible for incidents to discuss their performance and reinforce the organisations safe driving message, disciplinary action including the withdrawal of driving use privileges, reallocation of duties or dismissal. Organisation B has processes in place to monitor driver behaviour however the linking of driving behaviour to performance reviews and disciplinary action is adhoc. As can be seen in Table 1, overall Organisation A predominantly has limited practices in place. Comparatively, Organisation B predominantly has practices in place and is moving towards reduced harm.

Table 1: Audit Ratings for Organisation A and Organisation B

Road Safety Practices and Processes	Organisation A Ratings	Organisation B Rating
Work related road safety Policy	Practice not in place	Moving towards reduced harm
Recruit and select safe drivers	Limited practice in place	Limited practice in place
Formal induction program containing work related road safety	Limited practice in place	Moving towards reduced harm
Work related road safety training and education provided and evaluated	Limited practice in place	Moving towards reduced harm
Recognition of good and poor driving behaviours	Practice not in place	Moving towards reduced harm
Journey planning and management	Limited practice in place	Moving towards reduced harm
Select vehicles based on safety features and document maintenance procedures	Moving towards reduced harm	Moving towards reduced harm
Recording and monitoring incident involvement and managing high risks	Moving towards reduced harm	Moving towards zero harm

Safety Ownership

Road safety responsibilities were not formally stated in job descriptions in either organisation. Unofficial ownership of responsibilities varied between the organisations. Participants from Organisation A reported limited sharing of safety responsibilities between positions within the organisation. Employees in the positions of Fleet Manager, Risk Management Officer, Supervisor and Driver accepted ownership of some safety management tasks however shared ownership related mainly to tasks including identifying, assessing and

determining appropriate controls for hazards and risks and providing safety leadership. Within Organisation A it was observed that one Supervisor embraced ownership of road safety management tasks considerably more than the other Department Supervisors. Although overall Organisation A predominantly had limited practices in place, the department with the safety committed Supervisor exhibited good practice in various aspects of work related road safety for example providing driver safety inductions, 4WD drive training and fitting cargo barriers. The Fleet Manager was the person primarily responsible for managing work related road safety in Organisation A. Participants identified that although the Fleet Manager was passionate about improving work related road safety, the amount of work needing to be done in this area would be too large for him to manage and more support would be needed from other members of the organisation.

In comparison, participants from Organisation B reported greater sharing of safety responsibilities between positions within the organisation. Employees in the positions of General Manager, Health and Safety Manager, Health and Safety Coordinator, Business Unit Manager, Fleet Technical Officer, Supervisor and Driver accepted ownership of some safety management tasks. Ownership was shared across positions for all categories of safety tasks and the Health and Safety Manager was identified as the position primarily responsible for managing work related road safety.

Discussion

The findings from this study suggest that the level of ownership of safety management tasks within an organisation may be related to workplace safety. As hypothesised, organisational practices and processes varied in relation to the position of the person primarily responsible for managing work related road safety. In Organisation A where the Fleet Manager was the primary safety owner, the organisation's road safety practices and processes were most developed in the areas of vehicle selection and maintenance and monitoring vehicle incident data. This finding makes intuitive sense as these types of safety tasks align with the competencies and responsibilities required for a Fleet Manager. Similarly for Organisation B, road safety practices and processes were most developed in the area of monitoring incident data to identify and manage high risk areas. Again, this makes intuitive sense as the competencies and responsibilities required for Health and Safety Managers are well suited to tasks including monitoring incident data and managing safety risks.

Additionally, as hypothesised greater sharing of safety responsibility ownership was associated with greater development of work related road safety practices and processes. It is suggested that the more advanced safety practices and processes in Organisation B could be explained by an effective integration of safety knowledge, skills and abilities from a range of employees gained through sharing the ownership of safety responsibilities. In reviewing the work related road safety practices and processes across the two organisations, it is interesting to note that both organisations had only limited practices in place to recruit and select safe drivers. Perhaps this is not surprising given that safety ownership was not accepted by employees with Human Resource competencies and responsibilities in either organisation.

Findings from this research can be applied to industry to improve Australian road safety. As greater sharing of safety responsibility ownership was associated with greater development of work related road safety practices and processes, it is suggested that that employees and managers should be educated about their Workplace Health and Safety responsibilities and that responsibility for work related road safety management tasks should be explicitly stated in job descriptions across all safety critical positions. To guide organisations in formally distributing road safety responsibilities, future research should identify what safety management tasks must be performed competently by those occupying safety critical positions to manage work related road safety.

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