

Occupational Health and Safety (OHS): The big picture

All employers, regardless of size, are required to comply with the requirements of the Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) legislation. But in many industries, including construction smaller companies tend to see compliance as a burden in terms of both time and money - and many slip under the radar because there are too many of them for the authorities to police effectively.

By [Boitumelo Thipe and Makhosazana Kunene](#) 6 Jun 2018



© Enur Amikishiyev – [123RF.com](#)

However, as OHS becomes more firmly established and, particularly, as employees become more aware their right to a safe working environment, non-compliance will become more and more of a risk. High-profile cases like the silicosis and listeriosis class actions are conscientising employees to OHS.

But a growing chance of getting caught out should not be motivating factor; compliance for its own sake never yields the best results. That's particularly true when it comes to OHS because there are so many benefits to be had from taking a proactive approach.

At the most fundamental level, complying with OHS legislation reduces the risk of employees being injured or killed — a real possibility in the construction industry. Figures from the National Institute of Occupational Health indicate that annually more than 2.3 million people die and 17 million accidents occur on the job, impacting productivity and incurring direct financial costs, including recruitment and training of replacement staff. Research also indicates that injury and accident rates are higher in smaller businesses.

Relations and reputational benefits

Skilled and experienced workers should be seen as an asset in which the company has invested; replacing them is costly. At the same time, an employer who provides safe working conditions is also likely to benefit from better labour relations generally, not forgetting improved employee engagement and staff retention and less absenteeism.

The benefits don't stop there. Smaller contractors that take OHS seriously will find their reputation with the larger construction companies is improved, thus their chances of being included in big projects. Safety-conscious companies are more reliable on all sorts of levels.

Companies that take OHS seriously also find that their relationship with government — source of the lion's share of the country's infrastructure spend — changing for the better. Government overriding priorities which include growing the economy and making it as inclusive as possible. Companies that proactively provide safe working environments tend to be seen as strategic, valued partners in the broader movement to build vibrant and inclusive economy.

Women in the workplace

An important driver in this regard is the focus on making workplaces safer and more welcoming for women. At present, unfortunately, many industries are hostile environments for women — sexual harassment (and worse) rates are high, ablution facilities are lacking and even equipment and clothing are often unsuited to females. And yet women constitute half the potential workforce, and studies show that productive women benefit society as a whole because they tend to invest in their children's education.

In short, being seen as a positive force in integrating more women into the workforce will assist greatly in positioning the construction industry as a beacon of transformation, and a strategic partner in government's developmental agenda. And, as we all know, a good reputation is gold in business and politics—the cloud hanging over KPMG, PRASA, Eskom, Cambridge Analytica and many others show us just how devastating its ruin can be.

A practical model for achieving OHS excellence in construction

We must acknowledge that even if they buy into the logic of taking OHS seriously, many smaller, emerging contractors face a genuine challenge. Margins are tight, cash flow is precarious, and skills and capacity are in short supply — but OHS requires many specialised processes, including risk analysis, plan development and plan measurement.

The short-term need to get the job done means programmes like OHS are ignored, even if the long-term future of the company may be compromised.

One answer is to adopt a cluster approach. In construction, as in mining, we find that a few large companies dominate. Each of these giants exists as the centre of an ecosystem of smaller suppliers in a particular area among them building contractors. Obvious examples would be Eskom, any of the mining houses or one of the big construction companies. The idea would be for these giants to provide office space for a centralised OHS office that would provide information, and OHS plans and systems to all the members of the ecosystem.

This would mean that small contractors could access everything they need to develop and implement an effective, practical OHS programme at a fraction of the cost, and also without huge loss of time.

Think of it as a drop-in facility, where companies could come for their OHS needs.

The benefits alluded to above would be quick to follow: a more reliable, productive cohort of smaller contractors would be created, better able to be included in big infrastructure projects. The bigger companies

would also gain additional benefit from the BBBEE points.

And the construction industry as a whole would be well on the way to repositioning itself as one that not only fulfils its contractual obligations, but also as a valuable, strategic partner in the bigger task of building an inclusive, growing economy.

ENDS.

About the Master Builders Association North

The Master Builders Association North is the amalgamation of the former Master Builders Associations of Johannesburg (founded in 1894) and Pretoria (founded in 1903). The organisations merged to form the Gauteng Master Builders Association in 1996, and was renamed Master Builders Association North, representing four regions: Gauteng, North West, Mpumalanga and Limpopo. It is a chapter of the Master Builders Association South Africa.

Based in Halfway House, the Master Builders Association North represents the interests of employers in the building and allied trade industries in the abovementioned four regions. It aims to serve its members by facilitating best practice within its membership and the building industry as a whole.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Boitumelo Thihe of Master Builders Association North and Makhosazana Kunene at Mpilehle Health Care Consulting.

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>