

# Why virtual safety officers are the next evolutionary step in health and safety

When it comes to health and safety laws, there is a belief that this is only applicable to high-risk industries like mining, construction and manufacturing. However, the reality is that the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA) applies to every single business, regardless of size or industry. The challenge is that many organisations cannot afford a full-time safety officer, therefore health and safety are not prioritised. However, once an incident occurs, the damage has already been done, and this could have unfortunate repercussions for a business. A virtual safety officer (VSO) is the ideal solution, offering a shared resource on a part-time basis to make health and safety compliance accessible to businesses of any size.

 By Louise Woodburn 15 Apr 2021



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## Health and safety requirements can be complex

Some industries are more heavily regulated than others from a health and safety perspective, and for good reason. However, the OHSA applies to all, and there are various other requirements that may be relevant depending on the nature of an organisation. In fact, there are 274 individual pieces of legislation relating to health and safety, so understanding what needs to be applied and how, can be a complex undertaking.

Safety officers fulfil the role of ensuring organisations are compliant with relevant laws but employing one on a permanent basis is out of reach for the majority of businesses, especially in the Small to Medium Business (SMB) space. This role generally ends up with Human Resources and is not given the attention it deserves.

The challenge here is that if an incident occurs and a business cannot prove compliance, they will be subject to fines and prohibition notices from the Department of Labour. If negligence is proven, the owner of the business is personally legally responsible, and could face jail time. No business can afford to take health and safety lightly.

## A virtual solution to the problem

Shared resources are the answer, helping businesses to access the skills and expertise of a trained safety officer without the need to employ them fulltime. In today's digital world where social distancing is key, this role can also be virtualised. A VSO can use collaboration tools like WhatsApp and Microsoft Teams to perform video calls that enable the officer to review legal compliance, give legislative advice and ensure compliance with applicable laws.

The VSO will review documentation and systems, perform a gap analysis, assess the environment and develop a system to meet legislative requirements. They will perform compliance audits, either in person or via video feed and develop risk assessments. The VSO also works with the business to develop the Safe Health, Environment and Quality (SHEQ) file, perform online inductions to train staff in their roles and requirements and help businesses of all sizes achieve their compliance objectives.

In addition, the VSO performs inspections on machinery, ensures they are maintained, applies for necessary permits, and certifies that systems are current and managed according to the law. Should an incident occur the VSO will assess, investigate and register with the Workmen's Compensation Fund. The entire health and safety role is outsourced to a virtual, shared resource according to a company's unique needs, making it a feasible solution for all businesses.

## **Experience is key**

With a VSO, experience is critical – consultants must be SHEQ professionals with sufficient knowledge of various environments to understand what applies and what they need to look out for. Ideally, a hybrid approach provides the best coverage, with on-site visits and virtual follow ups, but when this is not possible digital solutions enable a fully virtualised offering. Not only does this maximise health, safety and compliance while minimising in person contact, it also enables this service to be accessible to any organisation.

Businesses have a moral and legal obligation to ensure the health and safety of their employees, and should they not meet this requirement, there are financial and reputational risks involved. With a VSO, businesses can leverage the skills and experience of a SHEQ professional at a cost-effective rate, removing the complexity of compliance while ensuring that all legal commitments have been fulfilled and all risks and opportunities have been identified.

## **ABOUT LOUISE WOODBURN**

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