



Workplace health, safety and standards for the SME

It's not just big corporates or companies working with obvious hazards that need to prioritize occupational health and safety (OH&S). Small business owners have just as much responsibility. Standards deliver a platform from which to address these changing needs in a way that's right for the modern workplace.

Regardless of sector or type, even the smallest business must ensure its working conditions minimize risk and protect staff. Aside from non-compliance penalties, poor management of OH&S risks interruptions to trading and reduced productivity, as well as damage to customer perception.

Every company is different, especially smaller businesses whose needs change according to the different stages of their lifecycle. Therefore, each SME has an individual situation to consider in terms of OH&S.

Larger, more established, organizations have generally been managing OH&S for many years, and are likely to have invested significant resource into its governance, from both a compliance and a social responsibility perspective.

The typical big businesses will also employ dedicated experts, teams – or even whole departments – to monitor compliance, implement processes and publish reports for management and stakeholders.

For smaller businesses, the situation is usually quite different. Limited resource often means that hiring dedicated experts isn't possible, so the responsibility will frequently be taken on by non-specialist staff, or a time-poor business owner. It's also something which can often be deprioritized during busy periods.

A further consideration for SME owners is that flexible and remote working practices add another layer of complexity. Small companies are far more likely to adopt agile working than their larger counterparts, in a bid to tackle potential hiring difficulties. But OH&S is typically easier to manage when employees work in one location.

In addition, SMEs can face external pressures relating to their OH&S systems – particularly from larger supply chain partners. Sometimes, those at the 'top' of the chain expect to see OH&S managed identically by all companies in the sequence, but this is not always realistic, or even possible.



This perspective does not recognize that each company needs to handle OH&S in a way that's appropriate to its context and size. A large multinational company will need a different approach to a small organization with a handful of staff.

Despite this, companies of all sizes can take a standards-based approach to managing OH&S. The process by which both large and small organizations can begin to manage workplace psychological health is also the same – by identifying primary risk factors and assessing what can be done to change the current working environment.

Small businesses can use the international standard ISO 45001 which provides a clear framework to benchmark and improve OH&S performance, as well as laying the ground for continuous improvement.

Taking a standards-based approach can help SMEs and start-ups understand their responsibilities and create the right structures to efficiently manage worker health and safety and comply with the law. ISO 45001 also integrates seamlessly with other management systems

standards, such as ISO 9001 (quality management) and ISO 14001 (environmental management).

Like many other management system standards, ISO 45001 uses a simple 'plan-do-check-act' (PDCA) model to help systematically minimize the risk of harm to all workers. It addresses factors which can lead to long-term health issues and absence from work, as well as those that give rise to accidents.

Momentum has also been gathering in recent years to better recognize the issue of workplace mental health. Improved transparency and increased mainstream awareness, means even the smallest businesses can't ignore their responsibility when it comes establishing a culture in which staff feel able to discuss depression, stress, anxiety and other related concerns.

Workplace mental health covers anything from an individual's work schedule, timescales and how tasks are organized, to flexibility and work-life balance, as well as the human relationships involved. A healthy workplace manages all these dimensions to promote sustainable staff wellbeing.

Finally, it's worth highlighting that standards development has also been active in this area. A new standard – ISO 45003 – is under development and will tackle psychological health in the workplace. Expected by mid-2021, it will supplement ISO 45001 to help small business owners appraise their current situation and guide the introduction of a management system for psychological health and safety in the workplace

With all this in place, SME owners can respond effectively to a transforming workplace culture, managing risk by promoting a safe and healthy workforce that reflects on society as a whole.

Summary

- Even the smallest business must ensure its working conditions minimize risk and protect staff, in compliance with all relevant legislation.

- Aside from non-compliance penalties, poor management of OH&S risks business interruption and reduced productivity, as well as reputational damage.
- The process by which both large and small organizations can begin to manage workplace psychological health is the same – by identifying primary risk factors and assessing what can be done to change the current working environment.
- Small businesses can use the international standard ISO 45001 which provides a clear framework to benchmark and improve OH&S performance, as well as laying the ground for continuous improvement.
- Momentum has also been gathering in recent years to better recognize the issue of workplace mental health. A new standard – ISO 45003 – is under development and will tackle psychological health in the workplace.

For more information on our business improvement standards, visit:

www.bsigroup.com/standards

