



Standards – Prioritizing People

Q&A with Kate Field, Global Head Health, Safety and Well-being:

How our standards can unlock the benefits of a human-centered organization.



Social responsibility and sustainable, fair employment are increasingly essential to success for any organization. And with the COVID-19 pandemic testing organizational resilience to its limit, it is clearer than ever that people are an organization's most important asset. **Kate Field**, BSI's Global Head of Health, Safety and Well-being, explains how occupational health and safety (OHS) can unlock the benefits of a human-centered organization.

Kate Field, Global Head Health, Safety and Well-being, BSI.

Kate Field (CMIOSH) acts as expert and ambassador on OHS supporting the delivery of excellence and expertise across the 193 countries BSI operates in. With a health and safety career spanning two decades, Kate has authored regulatory and technical guidance, written articles for a range of publications and is a successful global, keynote speaker and presenter.



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Why should organizations prioritize their people?

We often talk about people being an organization's most important asset, but in reality they are too-often treated as a begrudging commodity. COVID-19 has created challenges both for organizations and individuals, but it has also highlighted the intrinsic value of people and how essential they are to organizations in coming up with innovative and agile ways to ride out storms like a pandemic. Organizations are starting to realize that people are absolutely essential and they need to create a true culture of trust by truly prioritizing their people. That is the way they'll unlock the full potential of individuals, which in turn will unlock the full potential of the organization.

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What should organizations be thinking about when taking a people centered approach?

We've seen that there's a need to ensure it's not just physical health that is managed, it's psychological health too. Existing standards start to look at that, but not in as much detail as some organizations need, because it's seen as a complex area. The ISO technical committee, for which BSI holds the Secretariat, is developing a supporting guideline standard, ISO 45003, covering psychological health at work. It provides guidance on what can cause psychological harm, known as psychosocial hazards, and gives practical examples about what organizations need to do, to really help enhance this element of their health and safety management system. What we call psychological health is what might be more commonly referred to mental, cognitive and emotional health and, when it is not managed can give rise to negative outcomes such as occupational stress, burnout, anxiety and depression.

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Are there any common misconceptions around OHS?

Well-being is a very misunderstood term. It's generally considered more like wellness - gym membership and free fruit - but it's much more than that. It's about fulfilment and self-actualization. Gym membership and free fruit are positive; we know there are benefits to encouraging good physical health. But unless you're focusing on wider people issues including mental health, diversity and inclusion and creating fulfilling career opportunities, you're never really going to unlock the potential of your people.

Something you often see in organizations, particularly when they start to try to do the right thing and think about well-being, are things like resilience training. This is treated as a way of inoculating people against burnout without really addressing what's causing the burnout. Well-being, as part of an organization's occupational health and safety management, is about preventing the need for this kind of measure in the first place by focussing on prevention of the factors that cause harm such as burnout.

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What types of organizations can benefit from standards?

The easy answer is all organizations. There's a misconception that standards are only for large organizations but that's absolutely not the case. In fact standards can be hugely beneficial for small organizations who don't have the in-house expertise. For large organizations, standards are also beneficial – they bring the efficiencies that come from having a consistent approach across multiple sites and countries and can unlock competitive advantages. They are also important for organizations' reputations and are becoming essential for securing shareholder and stakeholder trust.

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Why should a business invest in standards, rather than using external consultants?

Standards are written by industry and subject experts, bringing together best practice from around the world in one document. No matter how big a consultancy firm is, they cannot compete with that expertise or value. Additionally, ensuring the competency of consultants is challenging – for organizations that are seeking certification to standards, using an accredited organization like BSI means competency is guaranteed. BSI follows stringent rules in order to be accredited – there are no such rules for consultants.

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How do employees and customers benefit from standards?

For employees, standards ensure that an organization is using a best practice framework to keep them safe and healthy at work, that they are working for an organization that is looking to fulfil their potential - whatever that may be - and create the opportunities for them to develop. I think a really important part of this is understanding that what you're looking to do is create a culture of trust within an organization. You'll only unlock people's potential if they trust you. Standards help create that trust.

And that trust agenda becomes important in terms of the customer experience. More and more customers and clients are focused on corporate responsibility and social values. By using standards, organizations demonstrate that they've got that focus as well.

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What are the risks of ignoring a people-centered approach?

You lose trust, that's the simple answer. Trust is always present, but you can enhance it or you can undermine it. If you aren't prioritizing your people and you aren't taking steps to follow global best practice then you're going to lose that trust. This loss of trust will manifest in a number of ways. From the physical health and safety side, you'll see increased incidents and absence through injury; from the mental health side, you'll see increased psychological health issues, such as stress and burnout, leading to a drop-off in productivity, as well as absences. This then has a knock on impact in others areas such as attracting or retaining talent and you'll lose the innovation and agility that comes from having a diverse workforce and this is an essential part of organizational resilience.

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Sustainability is on everyone's agenda, how do people fit into this?

Sustainability means different things to different people, but to make the biggest impact in the long term it must be seen holistically. It's not just about green and environmental matters. A good way to do this is to use the 6 capitals model, identifying sustainability as made up of financial, manufactured, intellectual, natural and social capital. And the one which underpins it all is human capital.

In the context of sustainability, I tend to focus on "sustainable work or employability" which is about embedding the capabilities and capacities necessary to deliver enduring or ongoing employment. This allows people to remain in work longer – which is critical as we consider the ageing workforce.

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Where else can OHS and people standards help organizations?

One of the challenges organizations have is understanding what 'good' looks like. A lot of organizations want to do the right thing but sometimes, particularly with something like diversity and inclusion, they're not sure where to start and they're not sure how to verify they're getting it right. That's where standards come in. They are a tool that is specifically designed to help you navigate and deliver the best solutions in a given area.

There are standards on diversity and, there are other people focused standards in areas such as recruitment, as well as standards such as ISO 45001 on occupational health and safety management systems. Coming back to thinking about people holistically, creating a happy and healthy workforce means that you will attract and keep the best talent and that's how standards help unlock potential.

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In what ways have standards helped organizations during COVID-19?

One of the things I'm most proud about working at BSI, is that BSI developed a standard for safe working throughout COVID-19. There was a recognized need to help other countries, and the guideline was recognised as valuable, so it was fast tracked and made into a freely available international standard. Keeping people socially distanced is still the best control we have and one of the best ways to do that is encouraging people to work from home where they can. But of course not all people can work from home, so it covers managing safety within the workplace as well as recognising the psychological impact that the pandemic has had, with very clear guidance on how organizations can help and support their people in a fully inclusive way.

Amazingly there hasn't ever been a standard about face coverings. Again, here BSI is leading the way in developing one. In the meantime, there are existing standards covering PPE, developed to ensure that equipment does what it's supposed to do, ensuring quality and consistency. It really shows how standards play a fundamental role in helping protect people.

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Will standards have a role to play in the recovery post COVID-19?

The ISO technical committee is looking to develop a standard which will help organizations manage communicable diseases in the widest sense. Epidemics and pandemics have been around for as long as humans have and will continue to be so. The likelihood of serious impact is only increasing as we become a more globalized society.

One of the things that's quite striking with COVID-19 is that organizations weren't necessarily as prepared as they could have been. Business continuity planning is the perfect example. A lot of organizations have business continuity plans in place, but they often didn't think about pandemics. I think that organizations will come back and reflect on that and standards will be updated to be much more explicit. There is also a standard on organizational resilience which a lot of organizations aren't aware of. I think organizations will start to explore these standards that have always been there, but are maybe underutilized.

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Who should be responsible for these considerations in an organization?

It starts at the top. It is leadership that creates the culture, underpins trust in an organization and creates a focus in terms of prioritizing people. But one of the things that we've seen happening during COVID-19 - and we need to make sure continues - is a breaking down of silos and much better cross functional working. So we've seen health and safety professionals and HR professionals come together in a way that they maybe haven't done before. That's something that we need to continue to see happen to come up with the most sustainable solutions.

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Taking a standards-based approach can help organizations understand their responsibilities and create the right structures to efficiently manage worker health, safety and well-being. Key standards:

Occupational health and safety management systems, is at the heart of creating a safe and healthy workplace, so that you're getting and creating the best for your people.

Handbook is a practical guide for SMEs using ISO 45001, to help them unlock the full potential of their people.

is a supporting document on Psychological health at work. It recognizes well-being as defined by the fulfilment of the physical mental and cognitive needs and expectations of a worker related to their work.

is the standard on human-centered organizations, laying out the values and beliefs that make an organization human-centered, the significant business benefits that can be achieved and the risks of not being human-centered.

is a code of practice for valuing people through diversity and inclusion. As with many of the best-known standards in the world, BSI has led the way and BS 76005 is now in the process of being made into an international standard.

is a new international standard pioneered by BSI, freely available, with general guidelines for safe working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

is the standard on organizational resilience, designed to help organizations plan for sudden shocks or gradual change, including building resilience through a people-centered approach.

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BSOL contains British standards and international and European standards that have been adopted as British standards. It also includes ISO, EN, PAS, ASTM and IEC standards that haven't been adopted as British standards.

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