Influencing nationally recognised training programmes for the purpose of applying evidence based manual task training across Australia.

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1. Introduction

The Western Australian (WA) Occupational Health and Safety (OSH) Act (1984) S19(1) (Government of Western Australia, 1984) requires employers to provide information, instruction, and training to employees to enable them to perform their work in such a manner that they are not exposed to hazards, including hazards related to performing manual tasks.

Research evidence shows that providing lifting technique training is not effective in minimising the risk of injury from manual tasks (Daltroy et al 1997, Martimo et al 2008 and Verbeek et al 2011). There is some evidence that applying a multifaceted risk management approach can minimise the risk of musculoskeletal disorders (Szeto et al. 2013; Hignett, 2001). These findings have influenced occupational laws, codes of practice and policies set out by jurisdictions across Australia for the purpose of reducing work-related musculoskeletal disorders (Government of Western Australia, 1996; SafeWork Australia, 2011; WorkSafe WA Commission, 2010).

Inspectors from the Western Australian Safety Authority, WorkSafe, found that several employers were not compliant with OSH laws as they failed to provide critical elements of manual task training as set out by the WA Manual Task Code of Practice (WorkSafe WA Commission, 2010). It was identified that this was partly influenced by the knowledge base of training providers and the key elements as set out by manual handling based training units registered under the nationally recognised training (NRT) frameworks. This paper presents how stakeholder engagement between WorkSafe WA and peak bodies that influence NRT frameworks and various trade skills councils has led to a pilot phase of the application of a systems approach to improving manual task training across Australia.

2. Method

WorkSafe WA inspectors identified a trend when investigating reported musculoskeletal disorders, as a requirement under S23(l) of the Western Australian (WA) Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Act (Government of Western Australia, 1984) . It was identified that employees that performed ‘hazardous manual tasks’ had minimal to no training in relation to manual task risk factors associated with their jobs either from the employer or from training organisations. This resulted in a number of enforcement actions taken against employers by the safety authority. During this process, inspectors identified that although enforcement on employers could influence some improvement to this finding, this method alone may not drive wider scoped changes that appeared to be necessary.

Discussions with employers during investigations and stakeholder engagement meetings revealed that many employers had assumed that because someone had achieved a nationally recognised qualification or that by engaging a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) to provide manual task or manual handling training, that their legal obligations in relation to the hazardous manual tasks aspect of the OSH legislation would be met. Subsequent meetings with RTO’s that delivered manual task training, revealed that they were also under the impression that by providing manual task or handling based training as outlined in the curriculum of defined units set out by the Australian nationally recognised training frameworks (NRT), that they would be providing the necessary elements and competency sets so that their clients (employers) would be meeting the necessary requirements of the OSH laws.

For this reason engagement with key stakeholders to improve our understanding of how NRT framework units relevant to manual tasks were written, how existing units may be found and how they could be influenced was undertaken. As a result of this, several NRT units relevant to manual tasks were identified and a review of these units was undertaken to identify the gaps between the elements of these units and the essential training elements outlined in the WA and National guidance on manual tasks (SafeWork Australia, 2011; WorkSafe WA Commission, 2010).
3. Results

As a result of exploring the NRT framework, it was identified that many training units pertaining to safely performing manual tasks exists for various industry types, and that many had not been updated for some time to reflect a change in focus from technique based training to risk management training. It was identified that this was the case in 11 NRT manual handling specific units across industries and industry skills councils.

Liaison with NRT providers at that time indicated that they were prepared to change their training to a risk management approach if the requirements from the NRT frameworks were updated to reflect this. At that time, the opportunity to influence the Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council (CSHISC) was timely as that skills council was reviewing their training packages at the time of these liaisons and they welcomed comment from WorkSafe WA. As a result, this was the industry skills council selected to be the pilot industry for this intervention. Subsequently WorkSafe WA scientific officers reviewed 40 Qualifications and 40 individual units of competency available for public comment through this council.

It was identified that five qualifications had omitted training elements in occupational health and safety. A further 12 qualifications pertaining to jobs that could expose workers to hazardous manual tasks lacked training elements specific to manual tasks. The single unit that was identified as being specific to performing a manual task safely (which contributed to 1 qualification), placed emphasis on correct manual handling technique. Other units that aimed to address safely performing manual tasks (in part), also placed emphasis on technique training and not a risk management approach.

Detailed feedback on identified gaps were provided by WorkSafe WA to CSHISC, with most recommendations being adopted by this council.

4. Discussion

This project identified that enforcement alone can be limiting, highlighting the importance of stakeholder engagement as an essential tool for influencing wider scope changes to vocational training programmes that are aimed at preventing manual task injuries.

References


