

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Introduction

Work-place focussed responsibility for both Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) management and the development of employee skills are growing features of the Australian work-place. The developments of new legislative frameworks have, according to Stanley, Meredith and Bishop (2002), imposed new responsibilities on managers and OHS practitioners in the work-place. The Department of Administrative and Information Services (DAIS) (2004a) outlined new responsibilities for managers which included the requirement for skills development and training in OHS.

The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) described how the delivery of training in work-places was influenced by a framework of nationally accredited Training Packages, which facilitated skill development within the relevant industry and work-place (ANTA, 1999). A review by Clayton and Else (2004) described the pressure on employers and government to respond to increasing workers' compensation costs while remaining economically competitive both nationally and internationally. The review indicated new responses were needed to meet changes to work-place safety. One of the identified areas of response related to training and development.

Context of the Study

In 1986, the Government of South Australia enacted legislation with regard to both occupational health safety and welfare, and workers' rehabilitation and compensation (WorkCover Corporation, 2000). Clayton and Else (2004) described how the two statutes made comprehensive changes to, and replaced, a variety of statutes and a system of private insurance and common law redress for injuries and wrongful actions in the work-place. The broad reason for these changes was, according to Bohle and Quinlan (2000), based on several factors such as the widely variable outcomes of workers' compensation cases achieved through the courts, the expense for litigants, a lack of rehabilitation of injured workers and uncertainty of outcomes for all parties.

State governments across Australia were given at the time of federation the constitutional responsibility for health and safety in the work-place. State governments in the late 1990s and early 2000s, needed to review OHS legislative frameworks due to, what Bohle and Quinlan (2000) described as, the "ongoing rapid and profound changes in the working environment" (p. 315). A recent report by the Economic Development Board (2003) in South Australia has identified that the costs of safety compliance and workers' compensation premiums are a major burden to the South Australian economy and "... there is evidence the rehabilitation rate has deteriorated" (p.380).

Workplace Services (2003) pointed out that the South Australian Government identified issues arising from changes in methods of employment as well as the increasing cost of workers' compensation premiums and set in place a review to

establish a cohesive administrative structure to “... ensure universally adopted best-practice for safety in the work-place” (p. 4). A review of “Workers Compensation and Occupational Health Safety and Welfare Systems in South Australia” was conducted by the Stanley Committee (Stanley, Meredith, and Bishop, 2002).

Bohle and Quinlan (2000) pointed out that, although the Australian Constitution limits the power of the Federal Government to legislate in the area of OHS, the National Occupational Health and Safety Commission (NOHSC) established in 1985 works cooperatively with all state and federal jurisdictions to provide coordinated “research, standards and policies (on education, professional practices)” (p. 308). Co-operation between states and the Commonwealth prompted state governments to set competitive national benchmarks in order to pursue OHS best-practice across industry sectors.

A key outcome of this cooperation is the development of Australian and New Zealand Standards in relation to OHS, which are incorporated into state legislation by being cited as approved codes of practice. One such standard is AS/NZS 4804:1997, published by Standards Australia (1997), which specifies that the work-place provide “...resources essential to the implementation of ... OHS policies ... [including] any necessary training ... specialist advice and services” (p.15).

The focus of skill development was devolved to the relevant industry and work-place after the establishment of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) and the national accreditation of Training Packages in consultation with Industry Training Advisory Boards (ITABs) (ANTA, 1999).

The qualification, assessment and training process was developed into entities called Training Packages and, according to ANTA (2000), ensures that assessment and “training is more directly related to work-place requirements” (p.10). Training Packages were developed and are monitored through a nationally recognised system called the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), (ANTA, 2001).

The abolition of both ANTA and NOHSC in their current form was announced in October 2004 by the Prime Minister. According to the Prime Minister , the role of ANTA was to be subsumed into the new Federal Department for Vocational and Technical Education responsible for funding and delivery of vocational education, in conjunction with a Ministerial Council on Vocational Education “to ensure continued harmonisation of a national system of standards, assessment and accreditation, with goals agreed in a Commonwealth-State Funding Agreement” and NOHSC was to become part of the Federal Department for Employment and Workplace Relations (Howard, 2004, p.1).

ITABs were superseded by Industry Skills Councils which, according to ANTA, (2004), had two key roles: the first of which was to provide information on skill needs and training requirements; and secondly, to support development, implementation and continuous improvement of quality nationally recognised training products and services, including Training Packages.

In South Australia, the public sector arranged the delivery of nationally accredited qualifications to its OHS practitioners. Hennekam and Flower (2002) pointed out that, qualifications for OHS practitioners were derived from "...Public Services Training ... [and] Business Services Training package[s]" (p.10). The framework offered by these Training Packages delivered skills through structured assessment and training based on work-place competency standards "... providing a win-win [sic] outcome for agencies and the individual [through] cost effective training, skills identification and flexible training structures" (p.9).

The context in which OHS practitioner training took place in the South Australian public sector was one of constant review and scrutiny, which the Economic Development Board (2003) stated was in the interest of the general public, as it aimed to "...put together a set of building blocks to construct a new, more robust economy" (p.2).

The legislative base for scrutiny of the public sector by the Economic Development Board was the Public Sector Management Act, 1995 (PSM Act). The PSM Act set standards which ensured the provision of responsive, effective and efficient services. Further, the PSM Act specified that the responsiveness of these services was based on continuous improvement of performance in delivering services while fulfilling obligations to meet all legislative requirements which included safe and healthy working conditions.

Hart and Cooper (2001) contended that productive approaches to OHS build both employee well-being and the positive climate of an organisation and this was expressed in policies and procedures, implemented in what Hart and Cooper described as an environment of supportive or empathic management. Further, Hart (2003) claimed that successful organisations can ensure that the work environment “...maximises employee well-being and performance” (p.1).

OHS practitioners played an important role in the way OHS policy management operated within their work-places, and their role provided impetus to policy development and implementation, according to Hennekam and Flower (2002), and could “... drive OHS improvement” (p.1). In an environment of continuous improvement, OHS practitioners’ training needs were a high priority as, Hennekam and Flower (2002) asserted, inadequate training of OHS practitioners posed “...a high risk to government of poor quality advice ... poor quality or ineffectual ...management systems...” (p.2).

Compliance with OHS legislation and communication of OHS policy in the public sector of South Australia is regularly audited by WorkCover (Else and Clayton, 2004). However, as Hart (2003) pointed out, compliance and communication strategies do not, by themselves, drive high rates of “...organisational performance and staff well being” (p.29). Rowe (2001) pointed out that high achieving organisational performance is based on OHS best-practice. Rowe (2001) argued that in relation to OHS, best-practice is a process which integrates OHS into

organisational and work processes and is actively supported by management and involves employees "... to achieve continuous improvement in organisational health and safety performance" (p.1). Rankin (2001) claimed that best-practice OHS management systems need to be systems that are "... developed and owned by the people in the organisation" (p.4).

The Need for the Study

There is a need to ascertain if OHS policy implementation matches best-practice (Rowe, 2001 and Rankine, 2001) in the public sector of South Australia. The Public Sector Management Act (1995), requires constant internal review by public sector agencies of their operations. The combined effect of internal review, and the external pressure exerted by the Economic Development Board for reform, indicated the importance of data gathering regarding the way in which OHS practitioners and work-place managers perceive policy and its management. Such data would inform observers about a critical area of policy development and, supply information for effective implementation.

The proposed changes which may arise from the new Occupational Health Safety and Welfare (SafeWork SA) Bill (2003) also indicated a need to gather data about the perception of current policy. This study will assist OHS practitioners and work-place managers to develop policy approaches to the implementation of proposed legislation and regulations.

Current approaches to assessment, training and development of practitioners need to be informed by data gathered by this questionnaire. The clarification of OHS practitioners' perceptions of implementation of policy could assist in giving direction to further research of OHS practitioner training and development.

Statement of the Problem

Is OHS policy congruent with the OHS practitioners' and work-place managers' perceptions of its implementation in the work-place?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to identify and describe designated OHS practitioners' and work-place managers' perceptions of the implementation of OHS policy in the work-place, within agencies of the public sector of South Australia, and whether these perceptions are congruent with policy and work-place practice.

Research Questions

Research questions selected for the study were as follows:

1. What strategies do OHS practitioners utilise to implement OHS policy?
2. How do managers in work-place settings perceive OHS policy and practice?
3. Are the strategies employed by OHS practitioners congruent with OHS policy?

Assumptions Underpinning the Study

Assumption One

Perceptions of work-place practice influence policy implementation.

Assumption Two

OHS policy is able to be implemented in the work-place.

Assumption Three

OHS practitioners have the professional understanding to make judgments about OHS work-place practice.

Assumption Four

Work-place managers have the professional understanding to make judgments about OHS work-place practice.

Research Design

In order to examine how policy is implemented in practice it was considered important to gather data from a natural setting. The public sector in South Australia was delineated as a bounded system (Burns, 2000) which would be appropriate for the examination of work-place practice. A case study method (Isaac and Michael, 1995) was selected as the research design for the study involving multi-method data gathering instruments. The data gathering instruments were as follows: Questionnaire of OHS practitioners, Semi-structured interview of work-place managers and Document analysis.

The Significance of the Study

The study gathered data on OHS practitioners' and work-place managers' perceptions of the implementation of OHS policy in the South Australian public sector. The

results of this study could assist in guiding South Australian public sector agencies' strategic direction on safety and welfare related issues, based on the perception of the effectiveness of OHS in the working and policy environment.

OHS practice can have a significant impact on the management of work-places in terms of budgeting and finance, productivity, vocational education and training, staff development, staff allocation, and staffing availability. Results of this study could provide useful insights regarding OHS practice. Application of the results could produce changes in a number of significant areas of other work-place practice such as, leadership, decision-making, role clarification and injury management. The study results could provide guides for further research. Few studies have focussed on the perceptions of OHS practitioners and work-place managers of OHS policy implementation.

Limitation of the Study

The results of this study would not be generalisable to other populations of OHS practitioners.

Researcher Bias

The investigator is a Senior Strategist/Adviser employed by the Department of Administrative and Information Services and was responsible for the implementation of the OHS practitioners' competencies project, which delivered work-place training and assessment services to OHS practitioners across the South Australian Public Sector under the AQTF framework. In this capacity, the investigator had to make

assessment of practitioners regarding their competency. The questionnaire was administered by post and the participants were not required to identify themselves, however, the possibility of bias is present in the interview data gathering (Bell, 2000).

As the work-place managers have no direct connection to the researcher's role in the public sector, the risk of bias in these circumstances is minimised. Further, the investigator had no reporting relationship to the work-place managers in the proposed population, diminishing potential bias. It should be noted that although the researcher was employed in the public service, the recruitment of subjects for the questionnaire and the interview was undertaken by a staff member in the Office for the Commissioner of Public Employment, independent of the researcher, in order to reduce a potential perceived power relationship.

In an attempt to reduce any discomfort, it was emphasised that involvement was voluntary and that if OHS practitioners and work-place managers did not wish to participate, this would not affect the relationship with the researcher and their standing would not be affected in any way. Participants were assured data was confidential and that their responses were not identifiable.

Definition of Terms

OHS practitioner An officer appointed by the Chief Executive of an agency to advise on Occupational Health and Safety policy and its implementation. (Hennekam and Flower, 2002)

Injury management	The process of managing work related injuries in the context of Workers Rehabilitation and Compensation and OHS legislation (Stanley et al., 2003).
AQF	The Australian Qualifications Framework is a framework for qualifications from Senior Secondary Certificates through to Doctoral Degrees, there are six VET qualifications available: Certificates I, II, III and IV; Diploma and Advanced Diploma. (AQF Advisory Board, 2002).
AQTF	The Australian Quality Training Framework approved by the Australian National Training Ministerial Council (ANTA, 2001).
Training Package	The Australian National Training Authority approves Training Packages which contain three sections, which must be adhered to so that a valid assessment of work-place competency can be made and a qualification awarded. These are the: competency standards, qualifications framework and assessment guidelines. (ANTA, 2001).

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the study including the research design, research questions and the data gathering instruments. The remaining chapters of the dissertation are structured as follows: Chapter Two presents a Review of the Literature, Chapter Three describes the Research Methodology, Chapter Four presents Results and Chapter Five provides a Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations. The next chapter will present a review of the research literature relevant to the study.