

President's Message



The Ministry of Manpower has recently introduced significant changes in its laws. The changes have good and bad results for Singapore's industry.

The changes are similar to the laws that have been in place in the United Kingdom and Australia since the 1980s. In these countries the laws have evolved to provide a sound regulatory basis.

The main change in the Workplace Safety and Health Act is in the philosophy of the Act. That is the Act is changing from a prescriptive to a performance basis. This means that the Act does not attempt to legislate against all hazards and risks that may exist in Singapore. The old Factories Act was prescriptive and had been shown to be inadequate for regulating all risks in Singapore. The MOM had introduced Safety Management Systems to close these gaps for some industries. However, SMS's were insufficient to manage the many other different types of workplaces. The outcome is the new act that makes each company responsible for the safety and health for all work done in the company. Failure to keep a company safe and healthy is a breach of the legislation.

A few of the regulations left prescriptive controls in place but most requirements are performance based.

Each company is required to know the hazards associated with the chemicals they use, the equipment they operate and the risks employees face at the site. Each company should conduct a risk assessment to determine what risk management control measures must be in place to protect their employees and their assets.

This is excellent for large companies. For these companies they will continue doing what they have been doing already.

Unfortunately, in all countries, small and medium sized enterprises (SME's) are an issue. In the United Kingdom the authorities found that most SME's did not know what regulations existed. And most of those that knew did not have the skills to implement the regulations. There was even a small group of SME's that was not interested in compliance.

The United Kingdom's Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has published a great deal of information to assist SME's. The most successful tool published by HSE is the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH). The COSHH tool has been published on the internet for anyone to use. By using information from the MSDS and the amount of the chemical being used, users can determine how they can safely use the chemical. This tool has been so successful that COSHH is now being used by the ILO to help manage chemicals globally.

Nevertheless SMEs will need help to remain in compliance with the new Act and its Regulations.

The intent of the law is to drive the overall incident rate down 5% per year. The large chemical companies are achieving a 10% per year reduction in incident rates. However this is insufficient. The construction companies had achieved 10% for several years but over the last 2 or 3 years the reduction rate had slipped to less than 5%. Overall, industry is now achieving an annual reduction rate of about 3%. SME's will need to better manage their risks if they are to drive down the incident rate in the future.

It goes without saying that SLP members will need to manage the safety and health performance of their companies. The SLP itself will need to determine how we can improve the safety and health performance of the SMEs associated with our profession.