

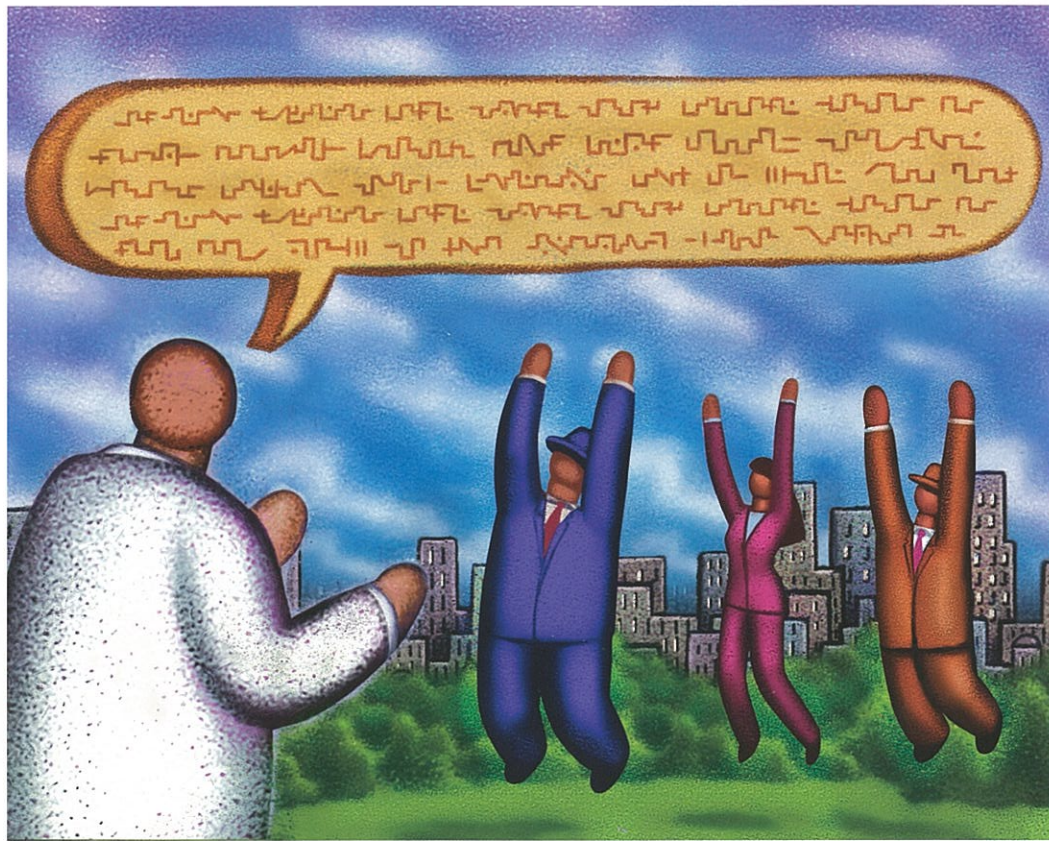


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Workplace health and safety training needs to be better

The Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment's moves to reduce workplace accidents are commendable but it needs to do more to ensure that health and safety training is adequate and fit for purpose.

Despite employers' best intentions, workplace health and safety training is often ineffective because around half of New Zealand's workforce has literacy and/or numeracy gaps that affect their ability to manage the more complex demands of health and safety in the workplace.



Literacy issues make it difficult to reduce workplace accidents when people don't fully understand the concepts and terminology in signs and labels, material safety data sheets, or the health and safety training they receive and are therefore unable to put that knowledge to use.

Employees may find it difficult to contribute to identifying risks, to complete hazard reports, or to correctly fill in health and safety incident forms that provide valuable information to employers and the authorities. This isn't just an issue for those in front-line or factory floor roles and many supervisors also struggle to understand health and safety documentation and forms.

The gap between the necessary knowledge to stay safe on the job and people's ability to understand safe working practices is of concern because every year more than 200,000 New Zealanders are seriously harmed and more than 100 are killed in workplace accidents.

Although the Ministry has set targets to reduce workplace accidents, they are unlikely to succeed unless training is improved because workforce literacy issues are compromising many employees' ability to report accidents, near misses and hazards.

In order to understand and utilise the training they have been given, employees need to understand the underlying concepts and their responsibilities for health and safety. They also need to have strong communication skills and confidence to speak up about unsafe equipment or to complete incident reports.

In our experience, many companies who are frustrated by their employees' poor health and safety compliance have not realised the extent to which this is caused by low literacy levels. Many employers are surprised when they discover literacy issues within their own workforce, yet – as is the case in other developed nations – around half of New Zealand adults have literacy and/or numeracy gaps.

Promoting improved workplace health and safety is not helped by the fact that most written health and safety materials are complex and technical. Even the Ministry's own Form of register or notification of circumstances of accident or serious harm could be made easier to understand and complete.

Some employers hope that bombarding people with screeds of written health and safety information will help to make a

difference, but in reality this usually achieves little.

As New Zealand increasingly looks to immigrants to fill skill gaps, the changing nature of our workforce means that more employees may not have English as a first language. They may also have different cultural expectations that affect behaviours such as their willingness to speak up about potential workplace hazards or to seek clarification about instructions. Training therefore needs to address these issues too.

It is, however, important to remember that literacy issues are also experienced by many people who have English as their first language. Many people with literacy gaps develop coping mechanisms to hide the extent of their issue so it is important not to make assumptions based on ethnicity or workplace role.

In order to be successful, health and safety training needs to better match the workplace demands and the employee skills that are necessary for good health and safety practice.

At present most training is too short and not tailored to developing the required knowledge and skills. More trainers also need to learn how to identify and address literacy issues within a trainee group.

Although writing materials in plain English is a good start, health and safety understanding could also be assisted by reviewing health and safety resources and guidelines to ensure that they meet workforce needs and are appropriate for people with low literacy and numeracy levels. Information should also be presented in a manner that builds literacy and is designed to meet the needs of people with a wide range of literacy skills.

Two recent American studies show how workplace health and safety are adversely affected by poor communication practices, poor health and safety documentation and training, and low literacy and language levels amongst employees.

We are seeing and hearing the same things in New Zealand and there is a need for research in this field. This will provide valuable information about the actual level of understanding in workplaces and the best kind of interventions for improving employees' understanding about good health and safety practices.

We have worked with hundreds of organisations and typically find many benefits (including reducing accidents and incidents) arise from literacy training that is integrated with developing the knowledge and skills for health and safety. Importantly, it enables better engagement and understanding about health and safety and resolves fears about the paperwork.

Managers tell us that, after receiving literacy training, employees who would once have done anything to avoid printed material now pro-actively ask for the correct documents to report hazards and incidents.

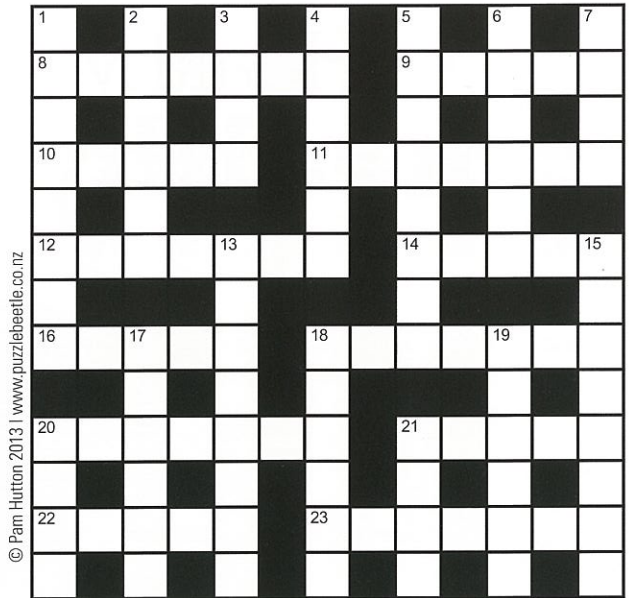
Furthermore, they are inevitably proud of their achievements and this has many personal benefits at work and at home. It also helps to improve general morale and has many positive benefits for the organisation.

If New Zealand is to reduce our rate of workplace accidents and improve occupational health, then it is vital that regulators and employers understand the extent to which low literacy, numeracy and language skills affect health and safety in workplaces. Once the impact of low literacy skills is recognised, steps can be taken to help managers and employees build the critical knowledge and skills needed to improve the effectiveness of health and safety training.

It is not enough to simply deliver training because in too many cases the information isn't getting through. The onus is on employers to avoid assuming that employees who have received health and safety training and/or instructions actually understand what they have been told.

Taking the time to actively check what people actually know and understand could help to prevent a workplace injury or death. ■

crossword



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ANSWER ON PAGE 23

ACROSS

8. Move employee to higher ranked position (7)
9. Used computer for emails, reports etc (5)
10. Wage ____ - series of pay negotiations (5)
11. Person who testifies to job applicant's character or ability (7)
12. Trainees gaining work experience under supervision (7)
14. ____ into job - gradually becomes familiar with duties (5)
16. Number of hours in traditional work day (5)
18. Person within organisation with access to information about it (7)
20. Newly established business (5-2)
21. ____ pay - remuneration based on performance (5)
22. This might describe inexperienced employee (5)
23. Working in short-term casual jobs (7)

DOWN

1. Evaluate employee's work performance (8)
2. This describes process that can withstand scrutiny and challenge (6)
3. Work ____ - job duties expected to be achieved in specified time (4)
4. Acquires knowledge and skills for job (6)
5. Another word for employees (8)
6. Bright ____ - intelligent employees with good ideas (6)
7. Slight competitive advantage over fellow job applicants (4)
13. Moving staff around different jobs within organisation (8)
15. Systematic plan of action to achieve goal (8)
17. Set levels in salary scales (6)
18. Contributions of work or information (6)
19. Obstruct or disrupt process (6)
20. Formally accept job contract (4)
21. Short in-house written reminder (4)