



Introduction to Practice as a Concept

Core Body of Knowledge for the
Generalist OHS Professional



Safety Institute
of Australia Ltd



Australian OHS Education
Accreditation Board

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The OHS Body of Knowledge for Generalist
OHS Professionals has been developed under the
auspices of the **Health and Safety Professionals Alliance**



The Technical Panel established by the Health and Safety Professionals Alliance (HaSPA) was responsible for developing the conceptual framework of the OHS Body of Knowledge and for selecting contributing authors and peer-reviewers. The Technical Panel comprised representatives from:



The Safety Institute of Australia supported the development of the OHS Body of Knowledge and will be providing ongoing support for the dissemination of the OHS Body of Knowledge and for the maintenance and further development of the Body of Knowledge through the Australian OHS Education Accreditation Board which is auspiced by the Safety Institute of Australia.



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Synopsis of the OHS Body Of Knowledge

Background

A defined body of knowledge is required as a basis for professional certification and for accreditation of education programs giving entry to a profession. The lack of such a body of knowledge for OHS professionals was identified in reviews of OHS legislation and OHS education in Australia. After a 2009 scoping study, WorkSafe Victoria provided funding to support a national project to develop and implement a core body of knowledge for generalist OHS professionals in Australia.

Development

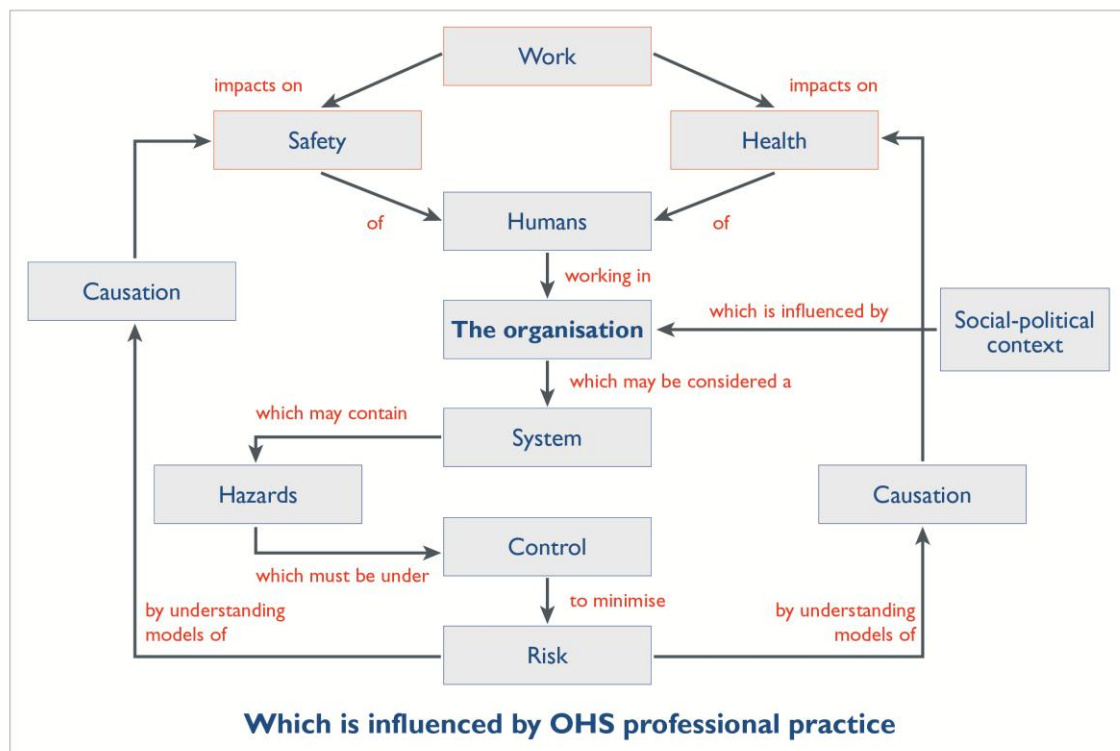
The process of developing and structuring the main content of this document was managed by a Technical Panel with representation from Victorian universities that teach OHS and from the Safety Institute of Australia, which is the main professional body for generalist OHS professionals in Australia. The Panel developed an initial conceptual framework which was then amended in accord with feedback received from OHS tertiary-level educators throughout Australia and the wider OHS profession. Specialist authors were invited to contribute chapters, which were then subjected to peer review and editing. It is anticipated that the resultant OHS Body of Knowledge will in future be regularly amended and updated as people use it and as the evidence base expands.

Conceptual structure

The OHS Body of Knowledge takes a 'conceptual' approach. As concepts are abstract, the OHS professional needs to organise the concepts into a framework in order to solve a problem. The overall framework used to structure the OHS Body of Knowledge is that:

Work impacts on the **safety** and **health** of humans who work in **organisations**. Organisations are influenced by the **socio-political context**. Organisations may be considered a **system** which may contain **hazards** which must be under control to minimise **risk**. This can be achieved by understanding **models causation** for safety and for health which will result in improvement in the safety and health of people at work. The OHS professional applies **professional practice** to influence the organisation to being about this improvement.

This can be represented as:



Audience

The OHS Body of Knowledge provides a basis for accreditation of OHS professional education programs and certification of individual OHS professionals. It provides guidance for OHS educators in course development, and for OHS professionals and professional bodies in developing continuing professional development activities. Also, OHS regulators, employers and recruiters may find it useful for benchmarking OHS professional practice.

Application

Importantly, the OHS Body of Knowledge is neither a textbook nor a curriculum; rather it describes the key concepts, core theories and related evidence that should be shared by Australian generalist OHS professionals. This knowledge will be gained through a combination of education and experience.

Accessing and using the OHS Body of Knowledge for generalist OHS professionals

The OHS Body of Knowledge is published electronically. Each chapter can be downloaded separately. However users are advised to read the Introduction, which provides background to the information in individual chapters. They should also note the copyright requirements and the disclaimer before using or acting on the information.

Introduction to 'Practice' as a concept

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Phil has over thirty years experience in industrial OHS roles in mining, offshore petroleum, shipbuilding and railways. He is currently Vice President HSE for Rio Tinto Alcan. Since joining Rio Tinto in 2001, Phil has been the global practice leader sustainable development assurance; general manager HSE for Rio's iron ore business in Canada; and general manager safety in the Rio's corporate group. Phil has held corporate and business safety and health roles in North Limited, BHP Petroleum, and Ranger Uranium Mines. Phil has also held occupational hygiene roles in railways, ship building, tyre manufacturing and chemicals manufacture. He has substantial involvement in risk management, systems implementation, occupational hygiene, radiation protection, and performance auditing.

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Core Body of Knowledge for the Generalist OHS Professional

Introduction to Practice as a concept

The OHS Body of Knowledge has described the technical requirements and knowledge base of an Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) professional. But there is a final, critical ingredient for a well-rounded, effective OHS professional, and that is the ability to influence.

The practice of promoting operations personnel to senior OHS leadership roles frustrates some specialists. There are even times where this practice is the stated intention of management. But the reason for this approach is sound; the chosen operations personnel will already have demonstrated their ability to influence. They will have shown that they can identify the need for change; can effectively analyse the situation; have the credibility and capacity to form alliances and coalitions to make change happen; and have a track record of being able to deliver. When surrounded by competent OHS professionals there is no reason why this approach should fail, which presents a straightforward and low risk option for management.

Rather than feel excluded, the OHS professional should apply the key components highlighted in the meta-skills of “consultation and building relationships” and “working within an organisational context” that underpin the Model of OHS Practice in the OHS Body of Knowledge. In fact, it is the duty of OHS professionals to ensure they are included. Regardless of career aspirations, the ability to influence is an essential element in the practice of OHS.

Specialists dealing with highly technical issues should have an easier time influencing as the knowledge base and recommendations are difficult to challenge. However, to be successful even the most technical information needs to persuade leaders to take action. Consider the messaging of a statement on unacceptable employee exposures that says “exposure data shows that the 95th percentile upper confidence limit of the geometric mean of monitoring results is 0.37 compared to the occupational exposure limit of 0.2”. Unless the recipient is also a technical expert, this is unlikely to influence action despite its completeness and accuracy. A far more persuasive statement would be “employees are overexposed to a harmful substance and action is needed today”. But even that statement will not guarantee that the appropriate interventions occur in a timely manner. While a practitioner may present data, the effective OHS professional will provide the influence needed to address the causes of the overexposure and provide long term solutions.

However this is a simple example and most OHS professionals do not deal with issues quite so straightforward. A cultural shift affecting the behaviours of managers or the workforce; the introduction of a new approach to risk management; the elevation of key health issues to match the attention paid to safety; or a multitude of other necessary changes identified by the OHS professional all require influence. This entails a steady and considered situation analysis; establishment of coalitions; development of a plan; and implementation of the plan, all of which require an influential professional. There will be times where senior management is fully aligned with little effort, but the professional must presume on every occasion that this is not the case and build the necessary alliances and coalitions, including, in many cases, an executive sponsor.

To become effective and well-rounded the OHS professional must master the ability to influence over a wide range of issues encompassed by OHS. The field of OHS gives the professional a good insight into the application of broad concepts, but the technical management of OHS issues requires different skills than those required to influence. The chapter on the Model of OHS Practice gives insights into the practice of OHS, touches on this need to influence and identifies many individual skills that contribute to such 'influence'.

The chapter on the OHS professional as 'critical consumer' of research identifies the need for the OHS professional to be able to explain their reasoning and the evidence supporting a particular direction or decision. This requires the professional to be technically current and informed by research so they can provide managers with advice that can be trusted for accuracy and is recognised as 'leading edge'.

No matter how technically competent, the professional should not presume that the ability to influence will come naturally. Even the most well-respected professionals will benefit from formal coaching to develop influencing skills and should seek a mentor to guide the application of these skills. While more research and clarification of the model of OHS practice is required, these final chapters of the Body of Knowledge give valuable insights into the practice of OHS. The professional should heed the suggestions and, recognising that the needs of each individual will be different, seek guidance specific to their needs to pave the way to become effective and influential.