2002

Training for the role of workplace health and safety officers in Queensland

Louise Horstmanshof
Bond University

Emma Hassall
H30 Solutions

Stacy Hassall
H30 Solutions

Cherie O'Connor
H30 Solutions

Ian Glendon
Griffith University

Publication details

The original published version of the article is reproduced here with the kind permission of the publisher, CCH Australia Limited.
Training for the role of workplace health and safety officers in Queensland

L HORSTMANSF
E HASSALL
S HASSALL
C O’CONNOR
I GLEN

This article reports findings from a study of the effectiveness of workplace health and safety officer (WHSO) training in the Brisbane and Gold Coast region of Queensland, Australia. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with WHSO, management and employee respondents from organisations in the construction, manufacturing and service sectors. Qualitative, quantitative and self-completion questions were combined with interviewers’ subjective impressions to assess respondents’ attitudes towards the WHSO role and its perceived effectiveness, particularly with respect to their WHSO training. Findings revealed that WHSOs reported shortcomings in training effectiveness and problems in transferring health and safety knowledge to others within the workplace. From the qualitative interview data, a model of factors influencing the effectiveness of WHSO training identified a number of organisational and workplace factors as well as other important contributors that determine the effectiveness of WHSO training. Suggestions are made in respect of desirable features of WHSO training.

Louise Horstmanshof, BA, GradDip (ApplPsych), MOrgPsych, is Adjunct Teaching Fellow in Communication and Media at Bond University. Emma Hassall, BA (Psych), PostgradProfDip (Psych), Stacey Hassall, BA (Psych), PostgradProfDip (Psych), and Cherie O’Connor, BA (Psych), BSocSci (Hons) (Psych), are Psychologists with H2O Solutions — an organisational psychology consultancy company. Ian Glendon, BA, MBA, PhD, CPsychol, AFBPsS, FIOSH, MERgS, MAPs, MAIRM, is Associate Professor and Head of the School of Applied Psychology, Griffith University.

Address for correspondence: Associate Professor I Glendon, School of Applied Psychology, Griffith University Gold Coast, PMB 50 Gold Coast Mail Centre, Queensland 9726, Australia.

KEYWORDS

- INTERVIEWS
- WORKPLACE HEALTH AND SAFETY OFFICERS
- SAFETY COMMUNICATION
- TRAINING EFFECTIVENESS
Introduction

While workplace health and safety (WHS) is a matter of national concern, prime responsibility for implementing and monitoring safe practice in Australian workplaces falls under the jurisdiction of individual States. Historically, Australia has followed the approach and style of the United Kingdom in terms of WHS. The Robens Report of 1972 provided a basis for most OHS legislation in Australia.1 During the 1980s and 1990s, all Australian States developed WHS legislation in accordance with Robens’ philosophy. This was premised on an assumption of “identity of interest” between employers and employees on health and safety matters, which led to a broad view of OHS that encompassed the total working environment and supported a model of worker participation.2

Workplace health and safety officers

To further the process of consultation between employers and employees on WHS issues, the Queensland Government introduced legislation (proclaimed on 31 July 1989) requiring a workplace health and safety officer (WHSO) to be appointed in workplaces which employ 30 or more persons.3 To provide for basic expertise, short courses were developed by various providers to train prospective WHSOS.4

This legislation led to the development of course specifications for WHSOS (generally referred to as “Statutory Obligation Education”) by the Queensland Government Division of Workplace Health and Safety (DWHS) in consultation with employer and employee bodies.5 The DWHS accredited training providers to conduct approved WHSO training. As in other areas of health and safety legislation, other jurisdictions observed the implementation and, where possible, evaluation of the legislation with interest to assess its effectiveness.

The WHSO research project

In mid-1999, the National Safety Council of Australia (NSCA), an accredited WHSO training provider, commissioned a team of Master of Organisational Psychology course members from Griffith University Gold Coast to undertake a project to determine the effectiveness of WHSO training within workplaces in the Brisbane and Gold Coast region. The National Safety Council of Australia was particularly interested to know to what degree WHSOS were able to transfer knowledge acquired on courses to their workplaces, the nature of any difficulties that WHSOS were encountering in their workplaces, and how these might be addressed. This article deals with findings related to the difficulties that WHSOS and other parties (managers and employees) reported that they were encountering. Training effectiveness and transfer of knowledge were considered in more detail in a keynote address to the Safety Institute of Australia (Queensland Branch) Visions Conference 2000.5

The research team surveyed a selected sample of workplaces using face-to-face interviews as the main research technique. Sixty-five respondents from 22 organisations were interviewed. Organisations were selected from NSCA lists to obtain a stratified sample of workplaces of various sizes from the manufacturing, construction and service sectors within the Brisbane and Gold Coast region. To obtain information on perceptions of the WHSO’s role and effectiveness, approximately equal numbers of WHSOS, other employees and managers — spread fairly evenly across the three industry sectors — were interviewed.

Three similar semi-structured interview schedules were designed, tailored respectively to elicit information from WHSO, management and employee respondents. The interview schedules combined qualitative, quantitative and self-completion questions. In addition, four questions sought the interviewer’s subjective impressions of each participant’s attitude towards the WHSO role. These
questions were included in an attempt to capture some important psychological cues that often go unrecorded in surveys of this nature. Details of the interview schedules and other information relating to this study are provided in a report to the NSCA.7

All of the authors were involved in interviewing. However, most of the interviews were conducted by three team members, who arrived at an organisation at the same time and each interviewed a respondent from either the WHSO, management or employee sample group. Informed consent was obtained for each interview and all interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

Quantitative data were gathered from 10 self-completion questions, to which responses were rated on a scale from 1 to 10, where “1” represented a strongly negative response and “10” a strongly positive response. Participants were given the option to respond “N/A” if they felt that a question did not apply to them. The quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences.7

Results: quantitative findings

Mean responses from the three respondent groups to the 10 quantitative questions, ranked according to overall mean response, are shown in Table 1. Responses to item 1 suggest a high level of agreement that management supports WHSOs. Table 1 shows that all mean responses were in the upper half of the scale, indicating generally favourable views in respect of the questions asked. A high degree of consensus was revealed between responses from the three respondent groups. There is least agreement between the groups in respect of knowledge transfer (items 8 and 9). One set of responses showed mean scores that were significantly different between sub-samples. The question asked to what extent participants believed that WHSO skills and knowledge were being transferred to workmates. Analysis of variance with a Post-Hoc Scheffe test \( F_{2,52} = 3.66, p < 0.05 \) revealed that WHSO respondents believed that these skills were being transferred to a greater extent than did employee respondents. Management responses to this question fell between the means for WHSO and employee respondents and did not differ significantly from either employee or WHSO respondents’ mean scores. The same pattern was found in response to item 9, concerning knowledge transfer to other employees, which had the same mean score as item 8. However, differences between groups’ responses to this item were not significant.

Table 2 shows mean values for the interviewers’ subjective impressions of four aspects of respondents’ perceptions of the WHSO role. Of the four questions designed to tap the interviewer’s impression of participants’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the WHSO role, one question showed mean response scores that were significantly different. Analysis of variance with a Post-Hoc Scheffe test \( F_{2,62} = 6.49, p < 0.05 \) showed that the interviewers’ aggregate views of employees’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the WHSO role was that they were lower than those of either management or WHSO respondents.

The data reported in Table 2 indicate that in the aggregated interviewers’ subjective opinions, both management and WHSO respondents considered the WHSO role to be more effective than did employee respondents. This seems to indicate that compared with the employee sample, WHSO respondents believed that they were effective. Discussions among research team members about the interviews and general impressions gained regarding both overt and covert commitment towards WHS issues within the organisations sampled supported this finding.

Results: qualitative findings

Tape-recorded interview data were transcribed and were the subject of several discussions among research team members, during which emerging themes were discussed. From these themes, a model of key factors influencing training effectiveness was developed. This model is shown in Figure 1.
### TABLE 1
Mean responses to self-completion questions
(mean values on 10-point scale: 1 = most negative, 10 = most positive)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question/rank</th>
<th>WHSO</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Employee</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How much support do you feel the WHSO(s) receive(s) from management?</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. In general, how well prepared do you feel the WHSO(s) is/are to deal with health and safety hazards and incidents?</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How much influence in general do you believe the WHSO(s) exercise(s) in this workplace?</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Since the WHSO training, how effective do you think the solutions that the WHSO(s) has/have offered to deal with particular health and safety hazards and problems have been?</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How useful do you believe the WHSO training has been?</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. To what extent do you believe WHSO skills and knowledge have been transferred to management?</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. How much support do you feel the WHSO(s) receive(s) from other workers?</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. To what extent do you believe WHSO skills and knowledge have been transferred to workmates?</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. To what extent do you believe WHSO skills and knowledge have been transferred to other employees?</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. How much support do you feel the WHSO(s) receive(s) from anyone else?</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Differences between means for each question were not statistically significant except for question 8 ($F_{(1,8)} = 3.66, p < 0.05$). Item ranking is on the basis of overall means prior to rounding.

### TABLE 2
Interviewer impressions of respondents’ perceptions of the WHSO role
(mean values on 10-point scale: 1 = most negative, 10 = most positive)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question/rank</th>
<th>WHSO</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Employee</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Interviewer’s overall impression of interviewee’s general attitude towards WHSO role.</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Interviewer’s overall impression of interviewee’s perception of the degree of support for WHSO(s) from management.</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Interviewer’s overall impression of interviewee’s perception of the effectiveness of WHSO role.</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Interviewer’s overall impression of interviewee’s perception of the involvement of workers in health and safety issues.</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Differences between means for each question were not statistically significant except for question 3 ($F_{(3,26)} = 6.49, p < 0.05$). Item ranking is on the basis of overall means prior to rounding.
In this data-grounded model, organisational and workplace features that were judged as key contributors to training effectiveness were safety culture, safety climate, WHSO role construct and communication. Other factors that were considered to be important to effective training were adult learning principles, individual differences, expectations of other parties, and outcomes. These are considered below.

Organisational and workplace features contributing to WHSO training effectiveness

Safety culture and safety climate: Behaviour and attitudes of management, WHSOs and employees are key components of an organisation's safety culture and climate. These concepts and the distinction between them have been considered at length elsewhere. Interview comments made by WHSOs reflect some typical attitudes: "Greater effectiveness as a WHSO requires more support from management"; "The main difficulty faced as a WHSO is trying to raise the acceptance of middle management to have greater support"; and "Management sees the role of a WHSO as a 'thorn in its side'". Management attitudes considerably influence employee attitudes. For example, where management takes little interest in WHS issues, employees often ask themselves, "Well, if they don't care, why should I?" These comments reflect a perceived lack of seriousness in considering WHS as integral to an organisation's operations. Safety compliance is further reduced in organisations where drug and alcohol problems exist. Findings from the current study suggest that this is particularly so in the construction sector.

The general level of awareness of the WHSO role and its responsibilities among employees is also an indicator of the attention that an organisation pays to safety issues. Many of the employees interviewed had very little, if any, awareness of the existence of the WHSO or his/her responsibilities. This lack of awareness reflects not only the level of effective communication within the organisation, but also the organisational impact of the WHSO and his/her general role effectiveness.

WHSO role construct: The WHSOs role is not always fully understood within organisations. Employees are often of the view that the WHSOs role is that of a
“safety cop”. That is, WHSOs are perceived as keeping a close eye on employees to detect safety shortcomings in their work performance. On the other hand, WHSO respondents typically felt that they were not able to do enough with regard to safety issues. This is particularly the case when the WHSO role is taken on part time or in addition to other work responsibilities. A widespread perception was also reported that in some organisations WHS is money draining, not money saving. Consequently, reactive solutions frequently prevail over proactive solutions in an effort to reduce expenditure.

The method of selection of the WHSO seemed to have a strong bearing on the attitude and commitment of the WHSO and consequently on his/her degree of effectiveness. The three main methods of selecting a WHSO are:

1. offering the position to application (both internal and external to the organisation);
2. asking for volunteers from current employees; and
3. election to the position.

WHSO effectiveness can be influenced by the method of selection to the position. This may involve internal and external advertising, recruitment of volunteers from an existing employee pool (where one candidate may be “strongly encouraged” to accept the WHSO position), or an election process among employees. Offering the position to application can bring good quality candidates, often with previous experience and training. In this way an organisation can expect to recruit an individual with WHS experience and also with relevant industry experience. Appointing someone from outside may prove challenging in the short term as that individual works towards acceptance within the organisation. Nevertheless, there can be advantages in establishing the WHSO as a non-aligned position.

Communication: Many WHSO respondents believed that they maintained extensive communication with both management and employees but that this level of communication was rarely reciprocated. Others expressed concern about having to deal with several levels of staff, from the shop floor to senior management. They felt ill at ease and ill-equipped to do so. While several aspects of communication can be taught, Rogers has insisted that formal structures that guarantee and facilitate frequent communication from top to bottom and vice versa need to be put in place.7 Without such formalised structures, the task of effective communication remains an uphill battle for WHSOs.

Important contributors to effective WHSO training

Adult learning: While training and education are important in terms of WHS, neither is a panacea for WHS problems. While the quality and focus of WHSO training is vital, and while compliance with legislation often provides a focus for safe work practices, learning is the key feature of continuous improvement, which is at the core of best practice.

Confirming the findings of Bellamy et al, respondents in this study wanted their training to adopt a more practical approach to the implementation of industry-specific regulations and to include items such as safety auditing.8 Almost one third of WHSO respondents cited not having enough time to perform WHSO duties as the main difficulty faced. This also reflects Bellamy et al's findings. The other main difficulties cited by WHSOs in the current study were lack of compliance on the part of staff, but more especially contractors, and the need for attitude and behaviour changes to facilitate acceptance of, and compliance with, current safety legislation. Perceived lack of compliance can be interpreted as a desire for changes in behaviour and attitudes. As such, almost 60% of the difficulties experienced by WHSOs in executing their duties could be attributed to inappropriate safety behaviour by other parties, which implies a lack of appreciation of the importance of safety. This lack of appreciation of the importance of WHS is also reflected in the frustration felt by many WHSO respondents, who reported that they had insufficient time to perform all the necessary functions of their role to a satisfactory safety standard.
Expectations: The most influential expectations for the WHSO role are generally those held by management. These tend to dictate the boundaries and scope for the WHSO's ability to operate effectively. They also crucially influence the amount of support received by the WHSO and the extent to which his/her recommendations for change are implemented. Whether on the one hand management views the WHSO role as merely complying with legislative requirements or as an active position that can be used to improve WHS on the other will be likely to have quite different effects. Even if the WHSO role is considered to be an active one, expectations of the position by management can vary. In one case, management could expect the WHSO to act primarily as an enforcer of safety rules, which could result in a management "yes man" who has little affiliation with employees. Alternatively, management may view the WHSO as an employee representative whose key responsibility is to present employees' safety concerns to management. In this case, management might dismiss many of the WHSO's recommendations and pay scant attention to requests for change.

Employee expectations of the WHSO role also influence a WHSO's ability to develop safety awareness within a workplace. The willingness of employees to support the function of the safety role and to adopt personal responsibility for safety is largely dependent on their view of the WHSO's alliance. If the WHSO is viewed as a "safety cop" for management, employees may consider the WHSO as another member of management and could be resistant to changes sought by the WHSO. However, if employees see the WHSO as one of their own, then the WHSO role could be seen as one that mediates between their requests and management demands.

Individual differences: Demographic factors affecting WHSO effectiveness include age, gender, level of education, work experience and current position within the organisation. While not wishing to entertain stereotypes, some industries (such as construction) are regarded as a predominantly male domain and one in which relevant experience in that field is respected. In the construction sector, an experienced, mature male in the WHSO role would have less resistance to overcome than would individuals with other age and gender characteristics.

Expectations and motivations of the individual assuming the WHSO role are also influential. A number of those interviewed reported having a particular interest in safety from personal experiences and were passionate about creating a safe work environment. This typically resulted in a dedicated, focused and productive WHSO, who was well-respected by both management and employees. Other WHSOs saw the role as a short-term step in their career progression and did not display the same passion for safety. Such an attitude and associated level of commitment are less likely to result in an effective WHSO. Respect from both workers and management tends to be greatest when WHSOs have a particular interest in WHS issues and when they are passionate about creating a safe working environment.

Outcomes: Findings from the current study indicate that WHSOs are eager to have training that provides adequate practical skills that build confidence in their ability to perform the WHSO role effectively. They are also looking for effective ways to implement changes in behaviour and attitudes among other key parties in the workplace that are necessary for the acceptance of, and compliance with, current safety legislation. This issue is considered in greater detail in the following sections.

WHSO training

The WHSOs interviewed in this study had received their training from a number of providers. Many WHSOs commented that they found the classroom environment in which the training took place difficult to adapt to and an ineffective environment in which to learn. Many WHSOs, although experienced in their own field, may only have a basic level of academic education. Some of those interviewed had attained no more than a Year Ten high school qualification and were intimidated by the theoretical approach of the course. There were a few incidences of those sent for WHSO training having literacy difficulties. Overall, the experience of WHSO training was found to be
daunting and overwhelming — considering that for many it was the first time that they had been in an educational environment for over 20 years.

Although most WHSO training providers state clearly what it is that they are delivering, evidence from the interviews seems to indicate that many trainees have unmet expectations. A first step in any training program could be to clarify the expectations, work through the practicalities and usefulness of the suggestions, and arrive at an agreed set that will satisfy the course requirements and, where possible, trainees' expectations as well.

While WHSO training must focus on all aspects of current legislation, a general feeling among those interviewed is that training is all about legislation and compliance. Many of those interviewed expressed frustration at the amount of legislation and legal jargon in the course content. Most felt that they had merely learnt how to reference the Act.

There was also a general feeling that the WHSO training should be more practical and hands-on. Greater emphasis should be placed on “knowledge-in-the-head” rather than on “knowledge-in-the-world”. Suggestions for increasing training relevance included “live” situations in which to analyse and solve problems, as well as site visits.

Clearly, the classroom model of training received a big “thumbs down”. In rethinking this mode of training delivery, it is also necessary to rethink the written examination method of assessment. Many mature students are completely intimidated by the thought of a written examination. There are some concerns that the pass mark for the course is rather low and that this does not necessarily reflect a competent grasp of the training content. If a WHSO has only grasped 60% of the training, how much can he/she be expected to pass on to others in the workplace? In line with adult learning principles, assessment should also reflect that training has been personally meaningful and that it has built on the individual's personal experience. It should also be meaningful in respect of how the training is to be used in the workplace.

Conclusion

The data from this study reinforce the traditional view that safety performance is critically dependent on company-wide commitment that is backed by active and ongoing management involvement. Worker involvement is also vital and this involvement is more likely to be forthcoming in safety programs that continually seek and encourage employee input. Without both management and worker involvement, WHSOs, regardless of their training, will always be left feeling frustrated and ill-equipped to perform their role effectively.

Desired outcomes of WHSO training can be stated as:

— adequate practical skills to do the job effectively;
— personal confidence in one's own ability to function in the WHSO role; and
— recognition for successful completion of the course.

WHSO training should provide all the necessary practical skills needed for WHSOs to be effective in their role. Over and above legislative requirements, training should assist WHSOs with methods of approaching management with proposals and recommendations. It should provide WHSOs with a good grasp of and a framework for what is required for effective report writing. It should provide some practice in conducting safety audits and risk analysis and should assist with understanding and implementing effective methods for changing management and employee attitudes towards safety.

Training should empower WHSOs to believe in their own skills and abilities to function effectively in their role. Workplace health and safety officers should feel confident in having a comprehensive understanding of the legislation and in their practical skills and ability to apply them. This would enable WHSOs to confidently enforce the legislation and to be an active safety resource for their organisations. The WHSO should present as competent and able to respond to all safety questions and concerns, comfortable in the knowledge that there is support in the WHSO
network to assist with difficult, unusual and challenging problems.

To achieve the desired changes, WHSO training needs to take into account trainees’ individual differences and to apply adult learning techniques. Training providers need to use the wealth of experience and “in-the-head” knowledge that WHSOs already have to build up their confidence and skills to yield greater WHSO effectiveness. By tailoring training delivery to include such aspects as dealing with management, writing reports and conducting safety audits and risk analyses, trainees could be provided with practical, hands-on learning. By highlighting the nature and process of “change management” as part of the learning experience, trainees would be assisted in their task of promoting and supporting safety culture within their WHSO role.

To achieve a broader and more practical approach, training could incorporate role-play and case study techniques. Role-plays can provide a safe environment in which trainees experience and act out typical scenarios that they could encounter. This technique also allows trainees to learn through active participation. The case study method assists trainees by sharpening their analytical skills and encouraging decision-making. It also provides an opportunity to enhance teamwork. Workplace mentoring fosters the ideal of sharing information and learning from others’ experiences. It also encourages life-long learning.

Course assessment should be changed to reflect changes to the training. Where possible, practical assignments that incorporate the ways in which WHSOs will need to respond in their workplaces should replace written examinations. Encouragement should be given to class participation, which could form part of the assessment. Where practical, assignments should be personally meaningful and relevant to each WHSO’s workplace and industry sector. Greater recognition given to those who successfully complete the WHSO training and the role that they play in fostering safety in their workplaces would contribute positively to safety culture and climate.

Within the spirit of the legislation, WHS is a collaborative effort that is shared as a central value — along with a commitment to continued learning. Without this collaborative effort, excellent training, exceptional management systems and supportive legislation will be like seeds falling on fallow soil. This small-scale study has demonstrated that, while there is a high degree of consensus on several issues relating to WHSO training and effectiveness among key workplace parties (from the comments of those interviewed), it is also clear that workplace behaviours and attitudes do not always act in support of WHSO training.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge the sponsorship and continued support from the NSCA throughout this project, the 22 organisations that allowed them access to their premises and personnel for interviewing, the 65 respondents, Griffith University for providing research facilities, and the Department of Psychology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong which provided research facilities during Associate Professor Glendon’s study leave in 2000.

References