

SAFETY...IT'S PERSONAL

Personalising safe work method statements ensures compliance, increases safety, and can save a company from bankruptcy, writes **Emma Bentton**.

When it comes to high-risk construction work, a safe work method statement (SWMS) is essential. An SWMS needs to list the types of dangerous work being done, list the health and safety hazards and risks arising from that work, describe how the risks will be controlled, and explain how suitable measures will be put in place.

While one SWMS can be prepared to cover a variety of tasks, a generic SWMS will rarely take into account the changing nature of the work environment. This is especially true on construction sites, particularly domestic construction, where a principal contractor is working with numerous sub-contractors on a job.

Below are a few ways an SWMS can fail on the worksite:

LACK OF INDUCTION

You would be surprised at how many contractors I come across onsite who have never seen, read or signed an SWMS. An induction forms the foundation from which a sub-contractor will make important safety decisions, so it's crucial this is performed correctly. The induction should provide each individual with information and experience that will ensure they are fully equipped to fulfill their role safely and to a standard acceptable under the Workplace Health and Safety (WHS) Act. If a sub-contractor is injured on your site, or even worse, there's a fatality, and you cannot demonstrate correct induction of the SWMS, you will be found negligent.

LACK OF TASK PERSONALISATION

A generic SWMS does not suffice when it comes to a variety of tasks. Create your SWMS in consultation with individual contractors. Have them walk through the job with you, so you can personalise it to their role and induct them on it. For example, a painting

contractor may be given a 'standard' SWMS that neglects to mention working at height. So as soon as they paint the stairwell, the SWMS fails.

LACK OF TRADE PERSONALISATION

An SWMS that isn't communicated or updated appropriately for sub-contractors causes issues. This can involve seemingly straightforward things, such as different contracted trades working across one site who simply don't introduce each other aside from a quick "G'day". This can have huge safety issues for the principle contractor as one new trade could alter the whole SWMS. For example, a carpentry contractor generates dust. The contractor may have the appropriate protective masks but the electrical contractors working a couple of metres away may not.

LACK OF SITE PERSONALISATION

In all of the above, the attraction is to re-use SWMSs from other jobs. After all, a house build is a house build, and all the trades used are common, right? Wrong! Under the new WHS Act, every SWMS must be site specific. Don't be tempted to simply reuse a past SWMS. A change from a flat site to a sloping site could alter the risk assessments completely.

NOT CONSIDERING DESIGN CHANGES

Under the new Act, you need to assess the lifecycle of the risk. So if there is a change in design plans after you have created a SWMS and inducted on it, you must check that the original still applies. If new work risks occur due to the design change, your SWMS must be updated to reflect them and you must communicate the updates to each worker impacted.

The cost of being compliant under the law more than outweighs the potential fines that can be levied. Government

WHS inspectors have now been given the power to issue on the spot fines for small breaches such as:

- Not having an effective SWMS in place, or a collection of SWMSs;
- Not stopping work if the job is not being carried out in accordance with the SWMS, and;
- Not preparing a suitable WHS management plan.

For serious offences where workers are at risk of death or serious injury, businesses can be prosecuted and fined up to a maximum of \$3 million. Persons conducting a business or undertaking, or company officers can be fined up to \$600,000 or face five years in jail. Individual employees can be fined up to \$300,000 for negligence.

Compliance is not as difficult, expensive or onerous as you might expect. There are tools that help make the process easier. Systems on a Shoestring (SOAS) Safety System apps can be purchased at the Apple Store or Google Play and take a little as fifteen minutes to build, personalise and print or email out. With so many tradies 'living' on their smartphones, it's an effective solution that supports compliance while also making paperwork management easy.

Good habits with SWMSs could – most importantly – save a life. SWMSs have saved businesses from bankruptcy following site injuries and fatalities, because the principal contractor has been able to demonstrate due diligence.

The real question is: could your business withstand a fine in the millions? ■

Emma Bentton is the founder of Systems on a Shoestring (SOAS), a set of easy-to-build safety systems for small business that you construct using mobile, downloadable apps. Emma holds formal qualifications across health, safety and the environment, with over 20 incident-free years working with small and large contractors in high-risk industries. www.soas.net.au