UNIT 25 OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY & HEALTH FOR EMPLOYEES AND NGO VOLUNTEERS

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25.0 OVERVIEW

Article 14 of ILO Convention C155 (Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Convention, 1981) requires measures to be taken to promote issues of health and safety at all levels of education and training in a manner that meets the training needs of all workers. The present Unit follows the above and aims to create awareness on OSH among University students apart from other measures taken by the University of Mauritius (UoM) authorities.

25.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this Unit, the reader will be in a position to:

- Describe the aims of OSH provisions in the workplace.
- Assess the economic importance of OSH for commercial and non-commercial organisations.
- Distinguish between the types of hazards faced by people at work.
- Assess OSH legislation and related enforcement issues.
- Develop awareness of general OSH issues in the workplace.

25.2 INTRODUCTION

The workplace is often characterised with poor working conditions, especially in manufacturing and some SME’s. Such conditions have the potential of affecting the health and safety of employees, although at times, the effects are not felt immediately. Recently, it was ‘discovered’ that wall partitioning of a government building contained asbestos, a potentially carcinogenic substance. Many people have worked in these premises before and may have suffered serious health risks in the long run.
Threats to health and safety affect workers employed indoors in factories as well as those working outdoors, for example, in agricultural fields. The deleterious effects of pesticides on health are well known and can lead to severe poisoning. It is well known that many owners/workers in small concerns rarely follow basic safety precautions at work premises and in the fields.

The above examples clearly show that a lack of awareness of Occupational Safety and Health principles is one of the main causes of OSH hazards in the workplace. It is therefore necessary to create awareness at the level of educational institutions in the first place. From there awareness can pervade the community more effectively.

### 25.3 AIMS OF OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH AT WORK

Occupational safety and health (OSH) encompasses two phenomena which are interrelated. A healthy place of work may be a safe place, but a safe place of work may not necessarily be healthy. Incidentally, safety often gains more importance in the workplace than health, although it is important to address both.

OSH aim at the following:

- Promoting and maintaining the highest degree of physical, social and mental well being of employees
- Preventing adverse effects on employee health caused by working conditions.
- Protecting employees at work from risks arising from factors adverse to health.
- Placing and maintaining workers in an occupational environment adapted to physical and mental needs.
- Adapting work to humans.

In essence, OSH aims to ensure the social, mental and physical well being of workers, in other words catering for the whole person (not only the physical aspect).
Activity 1

Discuss the aims of OSH in relation to volunteers working for NGO’s. Should the same apply? To what extent? Why?

25.4 IMPORTANCE OF OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH – THE COSTS OF NON COMPLIANCE

Complying with OSH rules and regulations undoubtedly entails a cost. Government has had to purchase alternative office space to house public servants affected by the asbestos problem. However, failure to comply would have resulted in more severe costs related to health problems, litigation, public image etc.

Most people spend more active time at work than at home. It is therefore essential for everyone that the workplace is safe and healthy. Thus requires the collaboration of both management and employees and involves broad ranging consideration of industrial hygiene, occupational medicine, toxicology issues, ergonomics in furniture etc and industrial psychology amongst others.

Despite general precautions, workers are often faced with a multitude of health hazards such as excessive noise, dust, toxic gases, vibration and extreme (high and low) temperatures. As a result, accidents are quite common in the workplace. In Mauritius, accidents are often reported and even one per month is one too much.
25.4.1 Direct and Indirect Costs of Occupational Accidents/Disease for Workers

Work related injuries or diseases greatly affect the lives of workers and their extension their families. Direct costs for employees include:

- The physical pain and psychological suffering endured by the worker.
  The recent (year 2009) scaffolding accident on a construction site cost the life of an employee with resulting distress for the family. Direct costs for the employee include:

- Loss of income.
  There can be temporary loss of income for a bread earner in the family and unless the risk was insured, this can cause economic distress for the employee and his dependent relatives.

- Possible job loss.
  More permanent incapacities resulting from workplace, injury occupational disease can lead to permanent job loss. This results in severe reduction in income, even when compensation may apply.

- Health care costs following accident/disease.
  Some accidents/diseases require regular health checks and monitoring as well as treatment. Unless, treated in public hospitals, such cases can become a financial burden for the worker’s family.

OSH accidents, however, do not only have direct costs for employees. Indirect costs can be as important, if not more important than direct costs, although they are more difficult to measure (for example social costs). Even when financially compensated, human suffering can rarely be relieved completely.
25.4.2 Costs for Employers

Direct costs for the employer include:
- Paying the affected employee while out of work.
- Medical compensation for hospitalisation and medicine/treatment.
- Repair or replacement of equipment.
- Stoppage in production or delays.
- Increase costs of training (in OSH?).
- Negative incidence on employee morale.
- Costs of litigation if cases go to Court

Employers can also suffer in indirect costs such as:
- Recruitment/selection/training costs to replace the injured employee.
- Administrative costs of accident investigation, reporting and corrective measures.
- Labour relations can be affected by employee concerns on OSH.
- Public relations with the community can be affected adversely.

In general, indirect costs for both employers and employees are difficult to measure, but can potentially cause a lot of damage to employee morale and organisation reputation.

25.5 THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF HAZARDS IN THE WORKPLACE

While some workplace hazards are obvious to the normal observer, other hazards may not be immediately visible. Obvious unsafe working environments include inadequate fire precautions, lack of emergency exits, dangerous machinery which remain unguarded or simply slippery work surfaces.

Other less obvious important hazards include:
- Biological hazards. Examples are bacteria, viruses, infectious waste, infected
- Physical hazards such as poor lighting, noise, vibration, temperature extremes, radioactivity.
- Chemical hazards in liquid, solid and gaseous forms.
- Hazards resulting from poor ergonomics, for example badly designed office furniture, poor factory settings, badly designed tools and other mechanical devices.
- Psychological hazards resulting from work-related stress.

The workplace normally contains a mixture of the above hazards, some of which may be inbuilt in the workplace as in work systems. Most of the hazards are known but science and technology always introduce new and sometimes unknown hazards to both workers and the community at large. Some of these hazards often come to be known only long after their deleterious effects are felt, for example asbestos.

### 25.6 ROLE OF MANAGEMENT AND UNIONS

When hazards are built in the workplace, the issue is not to make workers adapt to unsafe conditions, but to remove the hazards. For example, wearing heavy masks and goggles etc. in a hot weather can be tantamount to forcing workers to adapt to unsafe conditions and may be construed as shifting the responsibility from management to the worker. Such solutions are not sustainable.

Management must be committed to developing a successful health and safety programme. Management commitment often stops at government imposed (legal) standards. However, law should not be the limit. An effective management commitment to health and safety covers all actual and anticipated hazards, not only those covered by legislation.

Management often blames workers as being responsible for accidents. Workers do make mistakes or fail to take precautions. This falsely implies that the workplace can be made
safer if workers change their behaviour or if employers can hire workers who never make mistakes. The argument obviously does not stand. Anyone can make mistakes, even management. Accidents are not reduced simply by making workers become safety conscious, although it does help. Accident and disease prevention is most effective when safe conditions are inbuilt at the design stage itself.

The role of trade unions (and workers in general) is to ensure that the workplace is made safer by proposing safer alternative work processes. Both Unions and management should be jointly committed to ensure a safe workplace and to create and continuously communicate awareness on health and safety at all levels of the organisation.

One major area of collaboration between management and unions is training. Awareness is rarely sufficient for OSH. Training in OSH has numerous benefits such as development of skills in hazards recognition and hazards analysis. The new vice-chancellor of UoM recently emphasised the importance of regularly running fire drills to sharpen alertness on fire hazards management.

A comprehensive training programme at the workplace will enable workers to recognise early signs of any hazards before they become potentially dangerous. Training can also empower workers to assess workplace safety so that they can draw attention of management before dangerous conditions can develop.

### 25.7 OSH LEGISLATION

Legislation provides for the minima in OSH standards to be applied in the workplace. Being given the new hazards brought about by science and technology, legislation needs to be constantly updated to keep pace with changes. Legislation motivates employers to apply OHS standards at work and provides a framework for application, management of litigation and sanctions etc.
The Legal position refers to knowledge of the following by all parties:

- know the duties of employees under the Law:
  - i.e. Care of themselves and the others
  - Cooperation with the employer
- know the duties of the employer under the Law
  - i.e. general duties
- know the implication of breaching the Law
  - i.e. enforcement notices, fines or imprisonment

OSH regulations can take a number of forms, for example laws, regulations, codes of practice etc.

- **Occupational Safety and Health Acts**
  In Mauritius, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, 2005 is a legal statement of the general safety and health guidelines and principles. Acts are passed and approved in Parliament and have force of law. However, unless adequately enforced by the relevant authorities, they have limited power.

- **Regulations**
  Regulations can be passed by the Minister of Labour following the Act in Parliament. Regulations are detailed specifications of OSH for specific industries (textile, sugar etc.) or hazards (noise, vibration etc.). They state the minimum mandatory standards for hazard control in a given industry/workplace.

- **Codes of practice**
  Codes of practice can be drafted by international bodies like International Labour Organisation (ILO) or local bodies like the Ministry of Labour. They are normally based on minimum standards and objectives contained in Regulations.

- **Notes of Guidance**
  These guides provide employers and employees with official and up to date
detailed technical information and recommendation on how to comply with regulations. They explain the type of action to be taken and the “how-to” information on compliance. As with Codes of Practice, Notes of Guidance of ILO are commonly used in many countries which have not developed their own ILO documents to provide for some standardisation across countries.

25.7.1 Legislation Objectives

ILO regulations/conventions are not meant to substitute the law of the country. They rather assist governments through guidance and act as reference documents. The main objectives of OSH legislation are to:

- Protect workers
- Be prevention oriented by requiring employers to comply with regulations concerning occupational injuries and diseases.
- Provide for adequate compensation and rehabilitation of affected workers.
- Provide for adequately trained and equipped inspection personal to ensure enforcement.
- Provide for penalties in case of non compliance.
- Address any region specific or industry-specific needs.

Without enforcement, legislation may be ineffective. Ideally, enforcement requires the deployment of adequately trained and equipped personnel, in sufficient numbers to inspect workplaces and enforce OSH laws. Inspectors are to effect regular, preferably unannounced inspections of workplaces.

Effective enforcement also requires provisions for penalties that are equivalent to the severity of the offence caused, and this requires strong, protective legislation in place.
25.8 EFFECTIVE OSH – ECONOMIC BENEFITS FOR SMALL FIRMS AND NGO’s

Small firms, including NGO’s can stand to suffer substantial losses as a result of poor compliance with OSH regulations. Absence of proper systems can lead to more far-reaching consequences than in large firms due to the higher relative costs. The impact of a serious OSH incident is of particular relevance for small firms because of the following:

- It is relatively more difficult for an SME to recover from an OSH incident.
- The relative impact on the small firm is greater due to smaller size and related resources.
- It is more difficult to replace key workers when affected due to recruitment and selection costs.
- Work interruption following incidents can lead to loss of contracts.
- A very serious accident/incident can result in closure of business due to high costs of rehabilitation/damage etc.
- Relative levels of absence are high and can lead to production delays.

Small firms can conversely benefit from OSH compliance. Business benefits include higher productivity and business continuity, reduced insurance premiums following low compensation payments, higher staff morale and subsequent motivation and decreased absenteeism and labour turnover.

25.9 ESSENTIAL AWARENESS ON SAFETY & HEALTH AT WORK – THE MAIN ISSUES

The following are some of the main issues that need to be addressed in work environments by managers and employees/volunteers.
25.9.1 The General Working Environment

Stakeholders should be aware of the following:

- Responsibilities of employers in relation to the provision of and maintenance of a safe working environment include issues such as lighting, heating (cooking), ventilation, temperature, toilet and washing facilities, cleaning and maintenance.
- Measures to be taken to prevent slips, trips and falls include use of suitable footwear and clothing, good housekeeping and safe storage.
- Prevention of workplace transport accidents entails design of one way systems, restriction of reversing, segregation in storage and personal protective equipment.

25.9.2 Workplace Accidents

Stakeholders should have prior knowledge of the following concerning accidents:

- Know what is meant by an accident (or a near miss).
- Know the reasons for accidents, for example human error, mechanical failure or unsafe acts and unsafe conditions.
- An understanding of the impact of accidents on organisations and individuals. These include pain and suffering, possible disability and subsequent loss of earnings.
  
  For the organisation, there can be production delays, fall in staff morale, law suits and increase in future insurance premium.
- An understanding of the importance of reporting accidents (and near misses) so as establish causes, prevent recurrence.

Accident reporting normally follows a procedure, for example filling an accident book after reporting to supervisor.
25.9.3 Risk Management

Stakeholders should be trained on risk management principles and practice. They should be aware of:

- The principles of risk management as pertains to hazard identification, implementing safe systems of work, promoting safety & health and developing competence through formal training and practice.
- The difference between hazards and risks.
- The steps in risk management, i.e.
  - Identify hazards
  - Decide who are at risk and how
  - Evaluate risks and precautions
  - Record findings
  - Review and revise if necessary
- The hierarchy of risk control measures
  - Elimination
  - Substitution
  - Isolation
  - Reduce exposure
  - Personal protective equipment

25.9.4 Personal Protective Equipment

- Knowledge of the main types of personal protective equipment as giving protection against heavy eyes, hearing, respiratory tract, feet and hands
- Knowledge of the principles of provision, maintenance & storage of personal protective equipment, for example why and when used.
25.9.5 Fire Safety

- Managers and employees to know the most common causes of fire as being a combination of oxygen, heat and fuel, knowledge of heat sources, naked flames, friction, electricity, smoking etc. as source of fire.
- Knowing what can be done to reduce risk of fire, for example:
  - Demarcate smoking areas
  - No naked flames near flammables
  - Reporting damaged electrical
  - Keeping work areas tidy, waste disposal
- Knowing what to do on discovering a fire
  - Follow procedures
  - Raise the alarm
  - Leave the building as indicated
  - Close windows and doors
  - Report to any assembly point
- Knowing the main types of fire extinguisher e.g. water, foam, carbon dioxide, dry powder.

25.9.6 Electrical Safety Issues

All users to be aware of
- The main electrical hazards i.e. contact with live wires, faults, overloaded circuits, electrical fires and explosions
- Knowledge how to reduce the electrical risks.
- Knowledge of how to use portable electricity appliances in all safety.
- Knowing how to recognise faulty electrical equipment, for example damaged heads and signs of overheating.
25.9.7 Hazardous Substances

- Knowledge of physical, chemical and biological hazardous substances and how they can enter the body i.e. ingestion, absorption, inhalation.
- Knowing the duty of, employers, employees, regarding hazardous substances.
- Knowing the main labels associated with hazardous substances i.e. toxic, corrosive, highly flammable, explosive, radioactive etc.

25.9.8 Safety Signs and Signals

Management, employees and visitors to know the main safety signs and signals.

25.9.9 Manual Handling

People to be aware of the following:
- The most common injuries associated with manual handling.
- The main duties of employers and employees thereof.
- The main hazards and risks and how to avoid them or reduce the risks.

25.9.10 Workstations and Display Screen Equipment

This concerns office workers, typists etc.
- Knowledge of the main associated health risks including musculo-skeletal disorders, fatigue and stress, eye strain and headaches.
- Employers’ main duties as being:
  - analyse, workstations suitability, assess and reduce risks, plan breaks or activity changes, provide eye tests & information.
- Knowledge on how to reduce risks, i.e. lighting, glare, leg room, foot rest etc.
25.9.11 Work Related Ill-Health

Stakeholders to know:
- The common work-related ill health effects.
- The causes and effects.
  Effects to include emotional, behavioural and ill health.
- The responsibilities of employers and employees regarding violence and bullying, i.e. complaints procedure, legal provisions, counselling etc.

25.9.12 Workforce Consultation

All involved to know:
- The benefits of consultation
  - Employee involvement in decision-making
  - Improved morale
  - Better trust.
- The role of safety representations and safety committees.

25.10 SUMMARY

Unit 25 attempted to meet the requirements of ILO Convention C 155 concerning awareness of basic OSH principles at educational level. The Unit aimed to inform students on the importance of OSH in the workplace and the collaborative roles of employers and employees in prevention of workplace accidents/disease.