

## Workplace Health and Safety: Summary

### Research

Two reports:

Campbell, A. (2008). *All signs point to yes: Literacy's impact on workplace health and safety*. Canada: The Conference Board of Canada.

Campbell, A. (2010). *What you don't know can hurt you: Literacy's impact on workplace health and safety*. Canada: The Conference Board of Canada.

Overall conclusion from the two pieces – Safe workplaces operate more smoothly and have lower potential risk and incidents. Workers with low literacy or language skills, who are assisted in raising their skills are better able to act and react to workplace situations in accordance with approved health and safety measures. They are also better equipped to understand their own right to refuse work that is potentially unsafe. The overall conclusion from this research is that businesses and their employees realise health and safety benefits when literacy and/or language skills development is introduced in the workplace. (2010, p.ii)

Safe workplaces are those in which workers are able to communicate effectively and clearly with one another, with supervisors, and with customers. If their literacy and language skills are lacking their ability to communicate will be compromised. Workplace health and safety may be compromised accordingly. In order for written health and safety policies and procedures to be understood and followed workers need to be able to read and comprehend them. (2010, p. 35)

### The Law

The Health and Safety Reform Bill has passed and the new law (the Health and Safety at Work Act) will come into force 4 April 2016. The Act is part of “Working Safer: a blueprint for health and safety at work” and reforms New Zealand’s health and safety system following the recommendations of the Independent Taskforce on Workplace Health and Safety.

Working Safer is aimed at reducing New Zealand’s workplace injury and death toll by 25 per cent by 2020. It will require leadership and action from business, workers and Government to achieve this goal. The Act’s key emphasis is on everyone in the workplace being responsible for health and safety.

The Act works to focus effort on what matters, based on business risk, control and size:

- It reinforces proportionality – what a business needs to do depends on its level of risk and what it can control
- It shifts from hazard spotting to managing critical risks – actions that reduce workplace harm rather than trivial hazards
- It introduces the “reasonably practicable” concept – focusing attention on what’s reasonable for a business to do
- It changes the focus from the physical workplace to the conduct of work –

- what the business actually does and so what it can control
- It supports more effective worker engagement and participation – promoting flexibility to suit business size and need.

### The Situation

Workplace fatalities by industry show that for 2011- 2016 the highest fatalities were in agriculture (93); construction (28); forestry (23); transport, postal and warehousing (23). Serious harm notifications for 2016 show the highest rates occur in manufacturing (104); construction (96); agriculture (67); arts and recreation (67); transport, postal and warehousing (54).

**The industries with high fatalities and serious injuries are also those identified in ALL (2006) as having the lowest literacy levels.**

### Examples from Skills Highway

<http://www.thelearningwave.com/case-studies/cutting-edge/>

Cater Holt Harvey – case study

<http://www.skillshighway.govt.nz/success-stories/dominion-constructors>

Dominion Constructors – won SH Award 2014 – focus on H & S

[http://www.eeotrust.org.nz/awards/winners.cfm?content\\_id=22572](http://www.eeotrust.org.nz/awards/winners.cfm?content_id=22572)

Goodman Fielder - won the SH Award 2015 – included a focus on H & S

### Links between H&S and literacy: What Canadian Research Says

#### Highlights

- By improving employees’ literacy skills, employers can reduce accidents, injuries, and downtime, as well as minimise the insurance premiums, claims and fines associated with workers’ compensation boards. Employers will be able to maximise productivity while maintaining a more stable, healthy, and contented workforce. (2008, p.1)
- According to a report from ABC CANADA, 82 percent of respondents to a survey on the impacts of literacy and basic skills programs on Canadian workplaces associated increased health and safety with their workplaces’ literacy and basic skills training program. (2008, p.11)
- Workers with low literacy skills must then rely on oral or other types of instruction from supervisors or co-workers for their job-related health and safety information. However the stigma of low literacy skills is more likely to prompt workers to keep quiet and “figure things out for themselves,” exposing themselves and others to unnecessary danger. (2008, p.12)
- Low literacy levels do more than compromise workers’ ability to understand health and safety information. They also limit workers’ ability to understand their rights to a safe workplace. (2008, p.13)
- Previous research (IALS) indicates that certain high-risk industries- such as construction, agriculture, manufacturing, and transportation – report low

employee literacy levels. (2008, p.14) (Note in ALL in NZ it is primary industries, manufacturing, construction, retail and wholesale trade, health and social services.)

- An Ontario Public Health Association study found, “workers with limited literacy skills appear to have higher than average rates of occupational injuries. This seems to be because the type of jobs open to them are more likely to be hazardous.” A disproportionate number of persons with very low literacy skills are employed in primary, resource and construction industries. Accidents in these industries are well above average across all workplace settings. (2008, p.15).
- Following workplace education programmes the tangible benefits included improved safety records and compliance with regulations. Intangible benefits point to the potential to reduce workplace accidents and injury through improved understanding of job tasks and employers’ expectations of acceptable job performance. (2008, p. 17)
- Workplace health and safety is dependent on policies and procedures being understood and carried out as directed, adherence to health and safety policies and procedures requires comprehension and communication skills from all concerned. (2010, p. i)
- Employers design and articulate health and safety directions and rules by setting out policies. These policies cover issues such as legalities, regulations, liabilities, roles and responsibilities within the organisation. Policies are then translated into orders and directions for the workforce so employees may see where and how the policies apply to their jobs and respective roles. Many workplaces create manuals and other written documents as the main means of sharing the health safety directives with workers. However, by relying on written materials for health and safety communications, organisations run a great risk, as some employees may not be able to read or properly understand the directives. (2010, p.2)
- Manuals and other typical types of workplace health and safety publications tend to present valuable and pertinent information through a mix of text, charts, tables, figures, and numbers. Directions and steps for action are also typically handed down through text, flow charts, and conditional statements. Users of these documents need to have reading and numeracy skills at sufficient levels to read and comprehend content. (2010, p.2)
- Risks in the workplace of low literacy related to H&S – health and safety information and warnings are not understood: inability to use, or the misuse of equipment and procedures; not following procedures. These result in direct costs such as time away from work, compensation, wage supplements; indirect costs – associated with clean up, product loss, rework; administrative costs – paperwork, compliance reporting etc. (2010, pp. 18-20).