

Providing a safe workplace – the Singapore experience

Singapore's culture of tripartism and partnership has built strong occupational safety and health. Now, the country is poised for further improvements.

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All workers deserve a safe workplace and have a right to return home from work safe and healthy. “Decent work” must mean “safe work”. Maintaining acceptable occupational safety and health (OSH) standards should be seen as an integral part of a country’s development. Indeed, adequate worker protection is essential for individuals to lead dignified and productive lives, and for society to achieve sustainable economic growth. The principles of prevention and protection embodied in international labour standards provide a sound basis for national policies and programmes. Thanks to the efforts of ILO SafeWork, substantial guidance is now available at the national and international levels to strengthen labour inspection. This important ongoing work by the ILO will be particularly helpful to countries as they grapple with the many challenges they face in an increasingly globalized world.

Addressing common challenges

In 2004, the Singapore economy grew by a robust 8.4 per cent, riding on the strong global economy, particularly in Asia. This

helped to reduce the unemployment rate from a high of 4 per cent in 2003, to 3.4 per cent in 2004 and 3.3 per cent in September 2005. However, intense competition from increasing globalization has meant that, in order to survive, our businesses are being forced up the value chain. For low-wage workers who are at risk of structural unemployment, this is especially relevant. Singapore’s response is to upgrade the skills of our workers to help them remain employable in the face of the changing needs of our industries. This will also enable our workers to earn more through increased productivity and contribute to higher value-added jobs.

Like many countries, Singapore faces challenges posed by an ageing population. Hence, the Government is actively studying how the effective retirement age of older workers can be extended. A key strategy involves redesigning jobs to expand the job value and worth so that lower-skilled and older workers could be more productive and earn a higher wage. Our unions, under the National Trades Union Congress, are spearheading this effort. To enhance the employability of older workers, we are also considering how to design appropriate remuneration schemes

pegged to the output of the job rather than to the seniority of the worker.

At the other end of the spectrum, our children and young people generally remain in schools or vocational institutes till at least the age of 16 years, and child labour does not exist in Singapore. In ratifying Convention 138 on Minimum Age in 2005, Singapore further demonstrated her commitment to the values and principles that the ILO upholds.

Providing a safe workplace

The many challenges we now face in the ever-changing world of work call for increased determination to raise occupational safety and health standards. Singapore has made good progress over the years. This has been possible because of two factors – strong political leadership, as well as effective partnership with the unions and employers under a well-established tripartite framework, in addressing both economic and labour issues, including workplace safety and health. The accident frequency rate has fallen over the years from 6.5 per million work-hours in 1981 to 2.2 in 2004. Similarly the occupational disease incidence stands at 2.0 per 10,000 employed persons in 2004 compared to 4.7 in 1981.

From the OSH perspective, it has been helpful that Singapore is steadily transiting to a knowledge economy, with relatively safer and less polluting industries. Employment in manufacturing has declined relative to other sectors, such as business and financial services, and more of our workforce are now engaged in managerial, professional and technical jobs.

Need for vigilance

At the same time, we are seeing new technologies and complex processes used in manufacturing activities, as well as increasingly sophisticated construction methods, both in tunnelling and in building high-rise structures. In the face of

such increasingly complex and dynamic work environments, there is a need for greater vigilance. For Singapore industry, three serious accidents in 2004 served as a wake-up call and as stark reminders of the potential for loss of lives, disruption to business and opportunity costs when a major accident occurs.

In growth sectors, such as the chemical, pharmaceutical, biotechnology and logistics industries, processes are becoming more complicated, with safety and health issues that may not be fully understood, such as biohazards and risks from nanomaterials. This means that safety systems, procedures and competencies at all levels must be kept updated so that risks associated with technological developments are identified and proactively managed.

Industry ownership for workplace safety and health is therefore critical. Employers have domain knowledge of the industry and its associated hazards, and are in the best position to determine the appropriate solutions for hazard control. Increasingly, providing a safe workplace will require a systems approach centred on people that places the focus beyond machines and processes.

Framework for self-regulation

Legislation is necessary to ensure minimum standards of protection, as well as to provide transparency and a level playing field for businesses. Singapore's regulatory framework aims to promote self-regulation by industries. This self-regulatory regime includes key features, from OSH management systems to safety audits. The onus is on employers to ensure that they have in place and maintain systems to address safety and health issues at the workplace.

Close working relationships

The administration of OSH is an important role of the Ministry of Manpower.¹ This agency also oversees functions in the related areas of work injury compen-

sation, labour relations and welfare, employment promotion and foreign labour management. Close working relationships established over the years between the Ministry and the employers', workers' and professional organizations, as well as other government agencies, have contributed to the success of OSH programmes and strategies at the national level.² Such collaboration ranges from research, standards development and enforcement to surveillance and hazard control; and from training of key personnel and industry development to recognition and incentive schemes.

To encourage greater industry ownership, the Ministry of Manpower has, over the years, established Advisory Committees for three specific sectors – shipbuilding and repairing, construction and metalworking. Self-help efforts have resulted in significant improvements in safety and health practices in these sectors. A fourth Advisory Committee for the health care industry was set up in early 2005.

OSH training and recognition schemes

Underpinning the self-regulatory framework is a core strategy that places great emphasis on OSH training, promotion and recognition of effort. Requirements for training are enshrined in the law, and cover key personnel at all levels – OSH professionals, management, supervisors and workers, including guest workers. Through various promotional activities, recognition schemes and tax incentives, employers are encouraged to achieve standards that are higher than those required by law.

The business case

Increasingly, companies appreciate that having good safety and health systems, practices and track record is a competitive advantage. The reality is that providing a safe workplace has become an imperative

for companies wishing to compete globally. Singapore's marine industry is an outstanding example of this. Once thought destined to be a sunset industry, Singapore's marine sector generated a turnover of over S\$5 billion in 2004, employing some 37,000 workers. It has the largest ship repair centre in the world and its rig-building yards are counted among the best in their class. This successful industry transformation has been the result of intensive R&D efforts focusing on automation, as well as enhancing workforce safety and productivity.

Learning from the world

Participation in the areas of research, advisory services and training has provided Singapore with many opportunities for learning and sharing, regionally and internationally, and these will be increased. Training programmes conducted for our labour inspection counterparts from fellow member countries of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), as well as the ASEAN-OSHNET Project have helped to facilitate information exchange and sharing of experience. In contributing to the activities of both the ILO-CIS National Centres' and the WHO Collaborating Centres' networks, Singapore is pleased to be a part of the global effort to achieve safety and health for all.

We have also leveraged on the Internet as a useful vehicle for OSH promotion and information sharing. The Ministry's web site provides information resources on training programmes and materials, legislation and policies. A popular feature is the OSH Alert system – a free subscription service that helps update companies and OSH professionals on upcoming events, as well as share learning points from case studies. In addition, the Ministry's online OSH case studies database linked through the WHO Global Web Portal provides good practice models of successful workplace hazards control.

Succeeding through partnership

While Singapore's small size poses challenges in terms of resource constraints, our compactness provides opportunities for effective collaboration. Over the years, we have established a culture of tripartism and partnership that has served us well, both in the area of labour relations and on occupational safety and health.

A good example is the Workplace Health Promotion (or WHP) Programme. This major collaborative effort represents an integrated approach to workplace health promotion, and has the strong involvement of unions, employers and government. The objective is to improve the health status of working adults by encouraging organizations to implement effective workplace health promotion programmes, addressing key areas from OSH to health practices and work-life balance.

Programme strategies include government funding support, recognition of achievements through various national awards – the Annual Safety Performance Award, Occupational Health Best Practices Award, Family Friendly Employer Award and Singapore HEALTH Award, as well as linking workplace health to organizational excellence. A concrete endorsement of the latter principle is the incorporation of “employee health and satisfaction” as one of the criteria in the business excellence framework for the prestigious Singapore Quality Award. Some of these awards have been presented by the President and the Prime Minister, signalling to employers and to the nation the importance of workplace health promotion and making our workplaces not just safe, but healthy as well.

Coordinated by the Health Ministry's Health Promotion Board, the WHP Programme has so far met its original target of at least 50 per cent of the private sector workforce benefiting from effective workplace health promotion programmes by 2005. Currently, almost all public sector organizations have implemented such programmes. There have also been some positive effects on the health of Singaporeans, with improving trends seen over

the period from 1998 to 2004 in terms of proportion of working adults exercising regularly, as well as declines in prevalence of smoking, diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure.³

New framework for sustainable improvements

Singapore's transformation over the past 40 years, from an economy heavily dependent on entrepot trade to one with a significant manufacturing base and strong services sectors, has been accompanied by credible improvements in workplace safety and health. However, in order to raise OSH standards to the next level of achievement and ensure further sustainable improvements, more fundamental changes are required. There is a need to move beyond just prescriptive engineering controls and implementation of safety management systems, to address issues at a more systemic level that must be underpinned by stronger industry ownership and a safety culture.

We have therefore embarked on a fundamental review of the OSH regulatory framework. Setting ourselves a target of halving occupational fatalities, currently at 4.9 per 100,000 workers, within 10 years, we seek to become one of the safest places in the world to work in. These new initiatives for OSH are in line with the ILO's Promotional Framework for Occupational Health and Safety, tabled at the 93rd Session of the International Labour Conference in June 2005.⁴ The key emphases in the new framework for OSH in Singapore are:

- First, the focus will be on risk prevention and management, as well as addressing systemic issues. Stakeholders who create risks will be held accountable for managing and reducing these risks. Occupiers, employers, suppliers, manufacturers, designers and persons at work will have the responsibility to identify potential risks and take appropriate actions to mitigate risks at source.
- Second, all stakeholders will be brought on board for greater ownership of safety

standards and outcomes. The prescriptive nature of the current Factories Act creates a mindset for management and employees simply to follow the “letter of the law” and not address safety aspects outside prescribed legislation. Given the pace of technological change and variable work processes in different industries, legislation will inevitably lag behind safety risks. To promote greater industry ownership, a performance-based approach will be adopted under the new framework, augmented by prescriptive guidance for hazardous sectors and activities. To complement this, our enforcement stance will shift towards even greater industry partnership and compliance assistance.

- Third, workplaces with poor safety management will be stimulated to improve through rigorous auditing and tougher sanctions. Currently, safety lapses resulting in mishaps are severely punished, but the penalties for offences in the absence of mishaps are comparatively lower. This encourages the industry to tolerate sub-optimal safety practices until accidents occur. The Ministry will impose greater financial disincentives and penalties on workplaces with unsafe systems, before any accident has occurred. This will create the right environment in which all businesses find it more cost-effective to improve their safety management systems.

These principles will be institutionalized through new legislation that will be enacted in early 2006. The new Workplace Safety and Health Act, when passed, will form the legislative backbone of the OSH framework, allocating responsibility to stakeholders and setting out remedial measures (through remedial orders and stop-work orders) and penalties for non-compliance. To augment the Act, a number of Regulations will be passed. Two key subsidiary pieces of legislation central to the new framework and impacting all stakeholders – the Workplace Safety and Health (Risk Management) Regulations and Workplace Safety and Health (In-

cident Reporting) Regulations – will be introduced together with the Workplace Safety and Health Act in 2006.

A Workplace Safety and Health Advisory Committee (WSHAC) has been appointed that will facilitate and promote industry self-regulation, enabling industry to develop safer ways to achieve business goals. Spearheaded by industry leaders, the Committee will advise the Ministry of Manpower in the areas of:

- Setting OSH standards and regulations
- Promoting OSH awareness and engaging the industry to raise the level of OSH in Singapore
- Training key stakeholders to raise competency and capabilities in OSH.
- The Committee’s work will have four strategic key thrusts:
 - Promoting a business case for high OSH standards, and reviewing the current system to better recognize industry best practices in workplace safety and health
 - Engaging businesses to secure their participation and buy-in for the new OSH framework
 - Raising the level of OSH competency in industry by developing an OSH competency framework as well as new training programmes for all levels of industry
 - Working in partnership with the Manpower Ministry to set higher OSH standards for industry.

In order to develop sector-specific measures to raise OSH standards, the WSHAC has formed four industry sectoral sub-committees that will drive these strategic thrusts in the key industry sectors of healthcare, construction, metalworking, and shipbuilding and ship-repairing, the last three being industries with higher workplace accident rates.

Enhanced labour inspection

To implement the new OSH framework, we need to build and expand capabilities both within the Ministry and also in industry. For a start, the Ministry's OSH Division has been restructured from 1 August 2005.

The restructured Division will implement the framework, including new legislation, policies and programmes, adopting a proactive and systemic approach in accident prevention and involving all stakeholders in risk prevention and mitigation. It will also work closely with industry to enhance accident prevention and safety management capabilities, as well as develop a stronger safety culture. The Division will focus on the prevention of risks at source, set outcome goals for employers and help companies improve their safety management systems.

The Division's six new departments and their roles are:

OSH Inspectorate. The department focuses on reducing risks from safety and health hazards in workplaces through targeted programmed inspections, investigating accidents, taking enforcement action, and providing advice and guidance to industry.

OSH Specialist Department. The department provides specialist support and guidance in OSH – from occupational hygiene, safety and medicine to risk management and safety management systems – working in collaboration with partners through programmes and activities in the areas of OSH standards, research and best practices.

OSH Industry Capability Building. The department aims to create a vibrant and safe workforce through the promotion

of OSH best practices and setting competency standards for OSH personnel.

OSH Information Centre. The department provides information to support strategic planning and policies, as well as for dissemination to industry, and facilitates information sharing and international collaboration in OSH.

OSH Policy & Legislation Department. The department focuses on developing and reviewing policies and legislation on fundamental and strategic OSH issues.

OSH Corporate Services Department. The department assists injured workers and dependants of deceased workers to receive fair and expeditious worker's compensation for work-related injuries or deaths. It also processes the registration of factories and pressure vessels and other equipment, as well as the licensing of competent persons. It provides corporate support services to the rest of the division.

Providing a safe workplace is a journey of perseverance and vigilance. For Singapore, we have embarked on a new phase in the journey, aimed at achieving an even higher level of workplace safety and health. It is a journey we must take, for our people are our most precious and only resource.

Notes

¹ See the web site of the Ministry's occupational safety and health division at www.mom.gov.sg/oshd

² For more details, see the *Asian-Pacific Newsletter on Occupational Health and Safety*, vol. 12, no. 2, July 2005, <http://www.ttl.fi/NR/rdonlyres/DA6FB191-18C2-4ADE-BF25-62C63E593758/0/aasian.pdf>

³ Singapore National Health Survey 2004, www.singstat.gov.sg/ssn/feat/sep2005/pg19-20.pdf

⁴ www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/safe-work/promo_ppt_e.pdf