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Christina holds a master's degree in workplace health and safety together with an undergraduate degree in business (majoring in HRM) and postgraduate qualifications in rehabilitation case management. Her experience is unique for a WH&S professional in that she also has experience in WorkCover and rehabilitation. An experienced and qualified workplace trainer and auditor, she has worked in both the public and private sectors and in a variety of industries, retail among them. Christina is a member of the Safety Institute of Australia.

#### About HR business direction

The company provides leadership and value that inspires organisational evolution. It's committed to delivering excellent services with a holistic approach and collaborating with and educating clients through the delivery of business solutions that produce practical and commercial results. The team achieves powerful results for clients and has skills in industrial and employment relations, workplace health and safety, human resources strategy and workplace psychology.

**HR** business  
direction

## When times are tough ...

During tough times, HR programs may seem like a clear target for cost reduction.

**T**raining, rewards, incentives, safety, wellness and employee-assistance programs are often viewed as optional extras or 'nice to haves' for when business is good, and completely expendable or pointless when business is tough.

Of course, in tough times, businesses can be forced to make difficult decisions – reluctantly and with the understanding that they are not without consequence.

Cutbacks to HR programs must, however, be made with caution and a thorough examination of the potential strategic, financial and legal risk involved, as cutbacks can end up costing much more than is saved.

Workplace health and safety (WH&S) is one such example. During a restructure, it is tempting to shift resources and spending away from support services such as WH&S. Changes to WH&S programs often occur incidentally, as part of wider cost-saving initiatives, or unrelated organisational change. Beware!

Research has shown that changes and cuts affecting WH&S can have very negative consequences for an organisation during an economic downturn, as WH&S risks increase during these times. This has the potential to result in an increase in workplace injuries and workers' compensation claims at a time when an organisation can least afford it.

Risk factors include increased work volume, work pressure, fewer personnel, poor morale and uncertainty about the future.

Other issues that have the potential to influence WH&S in a direct or indirect way include:

#### **Lack of sensitivity in implementing workplace change or managing health and safety issues.**

A link between economic decline, mental health and suicide appears clear, and is discussed in the 2013 International Labour Organisation report, 'The recession and occupational safety and health: challenges and changes'.

Research has also shown that of those employees who remain after a restructure, there is an increased risk of absence due to mental health disorders and that the most committed employees are most at risk of suffering mental health problems.

#### **Poor morale.**

In an organisation experiencing a downturn or restructure, poor morale can result in the assumption

that safety is no longer a priority and, consequently, an increase in workplace injuries. To prevent this, it is essential that safety is reinforced and that it remains a priority during tough times.

When morale is low and job insecurity is high, it is not surprising that numbers of workplace injuries and workers' compensation claims increase. That back or shoulder pain an employee has not previously given much thought to might become more of an issue, especially for the worker who worries about getting another job at an advanced age or is unable to do the physical work they once could.

An employee bothered by the behaviour of a colleague or boss might begin to view the situation from a workplace-bullying perspective.

These scenarios are common but can be minimised by investing in the morale and wellbeing of employees.

#### **Reduced resources.**

Tough economic periods can bring time, financial and personnel-shortage issues and these can result in work pressure and errors that lead to accident and injury. Pressure to complete a task or job in a tight time frame with limited resources can also lead to cutting corners on important safety aspects of a task or job.

Travel restrictions resulting in a lack of senior management or safety personnel on-site can also contribute to an overall decline in safety culture and a sense of isolation and abandonment of staff.

Increased requirement for expenditure approval can lead to a dynamic where managers and staff are afraid to raise WH&S issues that may require financial outlay.

Importantly, WH&S legislation requires that an employer ensures the health and safety of its workers, so far as is reasonably practicable, but in determining this, costs may be considered only after the extent of the risk and the available ways of eliminating or minimising it have been assessed. For cost to be a key factor in the risk-control process, it would have to be grossly at odds with the risk.

#### **Changes to reporting relationships and loss of highly knowledgeable procedural or technical personnel.**

Changes to an organisation's structure during tough times can create an environment where it is difficult to follow or comply with established policies and procedures.

An example of this could be an

employee failing to report an incident or injury because a key person or part of the process is missing. It could involve a supervisor or a safety coordinator, or it could be as simple as a missing in-tray or pigeonhole.

Likewise, the loss of highly knowledgeable, procedural or technical personnel can pose challenges. Potentially combined with added time or resourcing pressures, employees may lack depth of knowledge to understand hazards, assess risks and implement appropriate controls.

WH&S creates a legacy that must be managed. By getting it right during tough times, the business will be well placed from a financial and HR perspective. Get it wrong and this legacy can hold a business back from being all it can be when economic conditions improve.

Here are some tips for ensuring you don't drop the WH&S ball when times are tough:

- Ensure changes are communicated and conducted as sensitively and as fairly as possible with regard to the future health impact on those who are staying, as well as those leaving.
- Aim to ensure employees are kept informed, to avoid gossip, rumour and worry.
- Maintain investments in wellbeing services such as employee-assistance programs.
- Work to maintain morale. This doesn't need to be costly. Praise and thanks are free.
- Reinforce senior management commitment to a safe workplace through regular communication.
- Prioritise risks according to rating and ensure that progress is tracked using a risk register, so that risks and progress towards closing them out are documented and not forgotten during tough times.
- Encourage new and innovative ways of reducing and eliminating risk to avoid hazard identification, risk assessment and control being abandoned during tough times.
- During workplace change, consider existing processes and procedures, and ensure that where these are affected by change, alternatives are communicated.
- Where employees are performing new roles or responsibilities, ensure they are provided with training from someone experienced in the role or task, and that this includes training in safe work procedures. ♦