Managing Your Most Important Asset:
Why companies are increasingly adopting an innovative approach to OH&S information management

The effective management of occupational health and safety (OH&S) information remains a significant logistical challenge for many businesses. Most large organizations create, collect and store vast amounts of OH&S data in order to meet regulatory requirements, to reduce absence, to improve workplace productivity, and to safeguard an organization’s most important asset, its workers. Despite these common requirements, many organizations take different approaches to the management of health and safety information.

Typically, OH&S data is not kept in a single repository. Instead, it is spread across independent OH&S functions, separate computer systems, and various business units, regions and facilities. This approach has meant that many companies have not kept pace with the volume and complexity of OH&S, business and compliance data. While this gap continues to widen for some, others have embraced an innovative, integrated approach that is beginning to reap significant rewards.

New Challenges, Old Solutions

While no two organizations are alike, health and safety professionals are faced with many of the same challenges when it comes to managing OH&S data, including the need to:

- Efficiently document health and safety data;
- Improve the tracking of required regulatory information;
- Generate reports that turn that data into useful management information;
- Identify trends, problem areas and root cause analysis;
- Protect sensitive content;
- Automate manual processes where possible; and,
- Carry out all of the above in a manner that is cost effective and that meets the financial and operational goals of an organization.

To meet these challenges, the majority of companies continue to rely heavily on paper-based systems, interspersed with a variety of independent computer systems. However, the international expansion of operations and the pace of regulatory change have created a shortfall with this approach. How can an organization efficiently track, manage, and coordinate high volumes of data from a variety of functional areas, while at the same time consolidating information from global operations subject to their own respective legislative regimes? Efficiency concerns aside, without a complete picture of their world in real-time, how can OH&S professionals be sure they are making accurate and useful recommendations to senior management?

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1 This includes Medical, Safety, Industrial Hygiene, and Case Management.
The Risks

In 2003, after a comprehensive Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) inspection, Chiron, a leading US-based biopharmaceutical company, conducted an independent business case analysis of their OH&S data management systems and procedures. At the time, Chiron had 25 different systems for managing OH&S data. These systems were poorly adopted and the data not well maintained. The ensuing report identified a number of risks associated with its approach:

- Lost business opportunities due to the lack of good OH&S data for managerial decision makers;
- Poor quality of OH&S compliance data and less than timely delivery of its OH&S information to key constituencies (i.e., government agencies), which could lead to financial penalties and/or enforcement action;
- Negative publicity directed at Chiron and its customers, suppliers, or partners;
- Lost ability to either prevent noncompliance or quickly reverse noncompliance after it has happened; and
- Potential exposure to the serious penalty provisions of Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 for making inaccurate claims in filing to government agencies.

The OSHA inspection and ensuing report commissioned by Chiron served as a wake-up call. It drew a clear parallel between the need for effective management and analysis of OH&S data and the company’s bottom-line performance.

An Innovative Approach

While the drawbacks associated with mismanagement of OH&S information are clear, a potential solution is emerging. Effective management requires OH&S professionals to speak a common language. They need a single, integrated system that can share information, not just across the functional areas, but also across the enterprise. That way, for example, when a medical practitioner is treating a worker for, say, lung disease, they have access to the air sample results collected by the industrial hygienist and the results of the safety facility audits conducted in the work area.

“[This innovative approach] enables us to focus on the issues rather than guessing what they are,” says Peg Rivedal, Employee Health Services Manager at Mutual of Omaha Company. The system has also enhanced her team’s ability to communicate effectively with upper management, who can then use this information for strategic planning.

“It has helped us develop proactive communication and reporting tools that ensure occupational health personnel are kept up-to-date,” according to one Wellness Manager from a Fortune 100 company. Using an integrated system has allowed him to support the Company’s doctors and nurses at the clinic level, while providing the statistical, reporting and front-end input tools needed by safety, risk management, worker’s compensation and return-to-work groups. “Having the OH&S management system has facilitated process development and enhanced manager participation in safety and health.” What’s more, the
improvements have been well received by employees at the Company, who have benefited from more rapid and thorough treatment.

While improved internal communication is a great asset, Paul Moss, Vice President Global Health, Safety & Environment at Dade Behring, values a single integrated system because of the ease of distribution of that information. The system is web-based, which has enabled the Company to open up its database to worldwide reporting. “It enables us to report from sites outside of North America and allows us to focus resources based on actual global data,” Moss says.

Making the most of your OH&S data

With more information and improved internal communication, an organization can move far beyond the traditional realm of OH&S management. They can identify problem areas, lagging sites, root causes, implement corrective actions and modify behaviors in order to reduce the risks of workplace injury or illness and contribute to productivity.

After completely overhauling its approach to OH&S management, Chiron now boasts improvements across the board. For instance, while increased visibility for senior management related to OH&S risk has been a welcome benefit, the company has been able to take a series of measures, based on the data, to dramatically reduce their injury rate and worker’s compensation (WC) costs. The company projects these measures alone will account for a 32% improvement in their Total Recordable Injury Rate and a concomitant reduction in WC costs.

Moss says the incidence data that is generated by the system can be studied for trending and enables the company to focus resources and budget on the most critical prevention areas. The same can be said for OSHA recordable information, which is now reported at Dade Behring by classification, nature of injury, type of accident, and by site.

Rivedal and her team at Mutual of Omaha have expanded their goals with the increased flow of information. They are now building a wellness program using the data to target specific areas of importance. They can then analyze how many people are using their wellness center and in what capacity. The enhanced tracking and reporting provided by the system has made it easy to demonstrate, in real-time, the correlation between a reduction in the number of lost days for those actively using the wellness center against those not using it at all or only infrequently.

Embracing change

In order for an organization to meet today’s demands of OH&S information management, it must be prepared to employ a common, integrated approach. Information must be shared, in real-time, across functional areas and the enterprise so that everyone is on the same page, including senior management. The alternative is the price an organization pays for poor OH&S performance, which is not only measured in government fines, but lost business opportunities, negative publicity, and lower employee productivity.
Mark Wallace is President and CEO of Medgate Inc. (www.medgate.com). Medgate has 20 years of proven experience developing OH&S software, used by leading corporations including 45 of the Fortune 500 companies, government agencies, and hospitals to cut costs, boost productivity and improve the health and safety of their employees. Mark can be reached at mwallace@medgate.com or 1 800.276.9120 ext 287.