**Opinion Piece: Integrating international health and safety standards saves money and minimises risk**

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Maintaining a healthy and safe working environment is a requirement by law, with the Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Act in effect in South Africa. However, while compliance with the OHS Act is mandatory, there are also international standards that businesses can and should be adhering to, specifically ISO45001. Certification to the standard proves that businesses are meeting their moral, financial and legal obligations around health and safety to the highest levels. Not only that, however, it can also make businesses more efficient, more productive, and ultimately more profitable as a result.

**People are a business’ most crucial asset**

According to the International Labour Organisation, more than 7 600 people die from work-related accidents or diseases every single day. Without people, businesses simply cannot function. It is therefore in the best interest of any business to ensure that the highest possible levels of health and safety standards are adhered to.

The ISO45001 standard was developed by the International Standards Organisation to address this very issue, and it has the potential to save almost three million lives each year. For organisations that work across geographies, the ISO45001 certification ensures that a minimum standard can be set for all business entities. It replaces the previous OSHA 18000 from the British Standards Authority, effective from 2018, with upgraded principles to make it more risk-based. The deadline to convert the OSHA 18000 certification to the new international standard has been extended to the end of September 2021.

**Not just a compliance exercise**

While some organisations specify ISO45001 compliance as a prerequisite for doing business, the international standard is not legally enforceable. In South Africa, however, there is a new Occupational Health and Safety bill in the pipeline, which mandates that a formal health and safety system be put into place. Organisations that comply with the ISO45001 standard will be ahead of the game, as they will automatically abide by this new requirement.

Health and safety is not just about compliance though. ISO45001 certification can be hugely beneficial for a number of reasons. By reducing workplace accidents, organisations improve their risk profile as well as both direct and indirect costs associated with incidents. Indirectly, insurance premiums are reduced when fewer accidents occur, which also saves money. In addition, less downtime from injuries and illness boosts productivity and efficiency. While certification to the standard may not be necessary for every business, adhering to the principles makes sense for any organisation, no matter what size or industry.

**The certification process**

The ISO45001 standard centres on implementing a formal system to manage health and safety on a proactive basis. The first step in certification is to perform a gap analysis on the current systems, policies and procedures, and then to standardise clausal procedures that meet the requirements of the standard for a particular business. These differ depending on the nature of the organisation as well as various other factors, for example, a mining enterprise will have vastly different requirements to a financial services firm.

Once the gap analysis is complete, an initial audit is performed to review paper-based evidence. Once this is passed, a three-month implementation is followed to ensure the standards developed can be put into place. A second-level audit is then performed to ensure physical compliance with the policies and procedures that have been developed and implemented. If this is all in order, the ISO45001 certification will be issued, and the business will operate in a surveillance period for a year, after which certain standards will be audited in-depth. After the second year, other standards will be assessed, and then every third year the entire certification process must be undergone once more.

**Not as complex as it seems**

While the accreditation and certification process appears to be overly complex and unattainable, the right partner can vastly simplify matters by ensuring that existing processes can be formalised and that the process followed fits the needs of the business. In addition, an expert partner can help organisations

to integrate ISO45001 with other ISO standards, including ISO9000 for quality control and ISO14000 for environmental management.

There is also a perception that ISO45001 is only for large enterprises, however, there is immense value in proactive health and safety for entities of all sizes. The standard provides for a formal process and a legal framework to manage risk and ensures that health and safety become an integral part of business rather than an afterthought, with major benefits to productivity and profitability.