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Keeping health and safety simple ain't stupid

Published: 28 March 2017

When you think Health and Safety do policies, manuals, paperwork and 'Too Hard Basket' spring to mind? Spencer Henshaw (SHL) is fighting back, introducing simple, practical measures to keep its staff and subbies safe.



FIGHTING BACK: (L-R) Spencer Henshaw Ltd Managing Director Murray Stevenson, Health and Safety Manager Ben Barber and Senior Health and Safety Advisor Amy Nelson.

Over the past eight months the Housing New Zealand head contractor has developed and trialled a simple health and safety system to support its subbies.

“We could see that a number of our smaller contractors simply didn't have the resources to get their own health and safety plans in place,” says Health and Safety Manager Ben Barber. “We wanted to help bring their knowledge and practice up to standard without them having to spend money.”

Step one was to employ Senior Health and Safety Advisor Amy Nelson as a consultant and 'go to' person for SHL subbies.

"For me, it's about being practical; taking complex information and making it simple so subbies can understand and do what's required to be safe and protect themselves," says Amy. "Any plan needs to be robust, doable and add value."

Amy holds an initial introductory session and follows up with four on-site training sessions. She's also on hand for advice at any time.

Step two was creating a resource pack; one that didn't result in a forest being felled.

Instead, the Site Pack and Health and Safety Plan, including a Pre-Start Toolbox check list, are light-weight documents that are pared back to the essentials, tailored to specific trades and presented in plain language with an abundance of colour images.

The first pack has been produced specifically for the painting and decorating trade and hones in on the key risks for this workforce.

"That means things like lead paint, asbestos and falls from heights," Ben Barber says. "There are hundreds of risks you could list but we're investing time and energy in those that are most likely to have an impact. Otherwise it becomes overwhelming and people switch off."

The resources are also being provided in Tongan and Samoan, making them more accessible and reflecting the ethnicity of the workforce.

To check on competency and understanding, SHL asks subbies to submit completed Toolbox documents for the first six jobs they complete under their new Health and Safety Plans.

"We look at their Competency Check Lists from the pack too," Ben says. "It's all about assessing the impact of the programme and what is or isn't working."

"But at the end of the day, it boils down to just three key things we want subbies to do: identify the risks, talk about them and do some training."

SHL Managing Director Murray Stevenson agrees.

“Our aim is to simplify the process so subbies can establish a fit-for-purpose health and safety system for their business. What we want is for every single person who sets foot on a Housing New Zealand site to be able to identify hazards and know how to manage them to avoid injury.”

And while the programme is currently targeted at SHL’s painting and decorating workforce, the plan is to ‘go big’.

“We want to get in front of all of our subcontractors across all of our trades over the next couple of years,” Murray says.

All this has got to cost money though, right?

“Yes it has, and will. But what price do you put on a life? You can’t put a dollar figure on the impact of a serious injury or loss of life.”