



## 2012 Essential Guide Article



### How Safety Audits Can Reduce Workplace Incidents

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Part of any complete occupational health and safety management system (OHSMS) is the requirement for periodic workplace audits. An audit is a comprehensive review of the entire OHSMS, from hazard identification, assessment and the implementation of controls, reviewing the effectiveness of those controls, and making changes as required. These audits can help identify gaps in your OHSMS, and allow for proactive closure of those gaps, thus helping prevent incidents and the potentially substantial costs associated with them.

Audits should include several elements, including interviews with staff, a documentation review and observational techniques. By combining these techniques into one audit, the auditor and anyone reading the final report will have a “snapshot” of the OHSMS at the time of the review. This will help confirm:

1. Do we have a management system in place?
2. Does our system cover the significant hazards that may affect our workers and workplace?
3. Is our OHSMS functioning properly? If not, where are the gaps?

The documentation review portion of the audit should look to see whether the applicable policies have been developed, and whether they are current, signed, and posted within the workplace as required by applicable legislation. Are the procedures in place that are required by law and that outline steps to be taken for specific situations? Are there records to confirm that workers and supervisors have been trained in the procedures required for their jobs?

Interviews with workers and supervisors can help identify communication channels and breakdowns within the organization. Have workers been trained on the hazards associated with their work and the workplace? Do they know their legal responsibilities and legal rights? Are they aware of their right to refuse unsafe work and do they know who to report any incidents and hazards to? Do they know where to find health and safety information in the workplace if they are looking for it?

Observation involves a physical walk through and review of the workplace. Using all of your senses, review the work being done and observe the control measures that are in place. Are they being used? Are they effective? Are there any hazards that can be eliminated or otherwise controlled that have not been dealt with yet? If controls are ineffective or not in use, this gives you an opportunity to ask why, perhaps by discussing with workers and/or supervisors. Perhaps the worker has not been trained, or perhaps their training was a long time ago and needs refreshing. Perhaps they did not understand the training, or there was no control in place. Either way, you have now identified a gap and can help to proactively control the hazard before an incident occurs.

Proactive audits by management should be supplemented by inspections by health and safety committees and health and safety representatives whose feedback and recommendations should provide commentary to management on the functioning of the OHSMS. Committee inspections should be completed *in addition to* management audits, as the primary responsibility for hazard prevention is management’s responsibility.

Audits are an essential part of any OHSMS. The gaps identified through auditing can help proactively reduce the risk of an incident occurring at the workplace. Gaps can be systematically closed, which also provides additional evidence of due diligence on the part of the employer. Although not every hazard causes incidents and injuries, the risks remain present. By putting all of the pieces together

and ensuring the effective functioning of the system, employers can reduce workplace incidents and the substantial costs that go along with them.

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<sup>1</sup>s. 2 of the AODA defines “disability” as:

- a) any degree of physical disability, infirmity, malformation or disfigurement that is caused by bodily injury, birth defect or illness and, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, includes diabetes mellitus, epilepsy, a brain injury, any degree of paralysis, amputation, lack of physical co-ordination, blindness or visual impediment, deafness or hearing impediment, muteness or speech impediment, or physical reliance on a guide dog or other animal or on a wheelchair or other remedial appliance or device,
- b) a condition of mental impairment or a developmental disability,
- c) a learning disability, or a dysfunction in one or more of the processes involved in understanding or using symbols or spoken language,
- d) a mental disorder, or
- e) an injury or disability for which benefits were claimed or received under the insurance plan established under the *Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997*.