

NEW WORLD SAFETY STANDARD

Why You Should Care About ISO 45001

By Ken Wells

In March 2018, International Organization for Standardization (ISO) published ISO 45001, the new occupational health and safety management systems standard. And many safety professionals in the U.S. just yawned. Interest is picking up, but the early review from many was, "So what? Who needs another safety management system standard?"

It's a fair question. Between PSM, SEMS, ISM, ANSI/ASSE Z10 or any of the other programs in wide use by industry, large numbers of companies either have a safety management program or have had the opportunity to implement one.

There are a few easy reasons for companies to become early adopters of ISO 45001:

1) It represents 4 years of work by safety experts all over the globe. It is always worth paying attention to that much collective knowledge.

2) Anyone who is currently OHSAS 18001 certified will have 3 years to switch over to the new approach.

3) Companies that work internationally may need to adopt the standard sooner than domestic companies.

4) It is a natural step for ISO 9001 companies or for those that use the ISO 14001 environmental management standard.

5) It may be the solution for companies that must meet different safety management regimes and need to organize them under one safety framework.

In May, my company started offering an Intro to ISO 45001 class. Based on the early feedback and our research, we believe the biggest reason safety personnel should learn about 45001 is to make sure they are looking after their own careers. ISO 45001 represents where the world is going on safety. The safety professional who ignores the concepts in ISO 45001 is not preparing for the future and may find that his/her career suffers for it.

Much of ISO 45001 is already a part of every good safety management approach. It is based on the plan-do-check-act cycle popularized by Deming in the 1950s, but that should not be a new concept for companies with a safety management approach.

However, here is what may be new.

Context

A whole range of internal and external factors impact a company safety program, from the need to comply with local regulations to the impact that safety has on public perception and customer trust. How many heads of OSH departments look at context in any organized way or even truly understand how they relate?

Business Case

No matter what you think about the value of safety, your CFO probably thinks of it as a cost center and potential area for budget cuts when business is slow. ISO 45001 is a road map to challenge that short-sided approach because it connects the costs with the benefits of safety and helps ensure that funds allocated to safety go to address the actual risk areas.

Alignment

ISO 45001 is about aligning safety with every part of a company. Alignment may include:

- Vertical:** Everyone in the company, from the CEO down to the boots-on-the-ground crews, understands why the company supports safety and, more importantly, how his/her role protects fellow workers.

- Horizontal:** Silos that separate departments are a plague at many companies. ISO 45001 only works if other departments and executives understand that safety and their functions are connected.

- External:** There is alignment between the company's program and customers, vendors, regulators, shareholders/owners, insurers, the public and other stakeholders.

The Role of the Safety Professional

All of this brings us to professional development. I have written before about the difference between safety management and leadership ("Is Managing Getting in the Way of Leading?" *PS*, March 2018, 58-59). ISO 45001 requires some ninja-level leadership skills, if done correctly. It will force many in the safety field out of their comfort zones and some will have a hard time making the transition. While safety professionals still need to be good managers (detail oriented, knowledgeable and experienced) and need to have the people skills to champion safety with employees, the concepts incorporated in 45001 take executive-level leadership and strategic skills:

- Budgeting:** Budget justification is critical to making the business case for safety.

- Prioritization:** Every workplace has thousands of hazards, but are you focusing your highest efforts on the greatest risks?

- Influence:** Managing down may include giving orders, but ensuring safety culture

means managing up, and that means influencing peers and top management.

- Mediating:** Large parts of a safety system are out of the direct control of the safety department. A recent *Boston Globe* investigation revealed that as many as one-third of all commuter train engineers have had their automobile driver's license suspended at least once or, in a few cases, several times. That's a human resources issue, but one that is critical to rail safety. Inspecting pressure vessels may belong to a stand-alone maintenance department. Operations owns operating procedures. How many times does the sales department promise things that create safety problems later? Successful safety heads need the negotiating skills of a UN diplomat to keep all those pieces in alignment.

- Communications:** Up, down, sideways, inside and out, it is all about communicating.

- External representative:** Safety heads must be out representing their companies with customers, competitors and regulators. Those external leaders need to know that, when s/he speaks, it carries the company's commitment.

Conclusion

Most companies in the U.S. are not going to adopt ISO 45001 in the near future, if ever. That's okay. But there is a lot of wisdom tucked away in the standard and supporting appendix. It is also the new global definition of what goes into a quality safety program and safety culture. Professionals who want to keep up with industry best practices and advance their careers must at least understand what is in ISO 45001 and why it is there. They must start thinking like the CEO, because that is who will ultimately lead the company safety culture that comes out of ISO 45001. **PSJ**

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