Background

The NSW Government sought expert opinions to prepare an Industry Policy White Paper focusing on economic performance and innovation. The Industry Policy White Paper will set the policy directions over the next 10 years (NSW Government, 2022).

Purpose of This Feedback

The purpose of this feedback is to encourage the NSW Government to place more emphasis on Work Health and Safety (WHS) in the Industry Policy White Paper. Organisations must ensure that their activities do not harm their employees, contractors, visitors or the public. Inadequate consideration/management of WHS can have moral, legal and financial implications (Acona Ltd, 2006).

About the AIHS & College of Fellows

The Australian Institute of Health and Safety (AIHS) is a 70-year-old organisation whose vision is "safe and healthy people in productive workplaces and communities" (Australian Institute of Health & Safety, 2022). The AIHS has a long and proud history of working with regulators, employers, unions and government departments in the pursuit of a more effective health and safety policy, regulation and, in particular, practice. The Institute has more than 4,000 members across Australia, including about 1,000 based in NSW.

The College of Fellows was established in 2002 and comprises those members who are Fellows and Honorary Fellows of the Institute. As a senior network of the Institute, the College works to support the Institute's vision, values and strategy.

Feedback

1. Work Health and Safety as one of the fundamentals of the new industry policy

Workplace health and safety is all about sensibly managing risks to protect workers and businesses. In Australia, in the year between 2019 and 2020, 194 fatalities were reported; out of which 53 happened in NSW (Safe Work Australia, 2021). Moreover, 120,355 serious claims were made with median compensation of $13,500 paid per claim. Furthermore, in 2012–13, work-related injury and disease cost the Australian economy $61.8 billion, representing 4.1% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Safe Work Australia, 2022). The institute encourages the NSW Government to add Work Health and Safety as one of the fundamentals of the new industry policy.

2. Adding 'digital work health and safety systems' as one of the examples under 'shifting to an increasingly digital economy'

The institute supports the government's view on digital technologies and how it is changing the way business is conducted globally. A digital work health and safety system makes information available at people's fingertips. From QR Codes to electronic risk assessments, digital systems provide instantaneous access to WHS information to stakeholders. It also drives positive cultural changes by bringing health and safety to the forefront of people's minds and actions (Lingard, Edirisinghe, & Harley, 2015). The institute encourages the NSW Government to add digital work health and safety systems as one of the examples under 'shifting to an increasingly digital economy'.

3. Transformative forces creating challenges and opportunities

Two of the major trends that are significantly impacting the Australian workplaces today and will continue to shape the future over the next two decades are:

1. **Rising issue of workplace stress and mental health issues.** Australia's workforce is registering increasing levels of stress and mental health issues. New and intensifying uses of digital

technologies in the workplace may exacerbate problems with mental health and stress, but technology also presents opportunities to manage these issues.

2. **Blurring the boundaries between work and home.** An increasingly large share of Australian workers are entering into work arrangements that enable them to work from home or other locations, blurring the boundaries between work and home life (Horton, Cameron, Devaraj, Hanson, & Hajkowicz, 2018, p. 4).

Some of the effects associated with these transformative forces include:

1. Larger compensation payouts for work-related psychological injuries.
2. Digital technologies (including new technologies) utilised in mental health treatment and monitoring.
3. White-collar employees subjected to higher risks to health.
4. Chronic diseases being the leading cause of illness (particularly obesity) and death.

While mental health (historically referred to as mental disorder) is a relatively new element of WHS, it has been receiving an increased focus. Work-related mental health conditions are a major concern in Australian workplaces due to the costs associated with the extended periods away from work by the negatively impacted employees. Over the five years between 2010 and 2015, the compensation payment and time off work related to mental health were almost triple the value of typical claims. The annual average total claims payment was $480 million. Moreover, annually, one out of every 1,470 workers claimed for a mental health condition. Furthermore, 60% of these claims were awarded to workers aged 40 and over (Safe Work Australia, 2015).

The Code of Practice on How to Manage Psychosocial Hazards at Work describes the various control measures that can be utilised to effectively manage occupational psychosocial hazards (SafeWork NSW, 2021, pp. 15-24).

References

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