

Threats to Workplace Safety

Over the years a premium has been placed on the issue of workplace safety. As a consequence, the focus on occupational safety and health concern itself with the safety, health and welfare of people at work. There is a high level of importance attached to occupational safety, since the scope of it extends to deal with all aspects of physical, mental social health and safety in workplace.

Occupational safety and health is a matter which should occupy the attention of all employers in all employment sectors, and particularly at the enterprise level. There ought to be consciousness of the possible kinds of workplace hazards and risks which exists, and the severity of them. It is important that employers do not limit themselves to giving consideration to hazards and risks that are of a physical nature, but also be mindful of those which can have a physiological and emotional impact. In an effort to avoid injuries and fatalities occurring on the job, its means that critical attention must be paid to workplace standards, systems and practice. This underlines the need for a workplace safety and health policy.

It has been well established that the employer has a responsibility to maintain a safe workplace. Following on this, it is the responsibility of the employer periodically review the Safety Policy, so as to improve on the workplace standards, systems and practices. As industry standards change, it becomes necessary for a review and update to take place. To do so would be consistent with the intent of the employer to ensure that safety, health and welfare of employees.

Such positive action by the employer invariably lends to the promotion of decent work. Decent work has been defined as a productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and dignity. It is questionable as to how many employers are following the law and practices which would ensure that the decent work agenda is being promoted. As a case in point, reference is made to the Safety and Health at Work Act 2005-12 (SHaW Act) which was passed in Barbados. This Act imposes several demands on the employer.

The SHaW Act in addressing the Safety Policy, stipulates that 'it shall be the duty of every occupier to prepare and so often as may be appropriate, revise a statement of general policy with respect to workplace, safety, health and welfare, and the organization and arrangements for the time being in force for carrying out the policy , and to bring the policy and any revision of it to the notice of all employees. Where 10 or more persons are employed, the statement of policy and the organization and arrangements for the time being in force for carrying out the policy required by Sub-section (4) shall be in writing.

In addition to the Safety Policy, questions can be asked as to how seriously do employers treat to providing training for their employees. The SHaW Act requires that provision for such information, instruction, training and supervision as is necessary to ensure; so far as is reasonably practicable, the health and safety at work of employees: With respect to fire and emergency drills at the workplace, it is left to wonder if these are scheduled by the employer, and moreover, how seriously they are taken by both the employer and employees.

Whereas the SHaW Act addresses the matter of developing a safety culture, where the exits are not blocked so as to impede exit in the event of an emergency, the observation has been made that some

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business places which have only a one door entrance and exit, have stock in the doorways. To aggravate the situation, some have items on display for sale which are placed at the front of the entrance. The Act specially states that the contents of any room in which persons are employed shall be so arranged or disposed that there is a free passage way for all persons employed in the room to a means of escape in case of fire.

It would be of interest to learn of how many business places have complied with the provisions of the SHaW Act which address access to firefighting equipment and the training of personnel. According to the Act, the appropriate and adequate equipment for fighting fire shall be provided and maintained at the workplace and shall be so placed as to readily available for use. Every occupier shall ensure that at least one person trained in the use of the firefighting equipment shall be available on the premises at all times when persons are employed in the workplace.

It is for employers and the enforcement agencies to question and review their management of the policies enacted, and the enforcement of the law to minimize existing threats to the workplace.