

MANAGEMENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY SYSTEM IN A STEEL MANUFACTURING FIRM

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Abstract

This study focuses on evaluating management's perception of the occupational health and safety system used within the steel manufacturing firm. It investigates how management perceives their role as managers, how management interprets and enacts their role as managers and how this in turn impacts on occupational health and safety in the workplace. Management should be contributing to the improvement of workplace health and safety within the steel manufacturing firm. However, managers each have a different interpretation of the purpose, which influences the way they perceive their role in workplace health and safety. Management's commitment and compliance with health and safety will be evaluated in order to examine the health and safety standards in this workplace. Quantitative data was collected using questionnaires. The random sampling technique was used with a sample size of 55 participants. These participants were sub grouped into different categories such as senior managers, line managers, safety health and environmental officer, laboratory management, health and safety representatives, artisans, and machine operators. The findings revealed that there is a strong relationship between management's perceptions and safety in the workplace. It was found that the human factor (behaviour) can have a huge impact on safety performance within the plant.

Keywords: Health, safety, workplace, perceptions, management, responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

Occupational health and safety is an important resource for companies in their ambition to be competitive and to produce high quality products at a low cost in a safe convenient way without causing harm to role players. There is a link between human behaviour and workplace safety. In reality people are different. Their values differ, what others hold with high esteem might be considered insignificant by others. Some people derive pleasure from engaging in risky behaviours while others guard vigilantly against risks.

It is very important for companies to create a healthy workplace framework. A healthy workplace framework is a structure that helps in guiding companies in implementing a healthy workplace environment. This study contributes to the growing understanding of

management perception and participation in occupational health and safety, by focusing on the role that management plays in the fulfilment of health and safety requirements within a steel manufacturing firm in Johannesburg.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

Like all South African companies, this Steel Manufacturing firm employs the globally accepted OHSAS 18001 regulatory standard for safety and health administration in the workplace. The OHSAS 18001 workplace regulation runs parallel to ISO 18001 standards. ISO 18001, as an administrative tool, is declared to be an ideal tool for occupational safety and health management worldwide in various industrial companies. In conjunction, the OHSA No. 85 of 1993 is in place to provide health and safety of persons at work and for the health and safety of persons connected with the use of plants and machinery, the protection of persons other than persons at work against hazards to health and safety arising out of or in connection with the activities of persons at work, to establish an advisory council for occupational health and safety and to provide for matters connected there with.

Hattingh and Acutt (2009:14), specialists in occupational health and safety, state that occupational health is concerned with the relationship between work and health and was defined in 1950 by a joint committee of ILO and the WHO as being concerned with:

- The promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of the physical, mental and social well-being of the workers in all occupations.
- The prevention among workers of departures from health caused their working conditions.
- The protection of workers in their employment from risks resulting from factors adverse to health.
- The placing and maintenance of the worker in an occupational environment adapted to his/her physical and psychological state.

Through the experience gathered at the Steel Manufacturing firm, it was observed that there are pitfalls/ gaps between the required health and safety management system and the actual health and safety performance system. As a result of these shortcomings there have been multiple health and safety injuries within the plant. It was also discovered there is no sense of urgency in addressing safety concerns. For example, health and safety injuries are not investigated on time in order to put corrective measures in place or to prevent the same incident from repeating again.

The Occupational Health and Safety Act states that it is the duty of the employer (management) to provide and maintain as far as reasonable practicable a working environment that is safe and without risk to the health of the employees. Major hazards identified at the Steel Manufacturing Firm are as follows:

- Lifting equipment/ overhead cranes
- Hot metal and cobbles in the mill
- Vehicles: trucks and fork lifts
- Stacking and storage.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Recent reports indicate that work related injuries are caused by human factor and unsafe working conditions, these findings sparked interest but also raised concerns. Subsequently there could have been many factors which could have influenced or contributed to injuries at the firm, namely, management's level of decision-making, their level of understanding of the system, their lack of vigilance, attitude, compliance and commitment to the occupational health and safety management system. This study explores the causes for high level of work related injuries in the steel manufacturing firm in Johannesburg, South Africa.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study is to evaluate the management's perceptions of the occupational health and safety system in a steel manufacturing firm in Johannesburg.

Within this context, the major objectives were identified as follows:

- To assess management's level of understanding of the OHSMS implemented.
- To evaluate management's level of vigilance in ensuring health and safety in the workplace
- To investigate management's attitudes towards occupational health and safety management system
- To assess management's compliance with the occupational health and safety management system.

BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) is often referred to as an important resource for companies in their ambition to create a good working environment. Health and Safety in the workplace is very important to ensure that an organisation provides a safe working environment for its employees and to minimise the risk of accidents and injuries. Health and Safety should be a joint responsibility between the company, management and

employees. They should possess the skills to identify and describe the relationships between the work environment, organisation, productivity and health.

Bennet (2002) argues that when it comes to the workers' opinions on health and safety, they are often ignored due to various management styles (certain management styles do not take into account the views and opinions of workers) and a lack of an adequate health and safety policy. This allows for very little or no reflection for worker contribution to health and safety within the organisation. Workers often find themselves compelled to simply follow the rules and policies of the organisation as these policies have already been put in place. Bennet (2002) believes that workers' perceptions on the subject are seldom considered.

Some of the requirements of the Occupational Health and Safety Act No 85 of 1993 (OHSACT) are that companies must create a health and safety policy under the chief inspectors directions (NOSA, 2011:7).

According to section 7 of the Act, the function of the SHE policy regards the protection of health and safety of employees at work. The act further requires that the CEO must sign this policy whereby the company's commitment, responsibility and accountability for health and safety is well stated in order to promote health and safety in the work place (NOSA, 2011:7).

The main purpose of the Occupational Health and Safety Act is to provide a proactive attempt at maintaining a safe and healthy working environment. Section 8 of the Act states the duties of the employer as follows:

- Every employer shall provide and maintain, as far as is reasonably practicable, a working environment that it is safe and without risk to the health of his employees.
- The provision and maintenance of system of work, plant and machinery that, as far as is reasonably practicable, are safe and without risk to health.
- Taking such steps as may be reasonably practicable to eliminate or mitigate any health issues of employees, before resorting to personal protective equipment
- Making arrangements for ensuring, as far as reasonably practicable, the safety and absence of risk of health in connection with production, processing ,use, handling, storage or transport of articles or substances
- Providing such information, instructions, training and supervision as may be necessary to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, the health and safety at work of his employees (NOSA, 2011:7).

Awwad (2001:1) states that the Occupational Health and Safety Assessment Series specification (OHSAS) 18001, have been developed as a recognisable occupational health and safety management system standard against which management systems can be assessed and certified. OHSAS 18001 is compatible with the ISO 9001 (Quality) and ISO 14001 (Environmental) management systems standards, which facilitates the integration of quality, environmental and occupational health and safety management systems by organisations. OHSAS 18001 is intended to help an organisation to control occupational health and safety risks (Awwad, 2001:1).

As mentioned by Awwad (2001:3) that fundamental to any safety management system is to identify hazards, assess risk and prioritise it, and implement controls to reduce unacceptable risks. All three systems specify clear requirements for hazard identification, risk assessment, and risk control; however the three systems vary in the level details specified. The effective of any SMS is highly dependent on the system's ability to comprehensively identify all hazards (Awwad, 2001:3).

The literature on occupational health and safety management that was previously conducted in different countries reveals that safety, health and the environment has become an integral component to the viability of business for employers, labour unions, governments and environments in general. Naturally a need for safety is an intrinsically human concern (Macintosh and Gough, 1998:1). Zwetsloot (2003) states that the OHSAS 18001 safety and health standard has proved to be an effective standard that continues to gain popularity in well established businesses all over the world. It helps bring about dramatic changes in many companies whose practices are now geared towards zero tolerance of health and safety hazards in conducting their business (Zwetsloot, 2003). Meanwhile O'Connel (2004) has supported the theory suggested by Zwetsloot (2003), which states that the benefits that are derived from complying with the OHSAS 18001 regulation have proved to be very attractive to progressive organisations all over the World.

The standard helps to form an all-embracing protective measure for the safety of the workers and makes provision for the evaluation of the success of its implementation (O'Connel, 2004).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

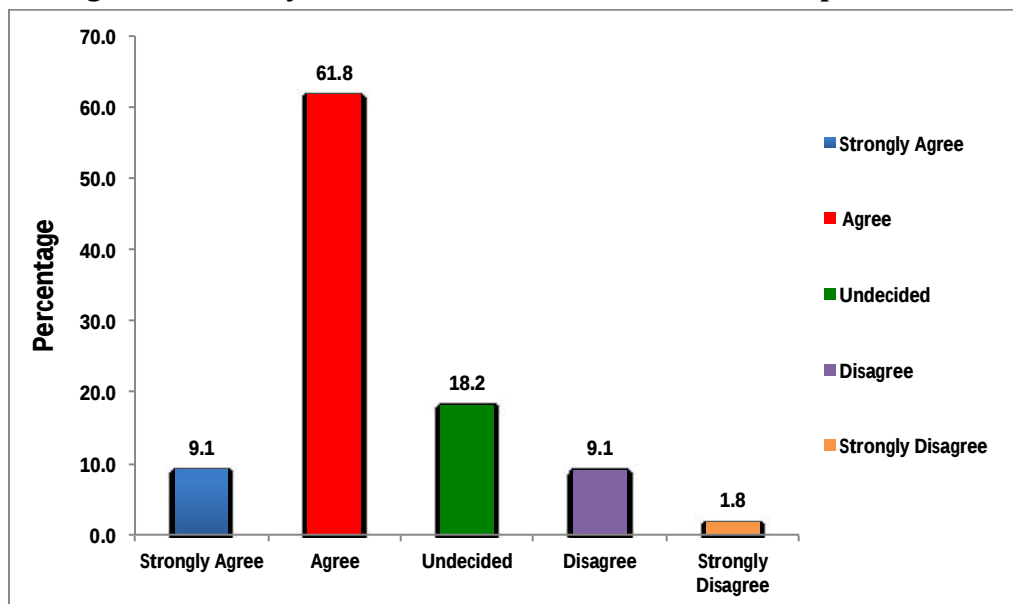
For the purpose of this study quantitative research was used. Quantitative research involves the collection of data, which can be statistically analysed to quantify the results of the research so that it can be widely applied (Saunders et al. 2007: 138). The quantitative research method was used as it was the most suitable for the study because it uses a large sample, and a large sample for this study was obtained. Data was highly specific, precise and reliability was high (Saunders et al. 2007: 138). The questionnaire was chosen as the preferred primary research instrument to collect data for this study.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Figure 1.1 indicates that the majority of the participants' agree (61.8%) that management identify, evaluate, and control risks and hazards within the manufacturing plant. Hence, management appears to be efficient and effective in monitoring and controlling various health and safety hazards that may be or are being experienced at the company. However, some participants indicated that they were undecided (18.2%) or disagreed (9.1%) that the management identify, evaluate, and control health and safety risks. Perhaps, the perspectives represent employees that have experienced negative health and safety incidences within the company, possibly denoting the need for management to further develop methods for improving, monitoring, and controlling hazards.

Figure 1.1 Management's Level of Vigilance

Management identify, evaluate, and control hazards in the plant.



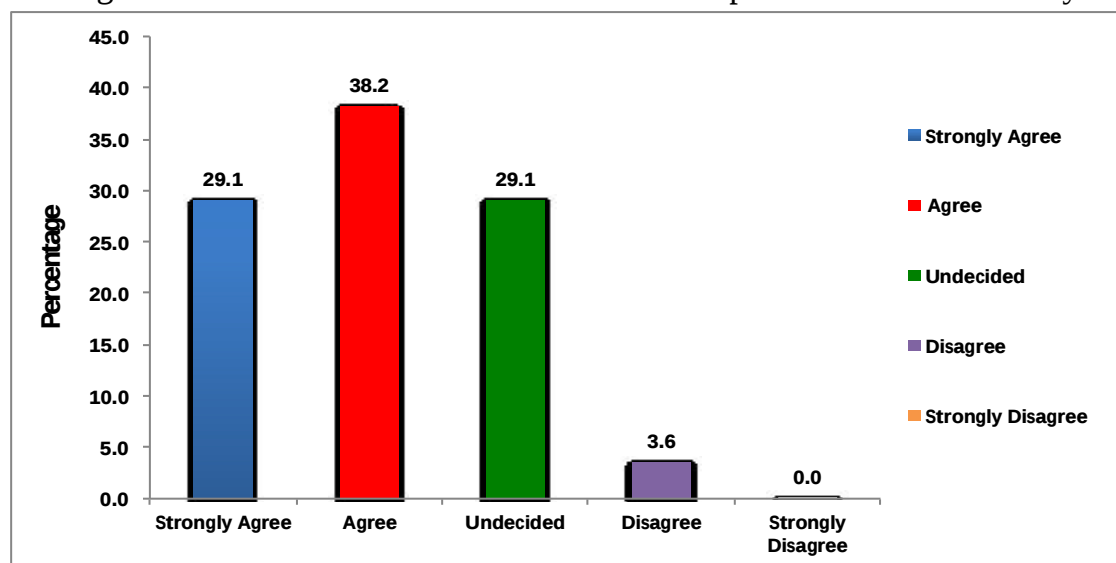
Source: Angel Phumzile Machabe, MBA Dissertation, Regent Business School, 2013

Based on Figure 1.2 below, the largest proportion of the participants (38.2%) indicated agreement that management commits themselves to continuous improvement of the

safety, health, and environment system. A substantial percentage of the participants also denoted strong agreement (29.1%) with the item. These findings suggest that most of the participants believe that management are constantly active and engaged in improving the safety, health, and environment system. However, 29.1% of the participants indicated they were undecided about whether they perceived management as being committed to the continuous improvement of the system. Perhaps, this suggests that many of the employees are unaware that managerial personnel are involved in improving the system. In order to ensure that the employees are aware that management is active and committed to being involved and working towards the improvement of the system, management is encouraged to inform the employees of the progress and effort that is being devoted towards the health and safety within the organisation and outline the path for safety and health improvement to the employees.

Figure 1.2 Continuous Improvement

Management commits themselves to continuous improvement of the SHE system.



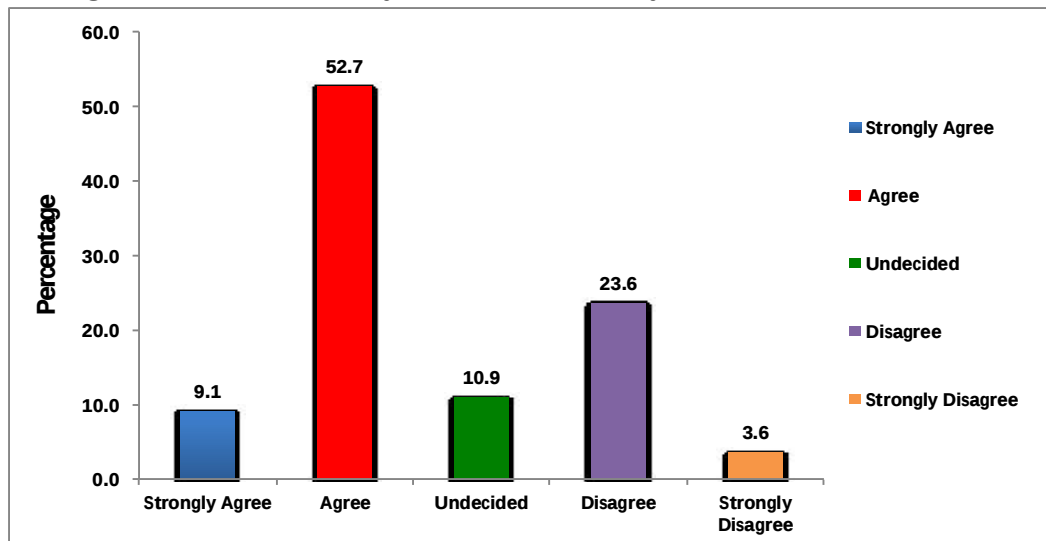
Source: Angel Phumzile Machabe, MBA Dissertation, Regent Business School, 2013

Figure 1.3 below suggests that the majority of the participants' (52.7%) agree that management resolves the safety concerns indicated by employees. However, approximately one quarter of the respondents (23.6%) indicated disagreement. The discrepancies between the response patterns may denote that management resolves certain concerns and not others. Additionally, considering the sample composition, the managerial participants may have indicated agreement whereas the employees' included

in the sample may have indicated disagreement. If so, this may suggest that the management may not be amenable to resolving the safety concerns of employees. Although inconclusive, it is important that management (1) resolves the critical safety issues of employees or (2) provides an explanation for decisions not to resolve health and safety issues raised by employees at the organisation. This may appease the issues certain participants' reflected in having unresolved safety issues.

Figure 1.3 Resolving Safety Concerns

Management resolves safety concerns raised by workers.

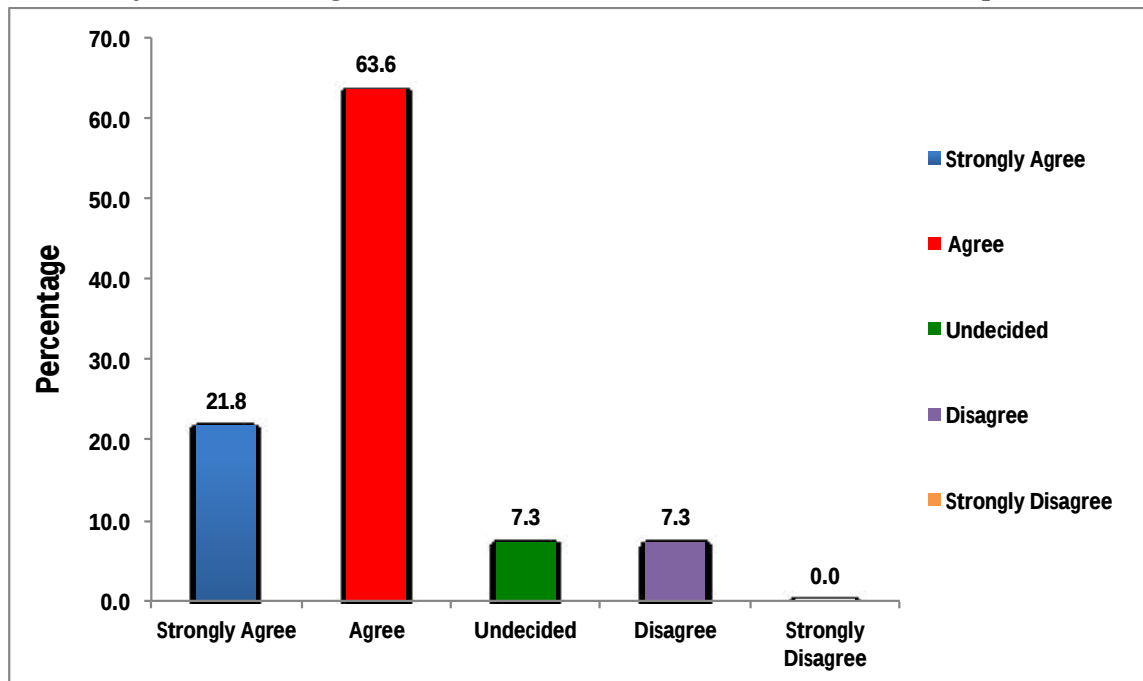


Source: Angel Phumzile Machabe, MBA Dissertation, Regent Business School, 2013

According to figure 1.4 below, majority of the participants (63.6%) agreed that safety related changes are communicated to all employees within their respective departments. This may suggest that a high proportion of the employees are appropriately informed about health and safety alterations that have been instituted. However, some participants were undecided (7.3%) and disagreed (7.3%), indicating that safety changes may not be communicated to certain employees when implemented. It is critical that each employee obtain specific detail regarding any of these changes, as any changes that are not detailed may result in accidents or a following of the incorrect protocol post-incidents.

Figure 1.4 Communicating Safety Issues

All safety related changes are communicated to all members of the department.

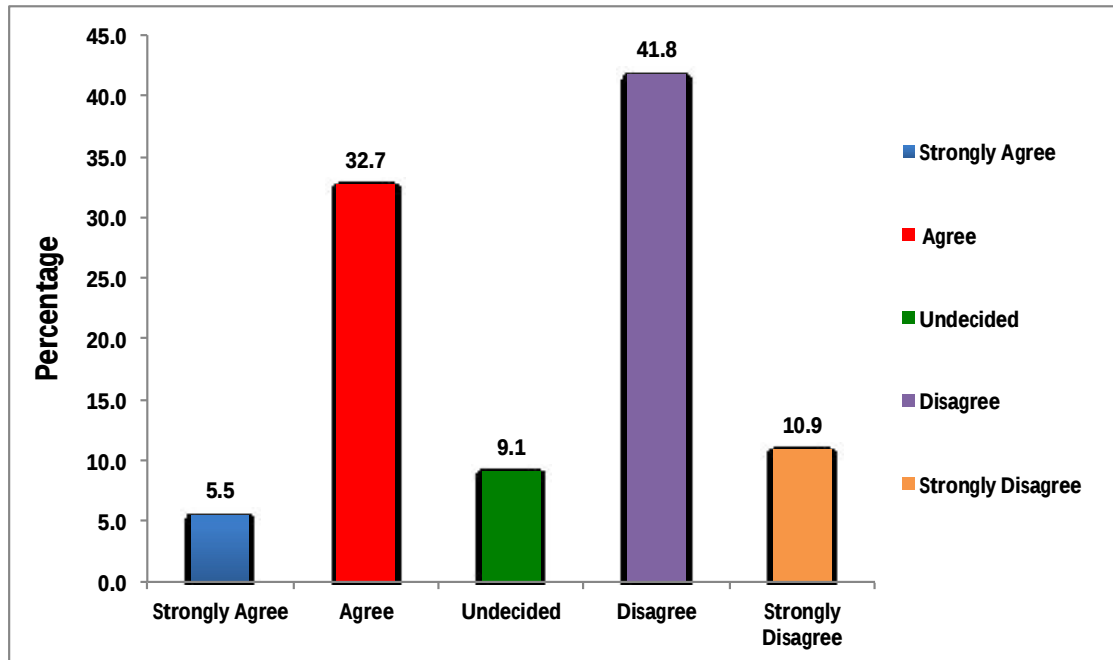


Source: Angel Phumzile Machabe, MBA Dissertation, Regent Business School, 2013

Based on Figure 1.5 the highest proportion of participants' (41.8%) indicated disagreement that management immediately investigate incidents that occur in the plant. A further 10.9% strongly disagreed. Considered collectively, this is a significant concern for the employees and the organisation. From the perspective of employees and managers, the reasons and causes of incidents may not be resolved timeously, which may result in further injury to other employees (e.g., if an accident occurred due to machinery malfunctioning and is not fixed or replaced).

Figure 1.5 Incidents Investigation

Management immediately investigate incidents that take place in the plant.



Source: Angel Phumzile Machabe, MBA Dissertation, Regent Business School, 2013

A large percentage (32.7%) suggested that management does immediately investigate incidents that occur in the plant. Perhaps, this is even more of a concern, as certain employees, accidents, or departments may be obtaining preferential treatment in terms of the initiation time of investigations that occur following incidents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The primary findings have indicated that management can improve and resolve safety related issues within the firm. The following recommendations are made based on the findings:

- Management's main focus area should be on improving their reaction time to accidents and injuries which occur in the firm, to avoid repetition of injuries.
- Address issues that are raised by the shop floor employees and also encourage them to report all the unsafe acts and unsafe conditions.
- Communication of any safety related changes that are taking place.

- Improve the leadership style in the sense that they must lead by example, they must take part in safety performance, and they must enforce discipline should any person be found to be violating the safety system.
- Assign a responsible person to monitor and communicate any safety related matters that are logged in the safety incident book (SIB) and to make sure that outstanding issues are addressed on time. This may encourage employees to report more safety matters that need urgent attention.
- Provision of safety related training will help to make the employee to increase their knowledge about health and safety at work.

CONCLUSION

The literature has revealed that it is important for management to commit and to take ownership of health and safety in the workplace. Management must learn to get employees on the floor involved when making any health and safety changes and decision within the plant. The study has revealed that management takes too long to react and investigate health and safety incidents that occurred in the plant. It is important that they form a team spirit environment in order to make health and safety a success in their plant.

This study has confirmed that there is a strong relationship between worker perceptions and safety in the workplace. The literature has established several factors that have a bearing on the link between human behaviour and workplace safety. In reality people are different. Their values differ, what others hold with high esteem might be considered insignificant by others. Some people derive pleasure from engaging in risky behaviours while others guard vigilantly against risks. Human nature is chaotic. If it is not harnessed effectively by the rule of law the wheel of civilisation would stop running. Organisational establishments are faced with a huge challenge of enforcing safety compliance in the workplace. As in a netball match, to maintain order one has to play by the rules. To ensure that order is maintained, a referee is put in place. The same applies to the workplace.

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