

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

THE HUMAN FACTOR OF BIASED OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH ADVICE BY SAFETY OFFICERS IN MALAYSIAN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian construction sector recorded the highest number of work related fatalities and one of the critical reasons is lack of knowledge among the management team and workers where a safety and health officer's (SHOs) duty is to advise the employer. The study investigates the possible causes that could affect the credibility of the SHOs advice that positively associated to the knowledge of the employers on safety and health matters. The underlying possibilities were brainstormed through cause effect analysis technique by qualified subject matter experts. The study also suggested several recommendations for review and future solution of the unhealthy human factor of biased safety and health officer's advice in Malaysian construction industry.

Keywords: Construction Sector, SHO, Workplace Safety, Biased Advice, Cause Effect Analysis

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, the construction sector is a very important and productive sector of the country's economy (Raza et al., 2013). However, construction sector has been regarded as the most dangerous and hazardous workplace due to the types of nature of the activities that is taking place in the construction sites (Yakubu & Mohammad, 2013). The Malaysian construction sector is notable as it continues to register a high rate of accident related casualties and construction workers who work within the construction industry face greater risk of fatality than workers in other industries and the data collected by the Department of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH) further indicates that the construction industry had recorded the highest number of fatalities every year (Nor Haslinda et al., 2016). For year 2017, a total of 4, 266 number of workplace accidents had happened at construction sites in Malaysia which a total number of 183 of them involved fatal cases (Sinar, 2018). In Malaysia, Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs) continued to expand at faster pace than the overall economy. However, despite their economic importance and the number of employees dependent on them, small firms have received very little attention from occupational safety and health researchers in Malaysia. Nonetheless, the number of reported accidents at the workplace especially in SMEs was worrying and statistics showed that SMEs in Malaysia had the workplace accident rate of 30% to 50% higher than big companies which specifically contributes to 80% of total accidents in Malaysia (Lilis, 2012). The time has come for those in the construction industry to reassess their position in safety at work and determine whether they have done

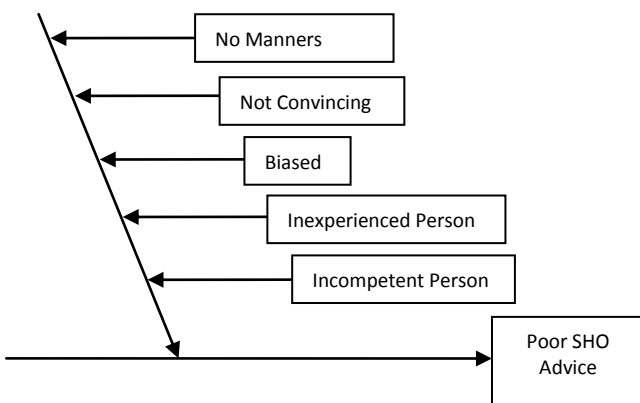
enough to ensure the safety of their workers in construction sites (Lee, 2018). There is a need to look into new way of improving the image of the construction industry by reducing the hazards at construction sites (Ahmadon et al., 2006). One of the main duties of the contractor is to educate and train their employees on work place safety and health and they must appoint a professional person to conduct such safety and health trainings and programs. A qualified safety and health officer's role is also to conduct such trainings and provide appropriate advice to the workers of their responsibility on safety and health at site (UK Essay, 2013). One of the critical reasons is lack of knowledge among the management team and workers that cause the workplace safety and health situation in the country is still very much adverse and below expectation (Nurfadzillah & Muhammad (2018). As per required under Sec 29 of Occupational Safety and Health Act 1994, it is the duty of an employer to employ a competent person to act as a safety and health officer at the workplace and it has been specified in Regulation 18 (a) of the Occupational Safety and Health (Safety and Health Officer) Regulations 1997 that the main duty of the safety and health officer is to advise the employer on the measures to be taken in the interest of safety and health at the workplace. Thus, it is hypothesized that the advice of a safety and health officer is positively associated to the knowledge of the employer and his employees on how to manage and implement safety and health measures at the workplace. Therefore, the credibility of the advice of an occupational safety and health officer is very important and any poor advice could have an adverse effect in the overall implementations of occupational safety and health at the workplace.

METHODS

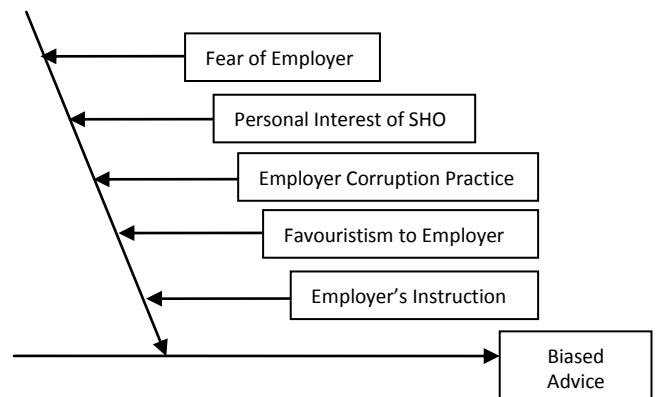
In order to determine further the problems that could lead to poor advice of a safety and health officer, the researcher had intended to investigate the underlying causes by using the Ishikawa or Fish Bone Diagram technique with five WHY's analysis through a brainstorming session with the subject matter experts. The authors had set up a group of six members which four of them comprised safety practitioners who are currently employed by the industrial players in the country and actively involved in construction work activities at the project worksites. All these four members are competent occupational safety and health officers who are registered with DOSH and have an experience of more than ten years working at multiple construction companies involving in various types of building operations and works of engineering construction in Malaysia. The role of these subject matter experts is to assist the authors in finding the possible causes that could lead to poor advice of a safety and health officer based on their knowledge and working experience at the construction sites, discuss the results and suggest recommendations for future improvement. The brainstorming session was held for six hours within a day at one of the author's premise whereby the authors had acted as the medium to list down all the findings, facilitate the discussions of results and conclude the appropriate suggestions to be recommended for improvements. Six key factors were used under the cause effect analysis diagram as basis to identify the possible causes namely Man, Machine, Method, Management, Environment and Procedures/Process.

RESULTS

Upon brainstorming, the possible causes under the human factor (Man), the subject matter experts have identified that five main possible causes that could lead to poor advice of a safety and health officer (SHO) were due to: 1) Incompetent Person, 2) Inexperienced Person, 3) Biased, 4) Not Convincing and 5) No Manners as per illustrated in Figure 1 below:

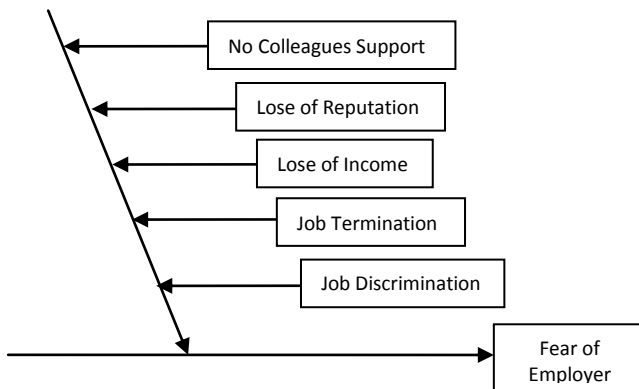


However, the experts ignore the possible causes of incompetent and inexperienced person from this investigation because specifically all safety and health officers must meet the certain qualifications and experience to be entitled to be registered as a safety and health officer as per required by DOSH. The experts also ignore the possible causes of not convincing and no manners from their further investigations because it particularly involves the attitude and behaviour of the safety and health officer in person. Therefore, the experts decided to select and focus much deeper of their investigations particularly only into the cause of bias which could be one of the prominent possibility under the human factor that leads to poor advice of the safety and health officer to the employer. Further investigation into the selected cause, the experts has identified another five main possibilities that could lead to biased advice of a safety and health officer to their employer were due to: 1) Employer's Instruction, 2) Favouritism to Employer, 3) Employer's Corruption Practice, 4) Personal Interest of SHO and 5) Fear of Employer as per illustrated in Figure 2 below:



However, the experts ignore the possible causes of employer's instruction as it could be one of the written conditions in the employment contract or appointment letter of the safety and health officer which the SHO has been bound to comply with in the purpose of protecting the company interest. The possible causes of favouritism in order for the SHO to maintain the relationship with the employer, practice of corruption by the employer to his SHO and personal interest of the SHO himself were also ignored from this investigation because all it were particularly involves the attitude and behaviour of the safety and health officer in person. Therefore, the experts decided to select and focus much deeper of their investigations specifically only

into the cause of fear of employer which could be one of the prominent possibility under the human factor that leads to biased advice of the safety and health officer to the employer. Further investigation into the selected cause, the experts has identified another five main possibilities that could lead to fear of a safety and health officer of their employer were due to: 1) Job Discrimination, 2) Job Termination, 3) Lose of Income, 4) Lose of Reputation and 5) No Colleagues Support as per illustrated in Figure 3 below:



Based on the findings obtained, the experts found that the safety and health officers has the fear of their employer because they are directly employed and paid under the employer's employment contract and therefore, the SHOs are worried of their source of income and try to avoid any direct confrontation and keep a good and easy relationship with their employers who are their direct paymasters in order to secure their employment for personal and family interest and benefits of the safety and health officers in the industry. This desperately makes the safety and health officer to share the same mindset with their employers and ready to willingly provide biased advice to their employer on the measures to be taken in the interest of safety and health at the workplace. Such advice eventually then caused the employer not acquiring an adequate knowledge on occupational safety and health issues which further leads to poor implementation of safety and health measures especially in terms of reducing the hazards at the worksites that leads to accidents such as near misses, dangerous occurrences, injuries and occupational poisoning at the workplace.

CONCLUSION

The experts concluded that by removing the fear of the safety and health officers of their employers, the SHOs could provide much genuine and truthful advice for their employers to acquire the adequate knowledge to manage the occupational safety and health issues at the workplace. The experts suggested that this could achieved if the safety and health officers could act independently by not directly employed by the employer compared to current industrial practice and DOSH compulsory requirement that requires the SHOs to be directly employed under the employer's employment contract. Never been the aim of the study to pin point any individuals, organization or governmental agencies in particular with regards to the result findings and suggestions made hereafter for the benefits of all stakeholders in the Malaysian construction industry. The followings are several suggestions recommended for all parties involved to review and find the best solution in addressing the arising matter among the industrial players:-

1. To permit qualified safety officers to act as independent safety professionals or safety consultants to be appointed as a separate functionality to advise the employers on managing workplace safety and health. This is very critical for SME projects especially below the contract value of twenty million ringgit where employers are not required under the Law to employ a SHO at the workplace. Such independent functionality of a safety professionals or safety consultants shall be also very beneficial in accommodating the current shortage of SHOs in the country, during the absence of a SHO at the workplace where the employers were still looking for a replacement and for short duration projects where many SHOs are not keen or interested to be employed for job.
2. To permit the safety professionals or safety consultants to also provide service of supplying qualified site safety personnel such as SHOs and Site Safety Supervisors (SSS) to be seconded to any main or sub contractor and the site safety personnel is must not be directly employed under the main or sub contractor's employment contract.
3. To make it mandatory for the new functionality of safety professional or safety consultant to be appointed for projects cost multi million ringgit as there is no any specified ratio for employment of safety and health

officer for projects exceeding the contract value of twenty million ringgit where employers are required under the Law to employ a SHO at the workplace. The ratio for employment of SHO shall not be based on the contract value price but must be based on the number of employees at each worksite.

4. To permit the safety and health professionals or safety consultants to oversee and manage multiple project sites not withstanding whether the project worksites were undertaken by the same employer or of various employer within the country and not by limiting them to be full time (minimum eight hours work daily) only at one project worksite as made mandatory by DOSH previously.

5. To make it a legal mandatory for every Client to appoint a safety professionals or safety consultants to advise the Client on matters pertaining to safety and health similar to other project consultants currently practiced in the industry as Client roles on safety and health were now clearly specified in Guidelines on Occupational Safety and Health in Construction Industry (Management) 2017.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

There is no conflict of interest.

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