

When it comes to health and safety management, how do we measure our impact?



Rowena Jackson, founder and director of Intelia Consulting Ltd, has provided independent health, safety and risk management consultancy and training to public and private sector clients for more than 20 years. In this exclusive article for NEBOSH, Rowena looks at some of the techniques practitioners can use to measure health and safety performance.

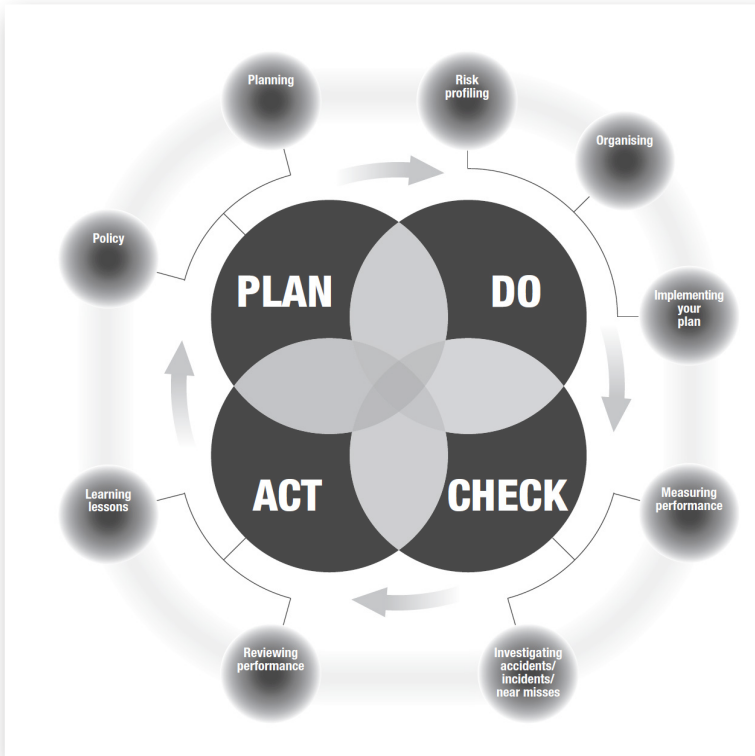


Figure 1: Plan, Do, Check, Act model outlined in the HSE's HSG65

In this article we will explore the Health and Safety Executive's (HSE's) approach to health and safety management set out in HSG65[1]; the Plan, Do, Check, Act (PDCA) cycle. This is a problem solving approach borrowed from quality management but is also commonly used to describe safety management systems in both HSG 65 and the new ISO 45001 standard.

Plan, Do, Check, Act.

The cyclical nature of the PDCA model can help an organisation to focus on completion of objectives, providing sufficient time and effort is given to the 'checking'. This part of the PDCA model can measure how management activities are impacting on health and safety performance.

Usually everything starts well. An organisation performs a gap analysis by thinking about where it is now and where it wants to be. An action plan is formulated and policies are written setting out what is to be achieved. That ticks off 'Plan'.

Moving on to 'Do'. Writing risk assessments can help to determine how to manage the organisation's risk profile in a sensible and proportionate way.

Organising activities so that everyone gets involved, communicating the health and safety management process and providing the right training helps to develop knowledge and competencies. Individuals become more willing to take on specific health and safety related roles such as fire warden, first aider and safety rep. Fantastic! It seems the implementation of the health and safety management plan is going well.

Monitoring and reporting on health and safety performance is a vital part of the health and safety management system. It is essential that we 'Check' that the policies and plans are being implemented and working/having the desired effect and confirm that they don't just exist on paper. This is where things can become less straightforward; enthusiasm may start to wane or other activities take priority. Perhaps this is because sub-consciously we don't actually want to find out or measure if what we have done is successful. What if it shows that it isn't? What do we do then? Does that mean we are failing?

Most organisations make progress on the 'Check' stage of the management model by collecting accident and incident data, and some will also collect information on near misses. To help manage these so-called 'lagging' (or reactive) indicators of safety performance we might deliberate for hours over the best design for an accident form and spend money on databases to help us to collect and manage this information. These enable us to prepare graphs for presentation to the senior management team and help to put a tick against 'Check' [1] in the PDCA cycle.

For me, a far more interesting and revealing part of the PDCA cycle is to look at the so-called 'leading' performance indicators, or active monitoring as it is referred to in the HSG65 model. They monitor the design, development, installation and operation of management arrangements that tend to be of a preventive nature e.g. routine inspections of premises. From my experience this is where it gets more difficult.

Deciding what to measure

This was just one example of what can be measured and there are a wide range of health and safety key performance indicators (KPIs) that could be considered. Remember to make sure that the measures you choose have some benefit to your organisation. These could include demonstrating compliance with legal requirements, confirming value for money on an investment or a demonstration of a behavioural change amongst employees.

Why do organisations find active monitoring so challenging?

The HSE states that: *"Selecting the right measures to use is the critical step. Using the wrong measures will cause a lot of unnecessary and unproductive effort, with little benefit to your organisation."*

So how can we go about checking health and safety in a more active way and improve performance before things 'go wrong'? Perhaps checking would be the most helpful place to start in the PDCA cycle.

If you ask an organisation *"what do you already do to manage health and safety?"* few will say *"nothing"*. Most organisations do something but you might not get such comprehensive answers if you ask more specific questions such as:

- How successful are you at completing 'x'?
- How do you measure that success?
- Where is the measure of success recorded and reported?

Measuring and reporting health and safety performance alongside other KPIs for your business is crucial to giving health and safety the priority and status it requires.

At this point I am reminded of a mantra that is pertinent and can guide us when implementing active monitoring:

"What gets measured gets managed."

Measuring performance

Measuring performance is not as easy as it sounds. Even the simplest ideas can develop into a time-consuming and involved measure. Sometimes the availability of other organisational information is a challenge to effective measurement.

For example, a simple idea for a KPI could be:

100% of employees complete a mandatory training course once a year

What is 100% of employees? Who has the information and how up to date is it? How has this number varied during the year?

The result you get for this KPI might also depend on when in the year you measure it - we all know that people tend to leave things until month eleven!

The increasing popularity of e-learning programmes to deliver this type of training is making performance measurement easier. These systems can tell you who completed what training, when, how long it took them and if they were successful on the 'test' that is usually given at the end of an e-learning package.

You might consider KPIs relating to the close out of corrective actions from accident reports, completion of routine inspections or the wearing of personal protective equipment.

All sound very straightforward and perhaps almost mundane. But you may be surprised by the things you find when you start to measure. Remember, *"what gets measured gets managed"*.

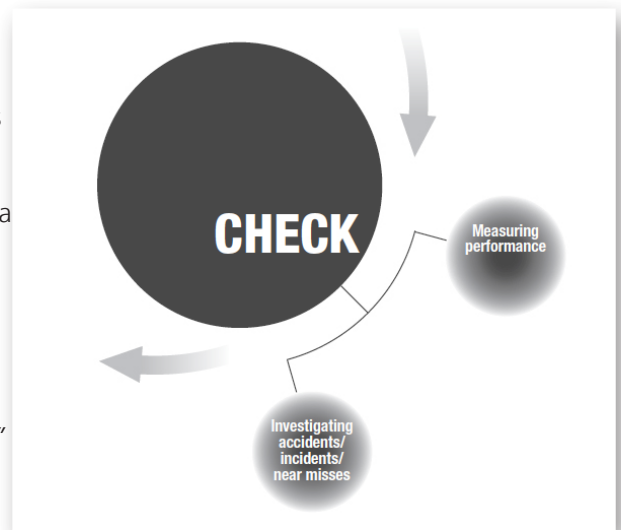


Figure 2: 'Check' from the Plan, Do, Check, Act model outlined in the HSE's HSG65

Writing a KPI

A good test when setting a KPI is to think SMART. The KPI should be:

- Specific
- Measureable
- Achievable
- Realistic
- Timely

A KPI need not require 100% compliance as that may be unachievable and unrealistic - there is no point in setting out to fail. Think about what other information you need to make the KPI measurable, and consider placing a time limit on meeting the KPI and intermediate points by which some progress should have been achieved. This can help avoid the 11th hour or 11th month problem.

Who should do the measuring?

Should those responsible for delivering the KPI also measure and report on it? Logic says not and an element of independence is helpful. In larger organisations business improvement or internal audit teams may take on the task of measuring and reporting health and safety KPIs alongside other business performance indicators. Giving independence to the outcomes can greatly help to raise the profile and credibility of the information. In small businesses it may be that those setting the KPIs are also measuring them.

How and where to present the results?

It is important that all the time and effort spent on measuring performance is worthwhile, so communicating the results in the right way to the right people is crucial.

Pictures speak louder than words and so graphs and charts can be a useful way to present the active monitoring information. Many organisations use a 'dashboard' representation that helps senior management and non-executives to quickly get an overview of the KPIs.

In terms of who should see the results, think beyond the health and safety committee. Certainly they should have the information, but you need to inform all the key stakeholders. That can mean using notice boards, employee newsletters, the intranet, senior management team and board meetings and the organisation's annual report - to name a few - as vehicles for communicating health and safety performance.

Remember, some organisations may prefer that the information is not made widely available. In my opinion, information is critical for helping people and organisations to progress to the final stage of the PDCA management process, which is to 'Act' on the results and make improvements.

Measuring performance can result in internal tensions and defensive responses when things aren't on track or improving. But, as suggested above, what is measured improves; organisations need to facilitate and embrace a long-term approach to health and safety performance measurement rather than concern themselves with a short term pat on the back.

In summary, completing the PDCA cycle accurately will help you to achieve your health and safety KPIs alongside other business performance goals.

References:

[1] - <http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/hsg65.htm>

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