Fatigue Management, Field staff Perspective

Abstract

Fatigue management is currently a hot topic; however, the perspective of field staff isn't often spoken about. The implementation of a fatigue management procedure can be quite challenging as different individuals have varying capabilities and endurance levels. It can also be perceived as a cost-cutting measure to reduce staff overtime and as an administrative burden, when in fact, it's an employer's due diligence to care for the welfare of their employees.

Some of the key considerations when implementing a fatigue management procedure are:

1. Leading by example – if those implementing the procedure are working excessive hours or downplay the importance of effective fatigue management, staff will likely disregard the procedure.
2. Helping staff identify the signs of fatigue while working in the field, during ordinary hours as well as overtime and callouts.
3. Using smaller groups when teaching the procedure to ensure everyone is on the same page.
4. Demonstrating practical investment in fatigue management resources.
5. Utilising a simple and concise assessment method.
6. Addressing all types of fatigue – mental, emotional, and physical.
7. Conducting informal follow-ups.
8. Demonstrating genuine care.

By implementing these principles effectively, benefits will include workforce retention, productivity, minimisation of costly errors, reliance on external contractors and reduction of unplanned sick leave.

Introduction

Fatigue management is a very important safety issue in the workplace at the moment particularly in regional areas, where travel between work zones can be hours apart. According to the *Sleep Health Foundation*, fatigue impairment is similar to being on drugs or sedatives: "studies show that 17 hours without sleep impairs your driving in the same way as having a blood alcohol level of 0.05 percent". Physical and mental fatigue are the most prominent types that we are dealing with within a workplace. To define fatigue, I will refer to an extract from WorkSafe Qld paper titled *Preventing and managing fatigue-related risk in the workplace*. "In a work context, fatigue is a state of mental or physical exhaustion which reduces a person's ability to perform work safely and effectively. Fatigue is a condition that can result from excessive work, inadequate or disturbed sleep, physical exertion, mental exertion, or prolonged waking times. Fatigue can be, in some cases, a natural response to the mental and physical effort of everything we do."

The implementation of a fatigue management procedure can be quite challenging. The differences in perspective and attitude between staff can be quite large because of many factors including whether they are indoor or outdoor staff, their age, work history, if they have health conditions and whether they grew up in the city or country.

In this paper, I would like to discuss my experience having recently gone through the process of a new fatigue management procedure and some helpful points in the effective Implementation within a workplace.

<u>Effective Approaches to Fatigue Management</u>

1. Leading by example

A key aspect of implementing any new procedure but particularly a fatigue management procedure is leading by example. When a new procedure is introduced, it should affect everyone in the PBCU from the CEO to the field labourers. It is critical that leaders help to model best practice when seeking to implement new procedures and demonstrate the acceptable parameters for implementation. Genuine exploration of concerns with workers and demonstrated best practice results in more effective acceptance and adoption by the workforce.

By contrast, even if unwittingly, when superiors that are developing or enforcing the procedure are not following the procedure themselves, it can immediately undermine the constructive intentions when the procedure was developed. Even if it is just to ask a worker to do one more job or to come in early, even though "*I know you're meant to be on a break*", this quickly demonstrates that the procedure is only valued when convenient and undermines the intent.

This can be perceived as a double standard and put workers at odds with management. Those in leadership positions can have a powerful influence in developing a positive safety culture where importance is placed on the health, safety, and well-being of workers.

2. Helping staff identify the signs of fatigue

There is a great need to assist field staff in understanding and identifying the signs of fatigue and how it is affecting their capacity to work, particularly during overtime and callouts. For example, if a supervisor went to site on a call out at 11 pm for the purpose of observing the staff for the signs of fatigue. At different points throughout the task, they can speak with the worker about the different fatigue signs that he is observing and explain how they connect with the procedure. This would be just an occasional occurrence for teaching purposes.

This gives workers feedback on signs that they probably don't notice when they are working, and just doing this once with employees can help to reduce the risk of injury and illness. I'll admit that I do not pay attention to how much I yawn or blink when in the busyness of a job, so having a supervisor attend site in a fatigue setting was very helpful. He was able to point out different signs of fatigue and talk about how they can be managed in a callout setting.

It is very easy to give workers a list or table of signs and symptoms of fatigue, such as can be seen in Table 2 below. Education about the signs and symptoms of fatigue can ensure a risk assessment can become more than just a box ticking exercise.

Table 2 – Fatigue Symptoms Checklist
This assessment is a subjective assessment for employees to proactively observe fatigue-related symptoms in a 15 minute timeframe.

Physical	Cognitive	Emotional
• Yawning • Increased blink rate • Heavy eyelids • Blurred vision • Head drooping • Slower reaction time • Impaired hand-eye coordination • Headache • Muscle aches and cramps	• Difficulty concentrating on tasks • Lapses in attention • Difficulty remembering • Failure to communicate important information • Risk taking behaviour • Disorganisation • Lack of situational awareness • Accidentally doing the wrong thing (error)	• More quiet than usual • Withdrawn • Reduced motivation • Lacking energy • Decreased tolerance • Mood disturbances • Emotional outbursts • Irritability

Source: *Central Highlands Regional Council, Risk Assessment, Assessment of Worker – Utilities, Fatigue Management*

3. Using smaller groups when teaching the procedure

A problem that arises when introducing a fatigue management procedure is that it is quite complex, and within a work group, you may have people with all different levels of reading and writing abilities. There may be some in a work group that don't speak English as their first language, there may be someone with a learning disability or with limited reading ability, or long-established views and experiences which contrast with the new proposals.

Utilising small work groups for the teaching of the procedure is beneficial so that it is delivered clearly and adequate opportunity for questions is given, and workers struggling with understanding the procedure are less intimidated to speak up and ask questions. Smaller groups when teaching a procedure can also help you control the conversation that is happening to ensure constructive outcomes are achieved.

For example, when there is a larger group of 20+, there may be 3-4 people who believe that you are just trying to take away overtime. This then controls the conversation, and you are unable to get genuine feedback. Smaller work groups are also a great way to show genuine care - it shows that you are willing to give time to each work group, that you are willing to listen, and most importantly that you believe in the procedure.

Within work groups, there can also be different levels of responsibility in regard to a fatigue management procedure. Whether someone is a Leading Hand, Supervisor or Manager, there is generally a person in control of the works being completed and their role in the fatigue management plan can be different. Teaching them their responsibilities as a separate smaller work group can be very helpful, and to ensure they can model best practice as referenced in #1 above.

4. Demonstrating practical investment in fatigue management resources

There are many fatigue management resources available in today's market, from driver monitoring to wearable technology that give real time feedback to help manage your alertness. Even a lot of modern work vehicles have great technology like automatic transmission, adaptive cruise control and lane assist, plus some car manufacturers even have their own version of a driver monitoring system.

All these things are great, but how does this help with implementing a fatigue management procedure? Driving is one of the highest risks when managing fatigue, having these systems enables prompt intervention, reducing accidents and saving lives. This is another way of showing workers that you believe in the procedure that you are implementing. Procedures and risk assessments are very important, and they cost money and time to develop but expenditure on practical tools or equipment that helps out in the field are also important.

This is consistent with the hierarchy of controls in identifying suitable controls for workplace health and safety risks. Where elimination of the risk is not possible, engineering controls can be critical and must be considered as a higher priority than administrative actions or PPE.

At Central Highlands Regional Council (CHRC) we are currently looking into such options.

5. Utilising a simple, concise, and relevant assessment method

Fatigue risk assessments can be quite a complicated document. In the assessment, you need to capture a lot of different information to be able to assess a worker's level of fatigue, and then identify the steps that need to be taken as a result of the assessment.

As I spoke about earlier, there can be many different levels of reading and writing ability within a workforce, so it is quite important to keep a self-assessment tool simple and concise, so workers can understand the information but are also getting the information they need for the assessment (as can be seen in Table 1 below).

Table 1 – Current rate of alertness scale
This assessment is a subjective assessment of your individual alertness using the Karolinska Sleepiness Scale and could assist in predicting potential impairment.

Scale	Rating
Extremely alert	1
Very alert	2
Alert	3
Rather alert	4
Neither alert nor sleepy	5
Some signs of sleepiness	6
Sleepy, but no effort to keep awake	7
Sleepy, some effort to stay awake	8
Very sleepy, great effort to keep awake, fighting sleep	9

Source: *Central Highlands Regional Council, Risk Assessment, Assessment of Worker – Utilities, Fatigue Management*

Having different methods of assessment can also help with this. Having separate assessment tools for both workers and the person in control provides the opportunity for varying levels of assessment and helps to minimise subjective assessments.

This approach can also reduce the risk that assessments are influenced by other considerations such as operational or budgetary priorities, workload, or worker attitudes.

At CHRC, the risk assessment tool that we are currently using is still a working document, but to date it has been very useful for field staff and has created great feedback. This is allowing us to get a tool that is workable for our unique situation in Central Queensland.

6. Addressing all types of fatigue – mental, emotional, and physical

Mental fatigue and physical fatigue are two separate entities. Physical fatigue is a form of tiredness caused by repeated muscle movements. In contrast, mental fatigue is defined as a psychobiological state of tiredness caused by prolonged periods of performing demanding, cognitive-load-inducing activities, and it reduces efficiency in cognitive performance.

Emotional fatigue is when stress from adverse or challenging events in life occur continually, you can find yourself in a state of feeling emotionally worn out and drained. This is called emotional exhaustion. For most people, emotional exhaustion tends to build up slowly over time, and can be influenced by both work and non-work factors.

All types of fatigue affect everyone and the effects are different in everyone - two workers can be working side by side for the same duration on identical tasks and one is fatigued, and one is not. So, teaching workers the signs of fatigue is as important and showing them that it is not just lifting heavy things makes you tired. Teaching employees about all types of fatigue and how different work and life situations impacts fatigue.

7. Conducting informal follow-ups

When a fatigue management procedure is implemented, best practice should include a trial implementation period where you are just seeing how it works and are looking for feedback. The issue can be that because workers are not doing overtime and callouts every day, across the trial period workers can forget how things went at the start of the trial period. Informal follow ups can be a great way to get accurate feedback about the procedure and assessment tools while it's still fresh in their minds.

Going to site whether it's during overtime or a callout, or at the end of an ordinary shift is a great way to see what the challenges are in regard to fatigue. Showing this effort and working through the fatigue tools with workers is a great teaching opportunity for the person in control and the workers, this also demonstrates care to the workers and that you believe in the procedure

8. Demonstrating genuine care

Throughout this paper, I have spoken about how different things show or demonstrate care towards the workers in regard to the fatigue management procedure. New procedures can be received like they are an attack on workers and all these little things go a long way to showing workers that you are implementing the procedure because you care for them not just so you are ticking a health and safety box. Demonstrating genuine care isn't an easy thing to achieve, I believe that it takes time and consistent efforts. It can be seen and shown through your demeanour and simply how you choose to interact with workers. Showing that you believe in the procedure that you are implementing is also an important consideration.

Conclusion

The safety of workers is of utmost importance. One of the highest risks for workers, especially when on callouts or doing overtime, is fatigue. Teaching workers about the different types of fatigue and how it can affect them in the workplace is one of the key points when trying to implement a fatigue management procedure. An effective fatigue management procedure will have great benefits for the workforce, not just having a safer workplace. When these implementation principles are used effectively benefits can include workforce retention, productivity minimisation of costly errors, reduction in unplanned sick leave and reliance on external contractors.

Over the past 8 months, since we had started with our procedure at the Central Highland Regional Council, I have seen many different reactions to the procedure, many of which have not been great. I believe that many of these reactions could be avoided by the way the procedure is implemented. I myself initially pushed back at this procedure but have since changed and really appreciate it. The major change for me was a change in supervisor. Early on the way the procedure was perceived as a micro-management tool. It was perceived to be a way to take overtime from some and give to others and even as a tool for reprimanding. The change in supervisor really helped the work group. He was able to really get through the team and show what the tool was actually for and how it keeps us safe.