

Preparing for and running effective health and safety committee meetings

Health and safety representatives

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Background

The Victorian *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* (the OHS Act) recognises the benefits of worker involvement in OHS matters. Workers are entitled, and should be encouraged, to be represented in health and safety issues. Employers and workers should exchange information and ideas about risks to health and safety and measures that can be taken to eliminate or reduce those risks.

Health and safety committees (HSCs) are an effective way to accomplish this. HSCs rely on the commitment and skills of their members and the employer. Successful committee meetings also depend on careful preparation. When problems arise, they should be dealt with quickly and openly.

Health and safety representatives (HSRs) are elected by workers in their designated work group (DWG) to represent them in health and safety matters. HSRs play an important role in making Victorian workplaces safer, and should be included in HSCs.

WorkSafe encourages employers to ensure HSC operations are well supported by management, with facilities, resources, information and time to implement activities.

Training of committees in committee procedures can help also, and should be encouraged.

Members of the HSC

Employers must, so far as is reasonably practicable, consult when determining the membership of any HSC. Workers must make up at least half of the membership and, as far as practicable, they must be HSRs or deputy HSRs.

Employers should ensure management representatives are of a sufficiently senior position within the organisation and are able to make timely decisions about health and safety on behalf of the workplace.

Employers can benefit from a representative HSC where HSRs, workers and management representatives can work together. This does not necessarily mean a large HSC is needed, more than one HSC may be appropriate if the workplace is large. A tiered structure with area or shift sub-committees co-ordinated by an overall HSC is an option.

Make sure everyone knows their role

All members should know how the HSC fits into the overall approach to health and safety in the workplace, and issues raised by workers, HSRs, supervisors and management should be in keeping with the scope of the HSC's role.

It is up to the committee itself to determine its own procedures, including matters such as roles, how the chair is chosen, how the agenda will be set, how often (as long as there is a meeting at least once every 3 months) and for how long it will meet.

A HSC should have well defined objectives, clearly set out functions and an agenda that is not crowded with minor problems which could be solved elsewhere. All members should arrive on time and understand the:

- difference between a HSR's role and the role of the HSC
- HSC's role in dealing with long-term policy and workplace health and safety program issues.

Try to ensure the HSC is not too large – too many people trying to have a say may be counterproductive and slow down the meeting.

The chairperson's role may include:

- schedule meetings and notify members (a HSC must meet at least once every three months)
- prepare the agenda and include items submitted
- invite specialists when required
- guide the meeting according to the agenda and time available
- ensure all discussion items end with a decision and clear course of action
- review and approve the draft minutes for distribution
- ensure the committee carries out its functions as agreed.

The chairperson should ensure discussions are balanced and enable proper representation by those attending the meeting, and could consider allocating time for each member who wants to contribute to the discussion on a particular item.

More information about Preparing for and running effective health and safety committee meetings

The secretary's role may include:

- keep the HSC records
- report on the status of recommendations
- prepare the draft minutes
- distribute the draft minutes
- assist the chairperson as required
- ensure the agenda is circulated.

'Representatives' on the committee are just that – representatives. They must have the opportunity to present the views of those they represent.

A properly developed agenda

The agenda sets out the framework for the meeting and should be manageable so that all items can be worked through in the time available. All members of the committee should be able to contribute items to the agenda. It should include:

- meeting time, venue and date
- introduction of visitors and others
- apologies for those not attending
- approval of minutes from previous meeting
- business arising from the minutes, including progress reports on outstanding items
- reports on incidents or other statistics
- correspondence
- new or other business
- time, date and place of next meeting.

Urgent or important matters should be addressed first.

Accurate minutes help

At each HSC meeting, someone should be appointed to take the minutes. The minutes record what happened at the HSC meeting and should include:

- the time, venue and date of meeting
- details of who attended
- all items discussed
- reasons for recommendations (and counter arguments voiced)
- recommendations – specifying action to be taken, by when and by whom
- time and date of next meeting
- signature of chairperson.

Hold the meeting in an appropriate place

The employers should ensure a suitable place is available for HSC meetings and make a firm booking with set times and dates. Management is encouraged to support the HSC through the provision of adequate facilities and appropriate equipment. The room should be properly set up before the meeting so that any necessary equipment is ready and working.

Don't let HSC meetings get side-tracked

Insufficient time should not be an excuse for not resolving HSC business. The efficient and speedy resolution of business means a more effective committee. Where outcomes appear beyond the scope of the committee, invite those who can resolve them to the next meeting.

Make recommendations and stay focused

HSC members should be trained in health and safety and clearly understand the committee's role. Information needs to flow both ways between the HSC and workers, and there is a common understanding of the committee's objectives. Having a senior manager as a member of the HSC can help the employer understand the recommendations to assist in making a decision.

Hold regular meetings

Effective HSC meetings are important. Don't let them be postponed or cancelled. Set a meeting schedule for the year with a regular meeting time, when the majority of members can attend. Communicate this so all members and others in the workplace are aware of meeting arrangements. Distribute the agenda to members before the meeting.

Implement and follow up recommendations

Make sure all recommendations are noted in the minutes and any action required, and person responsible for taking that action, is clearly described. The minutes should be distributed to all members and displayed in the workplace.

Further information

Visit: [worksafe.vic.gov.au/hsr](https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/hsr)

Contact the WorkSafe Victoria Advisory Service on 1800 136 089 or info@worksafe.vic.gov.au

More information can also be found at: [ohsrep.org.au](https://www.ohsrep.org.au)

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