

Benchmarking, behavioural insights tapped to improve S'pore workplace safety

Singapore

INSTEAD of relying on surprise inspections to ensure workplace safety, the Manpower Ministry has been piloting a new practice – by informing firms with poorer records of how they perform relative to others in their industry.

This marks a change in the ministry's regulatory approach, said Manpower Minister Josephine Teo on Wednesday.

Apart from deterring lapses via inspections and highlighting companies' unsafe practices – as it is doing now – it may no longer need to inspect each and every firm to boost safety. "Through this experiment, we found that the combination of benchmarking information and commitment to strict enforcement... encouraged the company management to reassess safety practices in all their worksites," said Mrs Teo of the Ministry's pilot, which started last year at areas such as construction sites.

There are plans to expand the pi-

lot, which is based on design thinking and behavioural insights, in time to come, said Mrs Teo. This change accompanies preliminary recommendations made by a Tripartite Strategy Committee, which was convened this year to develop a 10-year plan to improve Singapore's Workplace Safety and Health (WSH). It is headed by chairman of the WSH Council, John Ng, and consults industry stakeholders to form its suggestions.

While Singapore has had an average workplace fatal injury rate of 2.1 over the past decade, and achieved a record low rate of 1.2 last year, Mrs Teo noted that this "is not yet a sustained level of performance".

The aim now is to reduce and maintain the Republic's workplace fatal injury rate at less than 1 per 100,000 workers from 2018 to 2028.

To do so, there are three areas of improvement which can be made, said Mrs Teo at the opening of the biennial WSH Conference 2018 in Suntec Singapore on Wednesday, attended by close to 900 delegates

from 23 countries. "Some companies are still adopting a compliance mindset, choosing to do the bare minimum for safety, or worse, meeting WSH requirements only for show during (Ministry of Manpower) inspections," she said. "We need to transform the business environment into one which recognises WSH as an integral part of business success." One, the workplace safety performance of companies can be made more transparent, allowing buyers of goods and services to compare this across different firms when making procurement decisions.

Second, experts in safety and health will also be trained, through bridging courses, to manage risks in both areas rather than specialising in either safety or health, added Mrs Teo. "Traditionally, we have addressed the impact of work on the health of workers, for example, how excessive exposure to noise or chemicals can lead to occupational diseases," she said.

"However, a less familiar dimen-



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Manpower Minister Josephine Teo

sion is how the health condition of a worker can impact safety and productivity at work." For example, workers who have chronic conditions such as diabetes may experience dizziness or poor vision while handling machinery – leading to accidents.

This is why there is a need to help professionals manage the balance between work, safety and health, Mrs Teo added.

Third, technological advance-

ments such as data analytics can be tapped to improve workplace safety, she said.

Sensors and the Internet of Things can help engineers predict if a machine is going to break down, allowing them to take pre-emptive actions, while virtual reality can be used for immersive training, testing workers' reactions to risks at work. "Human capital is Singapore's only resource and we must aspire for our WSH standards to be among the best in the world," said Mrs Teo.

WSH's Mr Ng, in his welcome address, said: "With the inevitable digital disruption, businesses need to be adaptable to survive and grow... An ageing population and rising work-related ill health will also have an impact, and cause businesses to shift gears and make detours along the way.

"While these changes pose significant challenges to the workplace, they all present opportunities for us to uncover new ways of doing things to elevate safety and health standards at the workplace," he said.