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SAFETY AND HEALTH CHALLENGES ON INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANIZATION PRACTICE OF MALAYSIAN SMEs

Shazwani Mohd Salleh^{1*}, Norhafizah Abdul Halim², Roziyana Jafri³, Nurul Farhana Nasir⁴

¹ Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Kedah, Malaysia
Email: shazwani065@uitm.edu.my

² Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Kedah, Malaysia
Email: hafizahhalim@uitm.edu.my

³ Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Kedah, Malaysia
Email: roziyana@uitm.edu.my

⁴ Faculty of Accountancy, Finance and Business, Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology
Email: nurulfarhana@tarc.edu.my

* Corresponding Author

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Abstract:

Occupational safety and health are especially important in the new normal era due to the pandemic threat which may have implications for individuals and organizations. Moreover, accidents and injuries in the workplace can cost the organizations financially and non-financially. Although workplace safety has been widely investigated, less consideration is given to the small and medium enterprises. Regrettably, majority of workplace accidents come from SMEs. Furthermore, workplace accidents cause a lot of problems for SMEs such as loss of production time and compensation cost. In Malaysia, the incidence of workplace accidents has been rising in recent years, with the SMEs sector accounting for 80–90% of these incidents. As a result, the study's discussion of health and safety-related issues and challenges in Malaysian SMEs is centred on how these issues may affect the SMEs' ability to grow. Given the increased significance of occupational health and safety, a number of suggestions and solutions are made.

Keywords:

Challenges, SMEs, Malaysia, Health and Safety

Introduction

The development of Malaysia's economy is significantly influenced by its Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). SMEs make up approximately 97.3% of the nation's industry overall and are a major factor in the development and expansion of Malaysia's economy, according to the SMEs 2018/2019 annual report. In order to sustain the positive progress, SMEs' value addition is crucial for Malaysia. Early in the 1970s, the government began to support the expansion of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the wake of the New Economic Policy's approval in 1971. The goals of this strategy were to improve public welfare and reduce economic gaps between ethnic groups. In addition, the government's commitment to the development of SMEs is exemplified by the Second Industrial Master Plan (IMP2), which will expire in 2005, and the Third Industrial Master Plan (IMP3), which will run from 2006 to 2020 and align with the country's 2020 target (MITI, 2020). Therefore, it cannot be disputed that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are vital to the development and economic expansion of every nation (Kongolo, 2010).

SMEs in Malaysia demonstrate their resilience to both internal and external shocks, which helps them function as growth stabilizers in the face of a challenging economic environment in 2018. The GDP growth of small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) outpaced the 4.7% GDP growth of the overall economy in the same year, rising to 6.2% in 2018 from 7.1% in 2017. The expansion of every economic sector contributed to the maintenance of the higher growth rate. SMEs contributed 38.3% of the year's GDP, 17.3% of all exports, and 66.2% of all employment in terms of the economy. The outlook for SMEs in 2019, however, is mostly reliant on outside factors given the current concerns about prolonged trade tensions and weakening domestic economic development. With any luck, the GDP growth of SMEs is predicted to accelerate to a moderate 5.8% in 2019. The projection considers both the official 4.7% annual GDP growth projection for 2019 and the actual 4.7% annual GDP growth performance in the first half of 2019. Therefore, the goal of the Ministry of Entrepreneur Development's July 2019 launch of the National Entrepreneurship Policy 2030 (Dasar Keusahawan Nasional, or DKN 2030) is to unlock the unrealized potential of SMEs in order to facilitate a significant growth leap and thereby raise the share of SMEs in the economy.

Aziz, Baruji, Abdullah, Him, & Yusof (2015) assert, nevertheless, that there are a lot of occupational accidents and injuries in this industry. According to Aziz et al. (2015), between 80 and 90 percent of workplace accidents in Malaysia were reported in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) between 2010 and 2012. Additionally, the Occupational Safety and Health Master Plan (OSHMP, 2020) has several goals that have been identified and implemented immediately, including bringing the death rate down to 4.36 per 100,000 workers, reducing accidents to 2.5 per 1,000 workers, and increasing the rate of disease and work-related poisoning reports, which is expected to reach 30% by 2020. Malaysia is not alone, incidentally, as SMEs in other regions, like Europe, have a 4.9-fold higher risk of experiencing fatal industrial accidents (Arocena & Nunez, 2010). SMEs bear a disproportionate amount of the costs associated with industrial or occupational accidents and injuries. In addition to the monetary expenses associated with compensation payments, missed workdays, and lost productivity, they also have to deal with non-financial repercussions (Barling, Kelloway, & Iverson, 2003; Hrymak & Pérezgonzález, 2007). Even though there was a dip in accidents from 1999 to 2009, the overall number of accidents has been rising as a result of Malaysia's recent strong push for economic development (Maimunah Aminuddin, 2013).

Literature

Small and medium-sized firms (SMEs), the backbone of the Malaysian economy, are crucial to the development of jobs and economic expansion. However, there are significant health and safety concerns with these companies that need to be taken care. The primary topics and findings of this literature review are discussed in regard to the health and safety challenges that Malaysian SMEs are experiencing.

Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

Under the Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives (MEDAC), SME Corporation Malaysia (SME Corp. Malaysia) serves as the central coordinating agency (CCA) responsible for coordinating the implementation of development programs for small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) among all relevant Ministries and agencies. In addition to offering business advising services to SMEs and entrepreneurs around the nation, it serves as the primary point of reference for research and data distribution on SMEs and entrepreneurs. Additionally, SME Corp. Malaysia takes on the function of Secretariat for the National Entrepreneur SME Development Council (NESDC), which is led by Malaysia's Prime Minister. Malaysian SMEs are supported by a number of important organizations, including the Ministry of International Commerce and Industry (MITI). It simultaneously fosters the expansion of industrial operations and seeks to protect Malaysian interests in global trade. Since its founding under the Malaysian Investment Development Authority Act, the Malaysian Industrial Development Association (MIDA) has been the principal vehicle for the government's promotion of Malaysia's manufacturing and services sectors and broader economic change. Another agency of the government that offers assistance is the Small and Medium Industries Development Corporation (SMIDEC). Its goal is to boost the quantity of capable and resilient Malaysian SMEs so they can compete internationally. In addition to promoting Malaysian exports, MATRADE (Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation) has contributed to the expansion of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), assisting numerous regional businesses in gaining a competitive edge in international markets. The figure below depicts the history of SMEs:

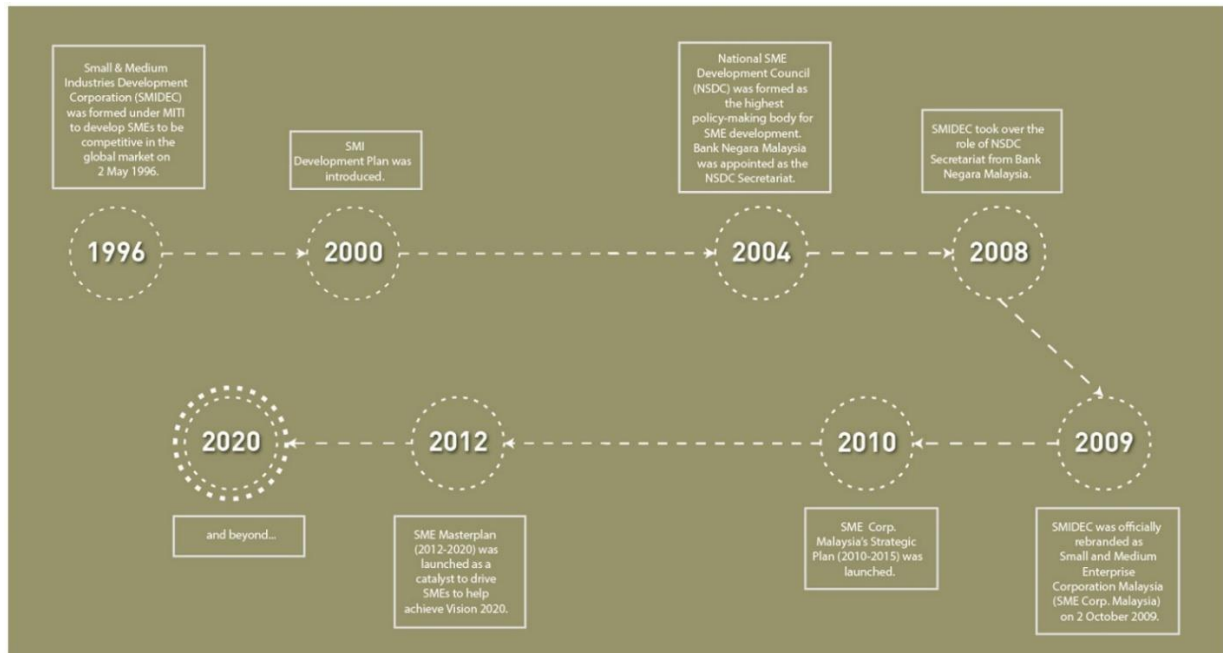


Figure 1: History of SMEs

Source: (SME Corp. Malaysia, 2020)

In Malaysia, the SME sector employs approximately seven million people and makes for 38.3% of the country's GDP. The government has, over the years, established an ecosystem that makes it easier to access a wide range of funding options from public and private institutions in order to ensure the sustainability of SMEs, a more inclusive financial landscape, and the development of a sound credit culture. This is because the sector is crucial to economic development. A SME financial ecosystem has been created as a result of measures implemented for these reasons. It provides a wide range of development and financing opportunities with financial institutions, as well as channels for information, advice, and reimbursement, management and outreach initiatives, and even debt settlement.

Financial institutions provide the majority of funding for SMEs, making up over 97.0% of all loans to this market group, according to the 2020 Access to SMEs Annual Report. Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM), other governmental organizations, and development financial institutions supplement bank lending to SMEs through plans and initiatives. SMEs can find a wide range of solutions to suit their needs at all stages of their business cycle, including start-ups, expansion, and export, thanks to the present financial and non-financial facilities. As seen in the following chart, SMEs in Malaysia are classified according to the number of full-time employees or their annual sales turnover:

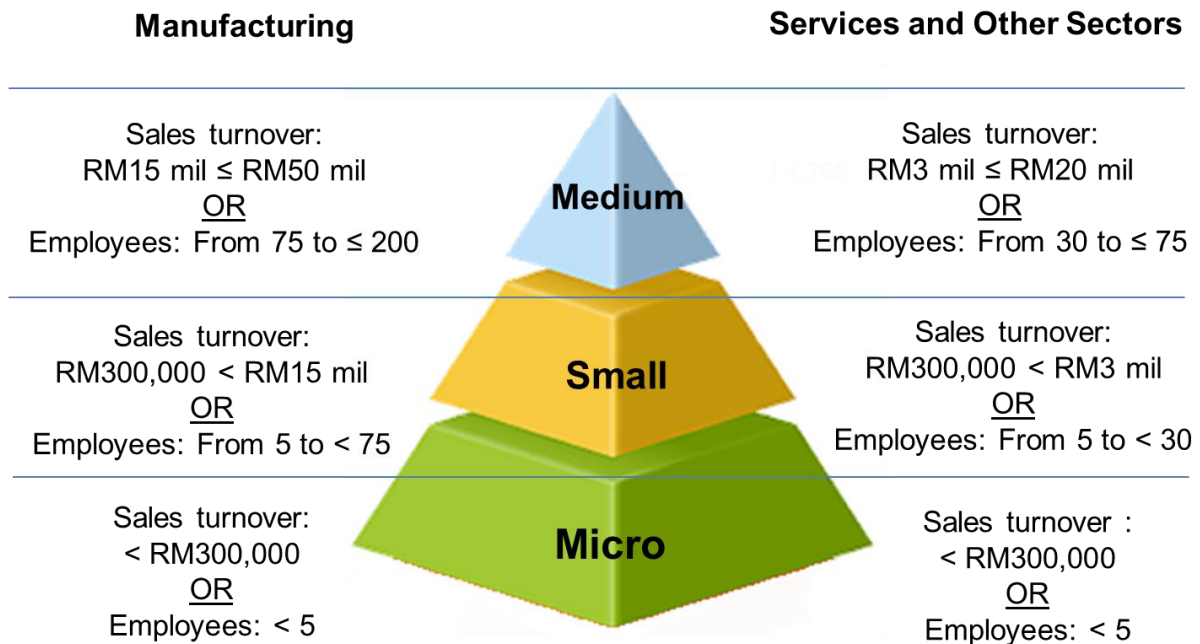


Figure 2: Categorizations of SMEs

Source: (SME Corp. Malaysia, 2020)

Safety and Health

Employee safety is defined differently by different people. Safety is defined by the Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) as being risk-free or harmless. While in the context of the workplace, safety is defined as a place of employment free from any risk of mishap or health threat to employees as well as members of the general public who might be impacted by the job activity performed. Avoiding mishaps that could result in bodily harm is another aspect of safety (NIOSH, 2020). As per Khan, Mustaq, and Tabassum (2014) and Towlson (2003), health is also associated with the physical and emotional well of all individuals present at work, including contractors, workers, and visitors, as well as their safety against any kind of disease or injury. As far as the physical status of the workplace is concerned, safety refers to a state where the likelihood of harm and risk has been removed or reduced to a tolerable level.

Furthermore, the World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as a condition of whole mental, bodily, and social well-being rather than just the absence of illness or disability. On the other hand, occupational health is a multidisciplinary area of medicine that focuses on allowing people to practice their jobs in a way that minimizes risks to their health. It is consistent with the goal of promoting health and safety at work, which is to stop injuries caused by occupational hazards. Occupational health has been defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) jointly since 1950. The Joint ILO/WHO Committee on Occupational Health adopted it at its inaugural meeting in 1950 and updated it at its twelfth meeting in 1995. The ILO declared that workplace safety and health is even more critical in light of the COVID-19 epidemic. Since it is a fundamental component of decent labor, it ought to be provided for everyone. However, there are still far too many workplace mishaps each year. By making sure that every workplace is safe and healthy, we

may help to eliminate work accidents, which have a huge negative impact on people's health, well-being, and economy.

Occupational health and safety in Malaysia is overseen by the Department of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH), which is a division of the Ministry of Human Resources. In order to improve how firms adopt OSH, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) provides training programs, seminars, and research on OSH. The DOSH receives assistance from NIOSH. Control of Industrial Major Accidents (1966) and OSHA (1994) are the two primary legislation pertaining to rules that include themes including employers' responsibilities to guarantee a safe workplace, emergency planning, and training. These groups handle all workplace safety and health concerns, regardless of the size of the business; although, the government has set up a dedicated agency to handle commercial activities, which includes SMEs.

Challenges of SMEs Going Safety and Health Environment

Establishing and emerging, Malaysian SMEs continue to face several challenges. SME owners in Malaysia face numerous challenges, not the least of which is the high rate of workplace accidents, which may have a detrimental effect on how they manage worker safety and well-being. That is further supported by the statement made in 2010 by Ir Tuan Haji Abu Bakar Che Man, the former Director General of the Malaysian Department of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH), according to which 80–90% of the incidents reported to the workmen compensation scheme (SOCISO) are SMEs. In all, there were 13,779 occupational injury cases in 2019 compared to 12,810 cases in 2018, according to the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH, 2020). The number of workplace fatal injury cases decreased from 41 cases in 2018 to 39 cases in 2019, resulting in a lower fatal injury rate of 1.1 per 100,000 workers. Between 596 in 2018 and 629 in 2019, there were 5.5% more significant workplace injuries. Similar to this, there were 13,111 minor injuries reported at work in 2019 compared to 12,173 in 2018, a 7.7% rise. While the number of harmful events dropped from 23 incidents in 2018 to 21 incidents in 2019, the confirmed instances of occupational sickness declined from 563 cases in 2018 to 517 cases in 2019. In comparison to 2018, the total number of reported injuries rose by 8% in 2019. From 373 to 396 injuries per 100,000 workers, the rate of workplace injuries rose. This increasing trend in reported cases may have a huge impact on the SMEs industry. Furthermore, there are some challenges that SMEs face when it comes to safety and health:

Poor Connecting Monitoring Between Industrial and Enforcement Departments SMEs

It is often known that SMEs are not equipped to implement Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) in the workplace due to a lack of knowledge, experience, and other resources. For instance, it's possible that they just completed secondary or high school, which accounts for the majority of their human resources expertise. As a result, they might only be proficient in administrative and HR-related work and have little exposure to OSH. In the end, this results in a poor monitoring connection between the enforcement departments like DOSH and the industrial sector. SMEs will encounter restricted best practices relating to skills in OSH if the enforcement department does not share its expertise and information (Surienty, Hong, & Hung, 2011). This is a result of firms placing a greater emphasis on operating costs than on investing in OSH, which is not regarded as valuable. According to Che Man's (2010) research, most SMEs fail to implement OSH because they lack the necessary staff, resources, or experience. Employers with the right expertise can establish best practices to collaborate with other

businesses in the industry or cultivate a positive relationship with the enforcement agency. Employers will feel more confident and knowledgeable about applying OSH best practices as a result of this. Therefore, if employers and employees are more considerate or exhibit appropriate safety behavior, workplace accidents can be avoided (Subramaniam, Shamsudin, Zin, Ramalu, and Hassan, 2016).

Lack of Promoting Safe Work Environment and Culture Practice

It's critical that employers implement a strong OSH management culture through their managers. Since top management should set the example for such practices, this culture aims to encourage leadership by example. However, in order to prevent culture shock, which could have a detrimental effect on the company, a positive workplace culture must be instilled gradually over time through practice (Kim, Park, & Park, 2016). SME needs to be prepared to implement safety culture best practices at the appropriate time and transform their culture. Respecting employees' right to a safe and healthy workplace requires that companies, government agencies, and workers take an active role in providing a safe and healthy workplace by supporting policies like ISO 45001. The rights, obligations, and duties are spelled out in detail through the ISO 45001 Safety and Health Management System. This includes creating an OSH committee and giving the principle of preventive first priority in both environmental and safety and health policies. Seminars, workshops, and trainings can be held internally or outside, such as when sharing skills and knowledge with the enforcement department or multiorganization, to promote safe work environments and cultural practices (Subramaniam, et al., 2016). Internally, that is by focusing on auditing, motivation, caution point, awareness poster, caution sign, OSH policy, environmental policy, OSH committee, and budgeting. According to Heinrich Theory, 98% of workplace accidents can be eschewed or prevented (Goetsch, 1999) as most of the accidents are caused by human behavior instead of the machinery or engineering.

Lacks of Financial Resources and Sound Management Capability

The majority of SMEs are family-run companies without a defined hierarchy or responsibility allocation. Additionally, the owner's and his family's capital are limited in terms of financial resources (Surienty, Hong, & Hung, 2011). These two elements significantly affect SMEs' (and any company's) capacity to adopt workplace safety and health. Organizations must invest a significant amount of money in safety measures such creating an OSH department, safety training, and an OSH documentation system. Surienty et al. (2011) state that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with limited capital frequently make investments in items that will boost production and generate higher profits. The management of SMEs observes that production investments are more crucial since they will increase their stability and longevity. Because OSH cannot directly benefit the company or contribute to its existence, it is therefore disregarded.

No Benchmarking on OSH and Environmental Practices among SMEs

The process of classifying which organizations are applying and performing OSH in compliance with the laws and regulations is known as OSH benchmarking. A proper OSH implementation is necessary to guarantee adherence to rules and regulations, which will lower the compensation paid. SMEs can lower their costs over time by comprehending the idea of Iceberg theory. The premise behind iceberg theory is that most of an iceberg is concealed beneath the ocean, with only a tiny portion visible above the surface. that an iceberg might be a really good idea for a flourishing small business. Since the majority of their accomplishments

and the results of their actions are visible to everyone or to a group of people. Keeping this Iceberg theory in mind aids SMEs in disclosing assumptions or beliefs that form the basis of their behavior, perception, emotions, and thought processes (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 2007). There is a need for increased OSH implementation and practice due to the problem of extremely thinly disseminated empirical research, information, and benchmarking on this (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 2007).

This is due to the fact that OSH benchmarking implementation is better equipped to support the long-term benefits for SMEs by helping to establish the concept of Iceberg theory within organizational contexts. Understanding these ideas is essential to bringing them to life, and figuring out the visible part calls for certain methods (Allard & Anderson, 2005). As a result, it's critical that they collaborate with local groups, international corporations, and law enforcement agencies to exchange expertise, knowledge, and new regulations (Zulkifly, Zain, Hasan, & Baharudin, 2018). The company will map out its goals for its OSH vision and mission, and every worker is expected to recognize the best ways to create a safe and healthy work environment. Research has indicated that implementing safety protocols at work can result in enhanced safety outcomes (Suazo & Jaselskis, 1993). The Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) is important, and SMEs must understand it if they want to increase profits. Raising the nation's economic competitiveness will come from managing health and safety risks at work. The likelihood of an accident occurring at work is higher for companies with less than 50 employees as well as independent contractors. According to Sorensen, Hasle, and Bach (2007), small and medium-sized enterprises are frequently involved in sectors of the economy that are rigidly organized or lack technological adaptability.

Recommendations and Solutions

Workplace health and safety are critical to business success overall as well as to employees' well-being. When discussing safety and health concerns, it is imperative to keep Malaysian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in mind. There are various suggestions and strategies that can be put into practice to support SMEs' safety and health.

Customized Safety Rules for SMEs

Unlike large organizations, SMEs often operate with limited resources, making it challenging to adopt generic safety regulations that are primarily designed for larger enterprises. The flexibility required in SME operations, along with their distinct risk profiles (varying from office work to manufacturing), demands tailored safety policies.

Specific Solution:

Simplified Safety Guidelines: Regulatory bodies like DOSH should provide simplified, sector-specific safety guidelines for SMEs, ensuring that compliance doesn't overwhelm their capacity. For instance, in retail SMEs, guidelines can focus on ergonomics, fire safety, and slip, trip, and fall prevention, while manufacturing SMEs may require guidelines focused on machinery safety, noise control, and chemical handling.

- **Safety Audits Focused on Improvement:** Regular safety audits should be geared towards improvement and education rather than punitive measures. This creates an environment where SMEs feel supported rather than penalized. Audits could focus on low-cost improvements, such as better signage, first-aid kit availability, and ergonomic adjustments for workstations.

Collaborative Equipment Sharing Programs

SMEs may struggle to afford specialized safety equipment, particularly in higher-risk sectors like construction or manufacturing. This can result in inadequate protection for employees, particularly when working with machinery, hazardous materials, or in dangerous environments.

Specific Solution:

- **Safety Equipment Sharing Consortia:** Local industry associations can create equipment-sharing programs, where SMEs can rent or borrow expensive safety gear (e.g., scaffolding, protective suits, and respirators). This model works well for businesses in the same region or industry, reducing the financial burden on individual SMEs.
- **Collective PPE Purchasing Initiatives:** SMEs could also participate in collective purchasing programs to buy Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in bulk, securing better pricing. Associations or chambers of commerce could manage such programs, allowing SMEs to share the costs and access high-quality safety gear, ensuring all workers are protected.

Simplified Safety and Health Management Systems (SHMS)

Many SMEs do not have formalized Safety and Health Management Systems (SHMS) because the complexity of traditional systems often exceeds their administrative capacities. This can lead to unorganized or informal safety procedures, which increase risk exposure.

Specific Solution:

- **Modular SHMS for SMEs:** Instead of implementing a complex SHMS, SMEs can adopt modular systems that focus on core areas like risk assessments, incident reporting, and emergency response planning. These modules should be adaptable based on the company's size and industry. Templates for simple risk assessments (identifying hazards, assigning risk levels, and establishing mitigation steps) can be provided by government agencies like DOSH or industry associations.
- **Digital Tools for Safety Management:** SMEs can be encouraged to use affordable digital tools to manage safety processes. For example, mobile apps can help workers report hazards instantly, track safety incidents, and access guidelines. Digital dashboards can provide real-time monitoring of safety metrics, helping SMEs stay compliant without excessive paperwork.

Training and Awareness Programs

SMEs may lack the budget or time to provide formal training on health and safety. This can lead to inadequate employee knowledge on safety procedures, increasing the risk of workplace accidents. Traditional in-person training methods are also not flexible enough to suit SMEs' dynamic schedules.

Specific Solution:

- **Online Learning Platforms with Certification:** DOSH, in collaboration with industry associations, could develop an interactive web platform where SMEs can access on-demand training modules covering topics like basic safety practices, first aid, fire safety, handling hazardous materials, and ergonomics. These modules should be

available in local languages and structured to be completed in short intervals, making them accessible to all employees regardless of their work schedules.

- Offering certificates of completion can incentivize workers to complete the modules. SMEs could receive recognition or incentives for achieving high completion rates among their employees.
- On-site Workshops and Regional Safety Days: Practical, localized workshops that demonstrate safety techniques (e.g., handling machinery, proper lifting techniques, and fire drill procedures) could be organized regionally. These workshops should be interactive and hands-on, allowing SME employees to engage with the material and ask questions specific to their workplaces.

Mental Health and Wellbeing Programs

Safety is not just about physical health but also involves mental well-being. High-stress environments, long working hours, and the pressure to perform in resource-strapped SMEs can negatively affect mental health, which in turn can lead to reduced focus and higher accident rates.

Specific Solution:

- Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs): SMEs can implement cost-effective EAPs, where employees have access to counseling services, either in-person or through digital platforms. These programs can help workers deal with stress, anxiety, and burnout. Government or industry bodies could subsidize or provide these services to encourage adoption among SMEs.
- Mental Health Awareness Campaigns: Organizing mental health awareness days or training supervisors to recognize mental health issues can help build a supportive workplace culture. SMEs should create a work environment where employees feel comfortable discussing mental health challenges without stigma.

Work-Life Balance and Fatigue Management

Fatigue due to long working hours or repetitive tasks is a significant issue in SMEs. Fatigue not only impacts productivity but is also a major cause of accidents, particularly in industries like manufacturing and construction.

Specific Solution:

- Flexible Work Hours and Rest Breaks: SMEs should adopt policies that encourage flexible work hours and ensure that employees take regular rest breaks, especially in physically demanding jobs. This can be supported by creating clear policies that allow for downtime without penalizing workers for stepping away when necessary.
- Automated Fatigue Monitoring: SMEs in higher-risk sectors could implement simple fatigue monitoring systems, such as mobile applications that prompt workers to take breaks based on their activity levels or shift lengths. For example, wearables could track workers' physical exertion and alert both the employee and supervisor when it's time to rest.

The success of health and safety strategies in Malaysian SMEs hinges on a combination of simplified regulatory frameworks, cost-effective solutions, collaborative efforts, and technology integration. By focusing on customized rules, equipment sharing, modular SHMS, and flexible training programs, SMEs can create safer workplaces despite resource constraints. Furthermore, promoting mental health awareness, work-life balance, and fatigue management can enhance employee well-being, ultimately contributing to higher productivity and fewer workplace accidents. Collaboration between government, industry associations, and SMEs themselves will be key to implementing these strategies effectively.

Conclusion

Finally, despite their unique structure and significance to the country's economic development, SMEs should be subject to a different OSH management than those used to evaluate general establishments (such as MNCs and local business conglomerates) in order to ensure that SMEs do follow the health and safety requirements that could ensure that workers' safety is not compromised. The management of SMEs must apply OSH in order to give workers a safe workplace, even though it may be difficult for the relevant authorities to access SMEs. This obligation falls on the employees in accordance with OSHA's 1994 self-regulation principle. To that end, management in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can rely on a number of safety management approaches, including supplying supervisory support, enforcing workplace safety regulations, allowing employees to participate in decision-making related to safety, and providing safety training. Ongoing research, assistance programs, and increased awareness will all continue to inform the development of strategies and solutions for the unique safety and health issues faced by SMEs in Malaysia.

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