

SMS Reconsidered

don't write about safety management systems (SMSs) much because everybody else seems to be getting "burned out" on the subject. Back when the international standards for SMS were signed out at ICAO, we all knew we were going to launch a new industry full of consultants. We also knew that all these consultants couldn't possibly know much about the subject and would be forced to regurgitate the ICAO guidance material that was being put out. It was obvious that the process people dealing with ISO and QMS would embrace the concept of SMS and treat it as another process exercise. It was also clear that regulators were going to have a very hard time evaluating an SMS and would be forced to reduce the concept to a series of checklists.

All of those predictions have come true, so it is time to take an honest look at where we are and where we go from here. The ICAO guidance was built around the "four pillars," so now everybody has an SMS with four pillars. And of course, now every regulator has a checklist that counts the pillars. We all have policies, posters, forms, processes and meetings. This is all really very comforting to people who have never grasped the concept of risk management. They are reassured by the fact that all they really have to do is fill out the right form and show up at the weekly meeting. Many well-meaning operators have worked themselves into a position where they are spending lots of time and money, but are not necessarily getting the intended results. Many managers have figured this out, and thankfully a few of them have come to us. We are learning a lot from these operators and, as a result, the Foundation is now trying to drive SMS back to its core principles

Before SMS was made complex by the consultants and process people, it was meant to do one

simple thing — allocate resources against risk. I would suggest that we measure that instead of counting our meetings and posters. Please put away the checklist and try this approach instead. Go back to last year's budget, and see if you can find one single instance where information from your SMS caused you to spend money differently than you had planned. If you cannot find an example of that in your operation, you either have an extraordinarily brilliant budgeting process, or an SMS that is not delivering. I would bet on the latter.

If you want to go deeper, let me give you four simple audit questions that are really easy to answer if you have an effective SMS, and impossible to answer if you don't:

1. What is most likely to be the cause of your next accident or serious incident?
2. How do you know that?
3. What are you doing about it?
4. Is it working?

The easiest way to make people do silly things is to measure them against mindless objectives. I think SMS was always a serious and practical idea. It is supposed to change the way you manage risk. Find a way to measure those changes, and you will find a way to drive an effective implementation.



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