

Brand WorkSafe: the burden of bureaucracy

WorkSafe Victoria aspires to be a centre of excellence for return to work. But with long term return to work rates now below 2006-07 levels, is its rhetoric outstripping performance? By AMA Victoria member Dr Mary Wyatt.

In 2008, the Victorian WorkCover Authority was rebranded as WorkSafe. WorkSafe is made up of an occupational health and safety division, as well as an insurance or workers' compensation division. One of the most important functions of WorkSafe is to ensure a speedy transition back to work.

According to its Wikipedia entry, WorkSafe is recognised as a world leader in occupational health and safety. However, Wikipedia notes that this description of WorkSafe is unreferenced and requires a citation. Wikipedia also highlights that the article reads like an advertisement. One could be guilty of thinking the same thing about its corporate plan.

In 2006-07 WorkSafe developed its five year plan. This set goals across a range of areas, including a target of 30 per cent improvement in return to work. As has been previously reported, and is repeated in the 2009-2010 WorkSafe Corporate Plan, WorkSafe Victoria indicates it aims to become a centre of excellence in return to work.

Setting clear aspirational goals is a significant step for a large public organisation, and WorkSafe is to be congratulated for its approach. But how is it tracking in relation to its return to work goals?

According to the data used by WorkSafe, which recommends return to work at 18 months post claim lodgement, its current return to work rate is below the baseline 2006-07 level. According to the annual Return to Work Monitor, durable return to work has been in decline since 2005-06, with a steeper drop in 2008-09 now reversed back to the level of two years ago.

There are four main concerns regarding WorkSafe's approach.

1. Return to work is tracking poorly against its five-year targets.
2. While return to work results are tracking poorly, there is little in the way of meaningful review in WorkSafe's updated information, including this year's corporate plan.
3. In the midst of a now very large organisation, return to work appears to be taking a back seat. Stakeholders are frustrated – they tell us it's hard to get through to an organisation that considers it has the answers.
4. Many of WorkSafe's return to work initiatives are driven by process, and it's not the kind of process that serves people. Rather, WorkSafe seems gripped with process and projects – jumping through hoops while ticking boxes.

To expand upon these points:

1. WorkSafe's five-year return to work target is for 83 per cent return to work by 2012 (this is return to work using WorkSafe's own Sustainability Survey, not the Return To Work Monitor data).

WorkSafe can adjust its target each year until 2011, however the 2012 goal is not alterable. In the first year it outperformed its target. The targets for 2008-09 and 2009-10 have been

lowered, citing the financial downturn as a contributor to lowered return to work outcomes. The bulk of the improvements now fall on the 2011-12 year.

The pictured graph has been developed from information in the Annual Reports, the Corporate Plan, and the targets for 2011 and 2012 provided by WorkSafe.

Based on the 2009-10 results, in the next two years WorkSafe Victoria will need to achieve significantly more than its 30 per cent target, because return to work outcomes have dropped for the last two years and the return to work rate is now lower than the 2006-07 baseline.

2. What does WorkSafe Victoria have to say about its performance? We can find very little.

In the 2010 Annual Report there is a small section on return to work.

After declaring early and sustainable return to work to be a key social objective of the scheme, the Annual Report goes on to advise that the volatile economic climate has impacted return to work rates in some industries. Satisfaction ratings achieve full page bold prominence in reporting targets and outcomes. Clear tables outline employee and employer satisfaction with components of the scheme, and clear graphs show the year by year results. For return to work, there are just four paragraphs, along with five bullet points covering current initiatives.

WorkSafe's 2009-10 *Corporate Plan Strategy 2012 – year three of our five-year plan*, outlines the goals set in 2006-07 for safety, premium reduction, stakeholder satisfaction, actuarial release, and return to work. The plan reviews how WorkSafe is tracking in these areas.

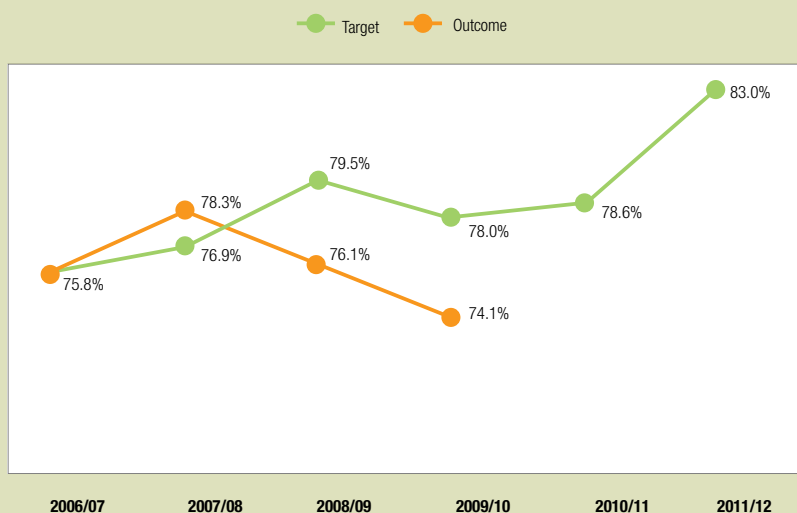
The 35-page document examines targets, and in some areas evaluates performance against targets. For example, safety measures such as the number of claims, and the number of claims with greater than four weeks compensation per thousand workers, are reviewed with graphs outlining performance versus annual targets.

On page 23, after agent and claims management, return to work is reviewed.

The report indicates that in 2009–10 WorkSafe will adjust its approach as required in response to the deteriorating economy. It indicates that it will focus more on short-term gains to improve return to work outcomes, and enforce compliance with return to work obligations for both employers and injured workers.

It is possible that the financial downturn does account for some of the drop in return to work rates. However we note that the Victorian section of the Return To Work Monitor shows return to work rates in Victoria have been trending downward from 2006-07 to 2009-10, with a more significant drop in return to work rates from 2007-08 to 2008-09. The durable return to work rate has now bounced back to the 2008-09

WorkSafe RTW - Target vs outcomes



levels, suggesting the impact of the financial downturn, if any, has been short term, affecting one year of the Return to Work Monitor results. Some jurisdictions, such as Tasmania, have not seen any drop in return to work during the downturn.

The lack of meaningful analysis of the return to work performance, in the Annual or Corporate reports, implies lack of conviction, or a lack of willingness to publically analyse and be accountable for performance.

3. As is now well recognised, remaining out of work in the longer term is more harmful to health than working in many of the more dangerous industries. Yet within WorkSafe, return to work looks to be the poor cousin of safety. No one can complain about safety being an important focus. But if return to work is also a priority, where is the in-depth analysis of declining results?

The Wikipedia comment about the WorkSafe entry reading like an advertisement rings true.

4. Lastly we address the WorkSafe approach to process, the bugbear of this writer. One of our team asked the other day, do we think WorkSafe is worse than the other similar authorities? Our frustration with WorkSafe is that its leadership presents the organisation to be a (if not the) leader in its field. As an organisation that knows what it is doing.

However, return to work is not about being authoritarian. When 'you know' but don't, systems are prescribed, processes are put in place, and it becomes about ticking boxes. People issues are overridden, and core purpose is lost.

Return to work is about dealing with people. Yes, processes are an integral part of professionally dealing with people in a public service environment. However, that process needs to serve the desired outcome. If processes serving people are not at the heart of the organisation leading the charge, it filters down through the system.

In WorkSafe Victoria there are many processes and they are often second rate. Projects are developed, implemented, and claims staff need to deal with a new 'high value work' practice. Claims staff are so busy implementing process that some say they don't have time to talk to the worker. Practitioners are frustrated and have repeated requests for reduction in the red tape that interferes with care of their patients. Vocational rehabilitation assessments often leave employees baffled.

Return to work is a complex area that doesn't get the media time of other issues. Pressed for sound bite acknowledgement, it is easier to talk about the average premium rate, claim numbers, or the amount of unfunded liabilities. The train wreck of a long term claim, the effect on the person and their family, is little discussed. WorkSafe has published an Annual Report that highlights stakeholder satisfaction, at the expense of exploring return to work results that are tracking down instead of up toward the aspirational and humanitarian goal that is a core purpose and reason for its existence. 🗨️

AMA NATIONAL CONFERENCE 2011

Nominations for delegate positions

AMA Victoria members who are interested in attending the national conference as a delegate are invited to nominate for a delegate position.

The conference is to be held in Brisbane on Friday 27 and Saturday 28 May. Indigenous health and mental health will be key topics for discussion.

<http://ama.com.au/nationalconference>

The number of positions, once ex officio positions have been allocated, is likely to be between 6 and 10. Members of state council vote for delegates in April.

Those nominating must be financial members. Send your nomination, and a supporting statement of no more than 50 words, to claireb@amavic.com.au, to reach AMA Victoria by 5pm on Friday 1 April, 2011. You will receive an acknowledgement. Advice of the result of the ballot will be sent no later than Friday 29 April.