

Compliance industry out of control: university professor

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An animated Dr Sidney Dekker, an international expert in safety relating to aviation, nuclear power, oil and gas, speaks at the Safety Institute of Australia conference at CQ University.

Allen Winter

GRIFFITH University professor Dr Sidney Dekker says the safety and compliance industry is out of control and billions of dollars each year are being spent on useless "box ticking".

Speaking at the Safety Institute of Australia conference at CQ University in Gladstone, he said Australia's compliance culture was not preventing serious injury or death.

He told delegates that in 1996 5.6% of the working population was employed in the compliance and safety industry. Today that figure stands at 10%.

"Safety and compliance is costing this country \$250 billion a year," he said.

"One third of that is spent on safety - the remainder is managing corporate risk."

He said most risk assessments undertaken by business were "useless and costly".

"We live in a global world where there is massive competition. If you think we can live competitively in that world, your'e joking.

"We are continually counting what doesn't count. We have lost sight of what really matters and we seem to have no idea. We have this attitude that if we solve the little things the big things won't happen. That's rubbish people are still dying - they are still suffering horrific injuries."

He said the most disturbing thing is that LTIs - Lost Time Injury statistics - were not safety indicators.

"They are productivity indicators, and so many businesses are fudging the LTI figures because of the pressure on good productivity.

"So often the minor injuries are not recorded, which makes the data useless - all in the name of improving productivity and being able to mark on the safety board that we haven't had any incidents."

He said a huge amount of a safety department's time is spent analysing what went wrong, but the focus should be on analysing what went right.

"What are the work-arounds that workers do every day to get things done? They are the things

we need to be concentrating on. Once we know about those things we start to know how to make our practices safer."

He told delegates he understood the problem, which he said was created by legislation which made company directors liable for the actions of their workers.

"That has brought along this incredibly cumbersome system of compliance and management of risk thinking.

"It's not going to stop until those directors realise that the current systems of compliance are too expensive. This current practice is stopping us doing business in many instances, because the cost is just too great. So the business suffers a loss of income while trying to comply with the explosion of regulations.

"Business just can't afford the regulation."

He said all workers should be asking themselves what was the most ridiculous thing they were expected to do by their employer, and then challenge it.

"At the moment, the system is treating us all like children.

"If we are treated like children, we will act like children, rather than think for ourselves and stay safe."

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