

# Factors impacting upon the performance of Workplace Assessors: A Case Study

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## Abstract

*This paper reports on the findings of a research project that elicits the main factors impacting on the performance of workplace assessors in the oil and gas industry. The purpose of the paper is to reveal the significance of the role of workplace assessors and the subsequent impact upon workforce engagement. One model of employee competency assessment currently utilised in the Australian workplace, is performed by suitable employees who have been identified and trained as internal workplace assessors.*

*This qualitative action research project aimed to discover the scope of the internal workplace assessor role beyond the primary focus of technical skills assessment. The selected cohorts for this project were employed in the upstream oil and gas industry working in a variety of geographically isolated locations. Through questionnaires, face-to face interviews and focus groups, the data gathered have been utilised to gain further insight into the role of the internal workplace assessor in the oil and gas industry by gathering perceptions from the assessors and of those currently being assessed.*

*“Workplace assessment the gathering and judging of evidence during normal work activities in order to determine whether a required standard has been achieved. Workplace assessment usually involves observation of work in progress, checking the product(s) of a work activity, and receiving oral responses to questions posed while work is in progress” (National Training System, Glossary, 2006).*

## Introduction

The role of the workplace assessor is to gather and validate evidence to ensure employee competencies meet a pre-determined set of industry training standards. This research reveals that the scope of the internal workplace assessor role extends beyond the assessment of technical skills to perform the important functions of providing learning support, direction, guidance and mentoring for new and existing staff. The workplace assessor role is pivotal in the alignment of employee performance with organisational strategic directions. The role provides a key function in the promotion of workforce engagement through the training, development and coaching of employees.

The workplace assessment task is performed in addition to their normal duties including technical work, supervision, planning and documentation. In the model currently used in Australia, the workplace assessor is assigned one or more candidates and is usually located within the same workplace or operates within the geographic region of the candidate's place of work.

Evidence of the competencies of employees is a serious industrial issue. Employers are required by law to prove that the skills of their workforce meet the legislated Occupational Safety and Health requirements of their workplace. Maintaining a skilled and motivated workforce is also of major concern as recruitment, induction and training costs to replace exiting staff is a great financial burden for employers. Particularly of concern is when the time lapses involved with replacement of staff interfere with the production of outputs.

The workplace assessor is usually an experienced staff member chosen firstly for their technical knowledge but also for their ability to train and develop other staff to increase skills. This research explores the areas paramount to this vital role and those which extend beyond the technical skills of the assessor, of coaching, mentoring and training. Formal recognition of this role will facilitate more efficient strategies to be implemented to increase the level and maintenance of competency in the workforce and promote workforce engagement.

The site chosen as the case study organisation for this research project is one of Australia's leading oil and gas exploration and production companies, with interests across the globe. The company is considered to be upstream oil and gas industry. This term applies to the exploration, development and production of hydrocarbons. It includes the basic processing of oil, gas and intermediate products e.g. Liquid Natural Gas – LNG (Origin Energy, 2005).

This study gathered data relating to the demographics of the workplace assessor population within the organisation and identified the major factors impacting upon their performance in the workplace. This research identified the current perceptions of their employees undertaking workplace assessor

roles. Views were not only gathered from the assessors, but also from a second group of employees who had recently undertaken the assessment process. This provided information on the value of the workplace assessment experience from their perspective and elicited clues on how to enhance the performance for those in this key role with the aim to elicit a comprehensive set of cost-effective recommendations for the improvement of training processes.

The question for this research was;

- What are the critical factors impacting upon the performance of the workplace assessor in the upstream oil and gas industry?

## Workplace Assessment

Competency-based standards were introduced in the late 1980s to improve the skill levels of the Australian workforce, establish career structures and enable the Australian industry to become more competitive in global markets. The most commonly used definition for competency-based training (CBT) forwarded by the Vocational, Education, Employment and Training Advisory Committee in 1992 states;

*CBT is training geared to the attainment and demonstration of skills to meet industry-specified standards rather than to an individual's achievement relative to that of others in a group (NCVER, 1999, p.2).*

However, the extent to which the workplace is able to meet the challenge of providing relevant, job-specific learning opportunities to develop the growing pool of qualified workers in a cost effective manner is a critical issue (Harris, Bone, & Simons, 1998). The regulatory requirement for oil and gas organisations to demonstrate worker competency raises the issue of defining what they are intending to achieve. Maher (2004, p.47) elicits the following essential elements of 'competency' as described by Key Competencies and Industry Standards:

- 'Competency' is being able to do something: This involves not only physical or mental manipulation or the practised ability to perform managerial tasks with facility, but an ability to bring knowledge, understanding and skill to bear on performance.
- 'Competency' is multi-disciplinary: It draws on a variety of knowledge, understandings and skills.
- 'Competency' is judged against contextualised criteria: The criteria for safety management in HROs should be judged against the setting pertaining to each high reliability organization.

Pivotal to the process of meeting competency standards is the workplace assessor. The role of the assessor is to determine the competencies or lack of

competencies of an individual against a prescribed benchmark in a reliable manner (Hase & Saenger, 2003). To achieve a safe working environment, organisational commitment to the assessment process and workplace assessor training is necessary, however Smith (2000) found in one study that not all employers were committed to the workplace assessment system due to lack of belief in the competency based system, lack of expertise and the greater need to focus on core business activities.

In 1998 an explosion and fire at Esso's Longford Victoria plant resulted in prosecution after two workers were killed and gas supplies were cut to about one million homes and businesses in Victoria for almost two weeks. The incident raised the issue of competency to Managers and Boards to demonstrate that:

*...no matter how sophisticated an espoused high reliability plant may be and no matter how up-to-date the systems, when those that operate and maintain those systems are not properly trained in their operation and are unable to deal with emergencies then the employer is at risk of successful prosecution when the systems fail and an accident occurs. (Maher, 2004, p. 136)*

Many offshore workers still vividly remember the world's worst offshore oil disaster to date, when the Piper Alpha oil and gas production platform exploded and subsequently caught fire killing 167 men in the North Sea on 6th July 1988. Competing business demands to achieve production outputs and to meet stringent legislative requirements of providing a safe workplace and competent workforce raises the need for industry to understand the importance of competent workplace assessment. Multiple interacting factors contribute to the complex but traceable background to accidents, including the effectiveness of regulations and compliance, the culture of an organisation, the personality and psychological stability of managers and the effects of power, greed and self-protection (Maher, 2004, p.19). For example, senior staff may not be aware of dangerous work practices due to the cultural values of the organisation (Maher, 2004, p.42).

Statute requirements for industry are currently being endorsed through the workplace assessment process, however, research to date shows that the significance of the workplace assessor role is unexplored and undervalued. Findings from this paper will demonstrate the need for employers to endorse the scope of the workplace assessor role for its cost-effective contribution to the engagement and productivity of their workforces.

## Research to Date

This research project explored the factors impacting upon the performance of the workplace assessor. Motivation and characteristics of workplace assessors to date has been poorly researched (Hase & Saenger, 2003) and review of the literature reveals very limited readings on the role of the workplace assessor. In 2002 a major study was commissioned by the Queensland Mining Industry Training Advisory Board (QMITAB) to review the efficacy of the Workplace Assessor training program in the Queensland mining industry.

The major Queensland study in 2003 found the wording of training documentation and the requirements of the assessment tasks were thought to be challenging for many of the mining industry assessors, and many assessors were found to lack the educational skills to provide assistance to those experiencing difficulties in workplace learning situations (Hase & Saenger, 2003).

Skills currency was also raised as an area of concern in the research conducted by Hase and Saenger (2003), as assessors raised the issue that they are not using their competencies all of the time and this impedes on their confidence to assess others. Unprofessional and inadequate processes were found to be occurring in assessments (Smith, 2000) and concerns have been noted by trainers and teachers regarding the modularisation of assessment methods which have provoked a checklist approach thereby denying a holistic approach to assessment that incorporated the underpinning knowledge of the participants (NCVER, 1999, p.6).

The issue of the up-front training of the assessors has been raised in a number of studies (Docking, 1998; Johnston and Holland, 2000; Smith 2000; Hase and Saenger 2003). Also, the provision of ongoing support for the assessor after the completion of their training to increase their confidence in the assessment process has been identified as necessary for the success of the process (Booth, 2000). Hase and Saenger's (2003) recommendations included rewriting of materials to be comprehensible to the average person in the workforce, follow up training for the assessor, regular assessment tasks to remain current and supervision of initial assessments.

International Survey Research (ISR) recently identified that the key driver of the financial performance of a company is the level of commitment that their employees have to the organisation. The measure of commitment is whether employees intend to stay, or whether they would recommend their organisation as a good place to work. A survey of 40 major global organisations tracked the financial performance of these companies over a three-year period from 1999 – 2001. Results revealed direct connections between high levels of employee commitment and significant increases in net profit margins and operating margins (International Survey Research, 2002).

Support of a supervisor and variety on the job are the most often cited reasons for worker satisfaction (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). As a workplace assessor is required to be competent in the skill of the worker they are assessing, this role is very much one of leadership. As the workforce escalates the need for meaningful work and supervisor support, the development of the workplace assessor function in human resource planning as a key role should be one strategy for consideration to promote workforce engagement, employee commitment and production outputs.

## Materials and Methods

This research project explored the scope of the workplace assessor role utilising qualitative data from two target populations;

- Workplace Assessors in the upstream oil and gas industry
- Assesseees - employees in the upstream oil and gas industry who have been recently assessed (within 0-3 months of project commencement).

A qualitative research methodology was selected to maintain the essence of what the participants had expressed. As the information that had been gathered is about people's perceptions, thoughts, feelings and ideas, qualitative research was the most appropriate style to gather the data as this mode of research encourages participants to express opinions and to elaborate. Questionnaires generated a minor amount of quantitative data from collection of participant demographics, however the majority of information collected was qualitative. Qualitative data analysis is a subjective exercise as the researcher endeavours to create some form of understanding of the perspectives of the participants, immediate events need to be ordered to create a form of conceptual understanding (Angus & Gray, n.d., p.25).

Action research models are very practical as results can be applied immediately to the specific situation or problem. The centrifuge of action research is discussion and reflection. The aim of the research was to empower the group through the process of discussion, reflection, assessment and subsequent implementation. In this mode of research those who are experiencing the situation or problems, are the ones who define the problems and the research is conducted within the environment that the problem or issue is occurring (**Brown, 1999**).

The client was a diverse organisation with a total of thirty six (36) qualified workplace assessors located across five (5) offshore facilities. This research project focused on two offshore locations;

(a) Group 1 consisted of nineteen (19) trained workplace assessors who had been allocated the duty of conducting internal workplace assessments.

(b) Group 2 included a cohort of twenty nine (29) employees who had been assessed recently (within 0 – 3 months from the commencement of the project).

The action research method utilised for this case study was an action science model. Action science focuses on the study of practice in organisational settings as a source of improved performance and new knowledge. This approach methodically builds the relationships between organisational psychology and the practical problems experienced within organisations. To facilitate this, two features of the participants' professional knowledge are identified:

- Formal knowledge competent members of that profession are perceived to share and should have received induction or training to perform that role
- And the enactment and interpretation of that professional knowledge.

The gaps identified between these forms the recommendations for change and improvement. A key feature of procuring this information is to ensure the participants are not feeling threatened or anxious about revealing information related to their role and that they feel comfortable enough to reveal any 'cover ups' that may be occurring in current practices (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p.561).

The questionnaires were designed by the researcher specifically to gather information for this study. The questions were predominantly open-ended to encourage participants to disclose as much relevant information as possible. Prior to implementation of the research project the instrument was issued to a small number of employees within the company with the same roles, but who were not involved in the study. Adjustments of question structures and terminology were made based on their feedback prior to issuing the instrument. The assessor cohort (Group 1) also had one face-to-face interview developed from the instrument used by the National Centre for Vocational Research (NCVER) in the 2000 study on Workplace trainers (Harris, et al, 2000).

Analysis of the questionnaire and interview data required a solid understanding of the body of knowledge. Questionnaires were scrutinised for information and recurrence of themes. Demographic information was tallied and transferred into bar graphs. All qualitative data were recorded and sorted by theme into groups according to the amount of recurrence.

The interview and focus group analysis process required typing into transcripts. The transcripts were scrutinised and coded, searching for linkages, themes and new research tangents through a process of re-reading transcripts and re-listening to tapes. Detailed notes were scrutinised to enable coding of forthcoming issues to develop into a conceptual model. Symbols and colour were used to code thoughts, perceptions or ideas that presented from the interview and questionnaire data gathered (Angus & Gray, n.d. p.25-27).

Memos, annotations and reflections were written at regular intervals and data were reviewed cyclically as new information emerged to observe trends and search for new themes until saturation was reached. All meetings during this project were written up as field notes detailing any observations or thoughts relevant to the process of the research. The data were reviewed and explored until conceptual understanding was achieved. The findings of this qualitative action research project will be discussed in detail in the next section of this paper.

## **Factors impacting on the performance of Workplace Assessors in the Offshore Upstream Oil and Gas Industry**

This research project aimed to explore the scope of the role of the workplace assessor. Analysis of the results of the data gathered from a variety of methods including questionnaires, interview and focus groups from seventeen (17) workplace assessors and six (6) recently assessed employees, a total of twenty three (23) personnel, revealed the following four main factors impacting upon the performance of workplace assessors listed in order of importance to the assessors and reinforced by recently assessed employees;

- 1 The lack of boundaries between coaching, training and assessing functions
- 2 The Learning Management System
- 3 Current staffing levels
- 4 Supervisors and management.

Other factors of importance gathered from the data analysis in order of prevalence included the lack of allocated time to perform the workplace assessment task, the impact of a newly created role, motivation, workplace assessment standards, the workload impact of the workplace assessor role on substantive positions and the offshore environment. However, this paper will focus on the four main identified factors listed above.

# 1 The lack of boundaries between coaching, training and assessing functions

The first major finding of this research project was that the workplace assessors performed the training, coaching and mentoring for all staff they assessed. The majority of workplace assessors mentioned they spent a significant amount of their time mentoring and coaching. Responses ranged from several hours per day coaching up to continuous mentoring during a shift. Some assessors saw coaching as a separate function whereas others saw it as part of the assessment role...

*but as a true assessor – we're not supposed to coach (WPA13).*

All participants identified coaching as a required expectation for experienced personnel to perform as part of their role offshore. However, it appeared offshore personnel had not been formally trained in how to perform training or coaching roles. The employees recently assessed verified that the reason for successful contact was related to working together with the assessor on the same platform as the communication is more effective face-to-face.

In the final focus group for assessors they agreed that the main factor impacting upon their performance was related to the coaching, training and assessing tasks offshore, as the three functions were all a 'blur' yet the assessors were currently performing all three roles. They stated they needed a definite boundary clarification between the roles and required appropriate training for each of the roles. Currently there were no guidelines and training plans in place and the offshore training being performed on-the-job needed to be quantified and required resourcing. They stated they had been managing all of the training by themselves with no training department.

At the time the research was being conducted, the workload had grown due to a large number of new starters and assessors were changing roles to positions that were less able to assess staff. Recently assessed employees agreed with the assessors and saw training and assessment were an all encompassed process offshore.

*There seems to be a blur for us guys doing the training and the coaching and assessing, and we haven't been trained how to train (WPA3).*

## 2 The Learning Management System

The research findings revealed a large majority of offshore workplace assessors use the Learning Management System (LMS) as the chief tool to measure competencies when they conduct assessments in the workplace and saw the LMS as their main resource. The LMS is an internal database to track and record the training status of all employees. The LMS may be utilised to justify training systems in the event of an internal or external audit to meet regulatory compliances. This highlights the need for the system to contain accurate information. Other responses indicated their own abilities and experience was the primary tool for assessing competencies – this suggests a potential for breakdown in quality assurance processes. As an employee is presumed competent because they are assessed – quality assurance assessment standards must be implemented to alleviate individual interpretation of the competencies. On the other side, the candidates being assessed mentioned their main resource was a multitude of text information including procedural manuals and the internet – not clearly articulating the LMS as a tool - and half stated assistance from workmates and peers as the most valuable resource.

Every assessor commented overwhelmingly on the lack of effectiveness of the current LMS to accurately assess competency and its need for review and update. The candidates also stated the LMS was crude and basic requiring accurate redevelopment. The majority of assessors responded to the LMS in a negative way commenting on the lack of validity of the assessment questions, the out of date resources connected to the learning guide, and the incomplete practical assessment record. Some assessors stated that with the current influx of new staff that the review and update of the LMS should now become a priority.

*LMS is just – monkey see monkey do. It needs to generate a more practical sign off by an experienced WPA (WPA18).*

Three assessors commented the client did not currently have dedicated time and resources to fix LMS but with the influx of new staff that it should now become a priority.

*Because of our workload unfortunately LMS becomes our lowest priority, however with the increase in inexperienced staff who are in training – it needs to become a high priority as they are coming along and the huge backlog creates potential for a breakdown somewhere. It needs to be looked at sooner rather than later (WPA14).*

They all agreed that the tool was in need of revision and update, however two took the stance that...

It's the process of the training and workplace assessing that keeps the system going – these roles should be the majority of the focus not the LMS. Take the electronic *testing – it's not effective – we need to increase the practical testing* (WPA18).

Three assessors discussed the development of the LMS and stated they have recently created a guide to gauge the progression of new staff – in their own time - out of necessity.

*WPA11 set up a map to gauge the progression of when guys are competent to work in an area – not LMS competent* (WPA10).

The lack of detailed assessment information on the Practical Record available on the LMS left the assessor open to their own personal knowledge and experience (subjectivity) as the guide when assessing candidates. Some assessors followed the details on the LMS sheet verbatim, which created an area for concern, whereas the majority of experienced assessors expanded the assessment by asking their own questions and required more detailed demonstrations than were articulated in the Practical Record.

Each participant made some form of reference to what competence meant to them and they all mentioned that the current LMS system didn't accurately capture on-the-job competency. They saw that there was still uncertainty surrounding the definition of competencies amongst staff and supervisors, although this has improved greatly over the recent years but there was still room for improvement. Some felt candidates were being assessed against the procedure manuals and not against the competency. The procedure manual is a part of the learning material and assessment of competency against the manual only does not address the necessary requirements of demonstrating competency (see definition pages 8 - 9). For example, some information currently being used was pertaining to equipment that was de-commissioned 8 years ago. A small number of assessors stated that they assess against the procedure manuals to define competency. Subsequently this raises an issue if all assessors offshore are not correctly validating all dimensions of competency.

### 3 Current staffing levels offshore

The majority of participants commented on the impact of current staffing numbers and the performance of workplace assessors. They mentioned the amount of trainees currently being on board as a key factor having a subsequent impact on their workload as it takes a substantial amount of time for a trainee to gain experience in all areas. Subsequently this perpetuates a workforce without full competency in all work areas. A large number mentioned the current lack of experienced staff on board due to experienced operators being moved onto project work, changing to supervisory roles, and being on various forms of leave including fitness to work.

*At the moment we have a lot of trainees on board and we basically have trainees training a trainee - which is not a good situation for us, and this means we have to be more vigilant when we assess people (WPA13).*

They all saw this as having a major impact on their performance as there were less experienced people available who were previously relied on for the coaching and training of new staff. The major impact from this is that the assessors did not get time to do the assessments which in turn was holding up the progression of staff to be deemed competent in all areas.

The recently assessed employees verified this as they stated it was hard to get assessed offshore due to lack of workplace assessors, the lack of WPA availability, and the difficulty arranging their workload to be available when assessors were. The current lack of training personnel meant employees could not be ready for assessment until the training had been done as the current manning levels meant there was a lack of resources to free people up to train or assess. At the time it was difficult to match the competencies of staff to all areas on the rosters, and subsequently to match people for training purposes. The lack of technically competent staff offshore created the potential for errors to be made in the training process, and trainees (inexperienced operators) were training other trainees offshore.

*...a trainee's been training that person – then he's going to come to me for an assessment - now that does make me a little bit nervous – because I don't really know that person (WPA13).*

Participants revealed when they were ready for assessment it was very difficult for a WPA to be available to conduct the assessment. This resulted in immense frustration as the time factors involved mean monthly blocks are passed by without the employee being able to progress in their competencies.

*We're under pressure to get everyone competent. The numbers of staff might match but the competencies don't (WPA10).*

The major impact is the assessors cannot get time to do the assessments, which in turn is holding up the progression of staff to be competent in all areas.

## 4 Supervisors and Management

Half of the participants made reference to Supervisors and Management as a factor impacting upon the performance of workplace assessors. Some participants made reference to new Supervisors who don't have the same knowledge or experience as previous Supervisors, the impact being the assessor becomes frustrated and tired during the shifts due to the lack of experienced leadership.

*A lot of new Supervisors haven't got the knowledge and experience as some of the other guys – its getting frustrating and tiring when someone less experienced is sitting in the office. They make a call and override our suggestions and it all falls over. It's a new philosophy – choosing people to manage people rather than having an experienced person that can be an extra resource when things get really busy (WPA3)*

Some assessors are now Supervisors and are aware of the expectations of the WPA role, although they now don't have time to conduct assessments. However they discussed the importance of management understanding the scope and expectation of the workplace assessor role. One assessor outlined the importance of supervisors being aware of what is required from the role;

*You have line managers who haven't done assessment courses so they don't see the training that's involved. Operations and trades did the training, but no people above did it. It changes the perspective or value of a task if managers and supervisors do the training. It increases their knowledge to understand what the role means (WPA10).*

Several participants made reference to the need for management to be proactive with forward planning of training and assessment resources to ensure they are not working under-manned.

Many perceived there was a lack of dedication from Management to the learning function of the offshore group. They stated management needed to understand the resources required for the assessment task and perhaps employ the services of a dedicated person to perform the assessor role over the next long term project period to alleviate the workload pressures on current workplace assessors.

Many participants see that there is still uncertainty surrounding the definition of competencies amongst management, supervisors and staff and this requires further clarification and education. Several discussed how they perceive the current management style to be authoritarian and some people are feeling resentful and frustrated with the current decision making style. They stated they experience a geographical disadvantage by not being able to communicate directly and engage in feedback on issues pertaining to their work environment. One repercussion of this perception, as revealed to the researcher by a relevant number of employees, is consideration of resignation from the organisation. Impact on the employee's performance on other technical tasks could also be likely and would require further research.

Supervisors and Superintendents who have not undertaken leadership training fail to recognise and performance manage the assessors adequately, and thereby are unable to maintain the assessor's motivation to maintain performing extra roles and responsibilities. Apparently many employees in supervisory roles have not undertaken the training or have failed to complete the Front Line Management training. Several participants mentioned their desire to progress within their positions. They discussed money and promotion was not what encouraged and motivated them but recognition and support. They saw line managers without developed leadership skills restrained their personal development due to poor performance management and lack of forward planning of human resources to allow smooth transitions and progression.

The participants in this research project identified the ability to motivate others as one of the desirable qualities of a workplace assessor. Employees from both research groups commented on the amount of personal motivation they had and the importance for this to be recognised and supported by their line managers. It appeared a cycle perpetuated whereby leadership facilitated motivation in the employees, who subsequently maintained their commitment to their roles and ongoing development. One participant said holding back a motivated person was..." like putting handcuffs on, or putting them in a cage".

## **Other issues of significance**

The great majority of assessors acknowledged that they did not have enough time to perform the assessor task. Many relayed that there is no structured time and the assessment activity had to fit in around other activities that resulted in several delays. With the current intake of new operators they found themselves short of quality time to give to candidates that was slowing down the process. Every assessor commented on how time consuming the task was and how the task was not formally acknowledged for this. Subsequently this resulted in added pressure, frustration, juggling workloads and a potential for oversight. Many assessors completed the assessment tasks outside allocated work hours.

The impact of this resulted in a backlog of staff who had not been deemed competent to perform tasks unsupervised, who in turn relied on the resources of the experienced staff to continue supervising them until the assessments had been done.

Of greater concern was the potential for safety hazards as employees felt pressured to rush the assessment process. Insufficient assessment lowers the knowledge expectations of the learner, who in turn may perform at a lower level. This person may then become a trainer and/or assessor of staff in the future who in turn will require lesser knowledge demonstration from staff to deem competency, subsequently perpetuating a workforce with lowered standards of performance than currently exists.

Also highlighted was the need to closely monitor the offshore contractor personnel training and competencies systems to prevent incidents. This can be done by ensuring the contractor has training systems that are aligned with the organisation and that the contractor maintains minimum training requirements for their staff that has been agreed upon between the contractor and the organisation. The contractor's training systems, including their LMS, mapping, matrixes and documentation should be audited by the organisation on a regular basis. The assessors stated that the offshore teams carried the shortfall when the contractors arrive offshore without the appropriate permits to work on the project. This matter of integrity and safety was forwarded to management for follow up.

Many assessors stated the workplace assessor is a type of person who takes on added responsibilities and duties, which further impacted on their time availability as they performed a multitude of various roles. The lack of designated hours to conduct assessments and the ongoing demand from candidates saw the assessors endeavour to prioritise their daily workload activities to include all tasks. Either the assessments were omitted from the trip or the assessor was doing the task out of work hours. The current lack of workplace assessors impacted on other available assessors when they were sent off to other projects, were on leave, or in roles that didn't allow time or mobility for the assessment task to be completed as they became pressured to pick up their backload of assessments as well.

Motivation of the individual employees was the key factor to the assessments being completed offshore due to the lack of structure and available qualified personnel. Employees stated they were highly motivated to continue with their competency progression, but not being able to be assessed for long periods of time resulted in great frustration. Assessors were equally motivated to ensure the assessments were done whenever possible including working out of hours. The impact of the frustration associated with the difficulty of getting assessments done, was verbalised by both groups that they considered

resigning from their position with this company. Both groups discussed the importance of Supervisors and Management leadership capability to maintain workforce engagement.

All participants identified the WPA task as having a definite impact on increasing their workload, as the task is piggy backed onto their technical role. For some assessors who were signing off contractor staff as well as their own staff, the assessment task had created a substantial impact on their workload resulting in a potential for taking short cuts. A main feature of the workload impact for half of the assessors was the lack of formal structure in the assessment process. They said the assessment task put pressure on their workload as they needed to juggle this task around operational priorities. The impact on their workload included the extra work that is created if trainees aren't signed off to perform duties 'solo' in certain areas, project work being held up through requiring permits which the delays indirectly led to production loss, and the substantial amount of work a new trainee creates for them.

## The Offshore Environment

Every assessor mentioned the personality type of offshore employees and the importance of positive relationships in the offshore working environment.

*Offshore is really a tight knit community. Need self respect and respect for all the others around you, because the difference out there is you rely on each other for your well-being. Whereas in here you don't give a toss whether one bloke is competent or not, because he's not going to affect your well-being at the end of the day. Out there, there is a lot of mutual respect and you get to know everybody to a great degree (WPA5).*

A large group made reference to offshore as a learning environment where problem solving and continually learning about new equipment was pivotal to their job.

*We're a captive audience out here so... The culture and lifestyle is different from others work as we are in constant contact with each other. We get to know people really well – its part of the learning process. Lots of things are learnt from casual conversation out here during lunch, tea time, we often mill over things (WPA17).*

They all discussed how each employee felt responsible to coach and train each other in this unique work environment that sharing of knowledge is crucial to maintain a safe and motivated working environment.

*You coach each other through because that's just part of the vital work, that's quite unique really to our work environment (WPA7).*

Part of the offshore culture is the expectation to take on extra roles and responsibilities, mentor, coach, train and impart knowledge and experience to create and develop a safe and competent team. In essence...

*...we are all one big team (WPA13).*

This cohort was very honest and forthcoming with valuable information and feedback for this research project. The workplace environment was unique, not merely in geographical context and social isolation. Reflected in their responses were teamwork, bonding and extreme consideration for each others work practices. It was notable that each interviewee discussed their personality differences and yet had high respect for their colleagues. These offshore facilities appeared to model the concept of a learning organisation whereby knowledge was shared openly and employees were actively involved with continuous learning. The workplace assessors on these facilities were highly engaged in the learning and development of the workforce.

## Conclusion

Workplace assessment is an 'in situ' system to ensure alignment between training, safety and quality outcomes. The workplace assessors in this oil and gas industry case study had been chosen by their employer for their ability to train, develop and motivate others to acquire knowledge, and this raises a question as to the scope of the workplace assessor role. Technically, workplace assessment is the process of gathering evidence by a certified assessor to demonstrate the competency of an individual during normal work activities. This case study reveals that the expectations of the employer fall outside of the particular scope to include the functions of training, coaching and mentoring employees alongside the competency assessment role.

Research participants perceived the implementation of workplace assessment had improved the standards of workplace performance and see it is responsible for removing the 'mateship' culture that can result in inefficient workplace practices. The checklist approach of workplace assessment can lead to a lack of incorporating holistic knowledge if the assessment tools are not precise, and with the current tools, demonstration of competency relied on the experience, initiative and subjectivity of each individual assessor. The research revealed the lack of formal workplace assessment standards and guidelines were contributing to inefficiencies in the existing system. This current situation was instrumental in leading to frustration of assessors and employees to the point of a significant number of participants considering resignation from the organisation. As less experienced personnel take on the role of coaching and training new offshore personnel in the future, the need to improve systems becomes a priority, as the lack of deemed competency inadvertently leads to production

loss and subsequent financial loss as inexperienced personnel take more time to keep plant equipment functioning. Assessors were juggling workloads creating a potential for oversight, with many assessors were doing the task out of hours. Employees being assessed reinforced the lack of availability of an assessor, the differences in the standards of assessments and the inadequate amount of time being given to them. It was due to their personal motivation that they were continuing to progress through the competencies, however these frustrations decreased their motivation.

Another area of interest included the possibility that some assessors follow the LMS Practical Record verbatim to conduct their assessments. If this possibility arose there could be serious repercussions for the integrity and safety of the workforce. All assessors interviewed were very articulate in describing their personal standard of assessments, and stated they check and cross-check the knowledge of new personnel creating a sense of a very safety focussed team.

The role of the workplace assessor is pivotal in the development and maintenance of a competent and motivated workforce. This study revealed the need for workplace assessors to be supported and recognised for their contribution to the efficient performance of their work groups. Highlighted was the requirement for resource systems such as an organisation's Learning Management System to continually remain current with information, knowledge and data to ensure the learner, trainer and assessor are performing procedures in line with current legislative and production requirements.

Another main finding was the need to allocate dedicated time for the process of workplace assessment. An organisation needs to review the corporate value of training that is provided on-the-job versus sending employees to an outsourced training program, where the learning may not be implemented into workplace practices. The system of workplace assessment advances a method of continual learning in an environment that is relevant to the adult learner – their own workplace. The system promotes encouragement, support and motivation of the worker and is a cost efficient strategy to increase productivity and sustainability and engagement of the workforce.

Implementation of quality assured training and workplace assessment systems should be regarded by high reliability organisations as high priority as there are no room for mistakes offshore...

*... you'll either kill yourself, kill someone else, or take out the whole platform (RA20).*

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