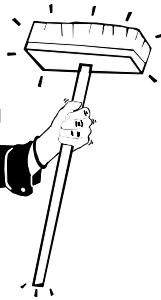


CLEAN START

FAIR DEAL FOR CLEANERS



17 October 2009

WORK STRUCTURE

The risks of poor work structure and the opportunities to change

KEY POINTS

- The high and serious injury rates in contract cleaning are partly a result of informal work structures and recruitment processes and incredibly high workloads exacerbate physical risks.
- Cleaners are often not given the time to provide a quality clean or complete tasks.
- Work structures and recruitment processes are informal in the cleaning industry and this leads to a culture of exploitation and greater precariousness in turn leading to cleaner injury rates and therefore owner risk.
- Opportunities exist for improving the working environment for cleaners through formalised work structures and the flow on effects of such improvements for owners would be a greater level of service and security, along with risk minimisation due to minimised risk of injuries.
- The Clean Start Collective Agreement gives specific instructions to remedy these issues and Clean Start cleaning companies and owners are working with the LHMU to make these changes.

Injury rates in contract cleaning are so high that they are currently rated second only to those in the concrete construction industry¹. The nature of injuries are serious and more likely to lead to permanent disability²³. Ethical dilemmas aside, such high rates of injury expose property owners to prosecution under duty of care Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) legislation. High injury levels also lead to more expensive contract prices due to higher workers compensation premiums.

In exploring why contract cleaning produces such a great number of casualties as compared to other industries, analysts have focused on the unique physical (slips and falls hazards, awkward posture, heavy lifting etc) and “psychosocial” or “work organisational” (workload, time pressures, job demands and control, work structure) risk factors⁴.

¹ WorkCover NSW, *Insurance Premium Order 2009-2010*, WorkCover Authority of NSW, Sydney, 11 June 2009, Table B.

² WorkCover NSW, *A guide for property owners and managers: health and safety for cleaning contractors in NSW*, Guide 1, WorkCover NSW, Sydney, 2003, pp1

³ According to the WA WorkSafe Authority, in the four years from 2000 to 2004, 297 cleaning industry workers were injured seriously enough to miss at least 60 days of work: *Cleaning inspection program reveals lack of awareness of safety requirements*, media release, Department of Consumer and Employment Protection, Government of Western Australia, 30 May 2006.

⁴ WorkCover NSW, *Assessment of the repetitive manual tasks of cleaners*, report prepared by F Weigall, K Simpson, A Bell & L Kemp of Health & Safety Matters Pty Ltd, Gympie, February 2005

A WorkCover NSW report noted: “permitting or encouraging workers to operate at chronically excessive workloads should be prohibited due to the well known hazards and high injury and disease risk”.⁵

As well as negatively impacting on cleaners’ health, high workloads also have a massive impact on the quality of clean that owners and tenants receive, although many cleaners will regularly work over their shifts with no pay in order to get the job done.

“I clean the toilets, 70 toilets and I have to clean those in 2 hours, 50 minutes every day. That’s 70 toilets, 88 washbasins, 88 mirrors and 10 urinals as well as restock and clean up mess that’s always left behind. I worked out that you have about 45 seconds per toilet to clean it with everything else you’ve got to do. I don’t feel I can do a proper job and you’ve got to work extra [unpaid] to get it done”.⁶

Most organisational strategies are legal prerequisites and include providing training and consultation with staff over OHS information, work methods and cleaning equipment. Studies have shown that “where cleaners have been actively involved in negotiating their work rates and other aspects of their work, this involvement has achieved a positive effect on working conditions and workers’ health”⁷ as well as yielding a range of organisational benefits.⁸

However research and experience has shown that time and again reporting systems and training are often inadequate or totally missing in the contract cleaning industry.⁹

Where OHS information is provided this has often been found to be available in English only¹⁰ completely alienating a large proportion of cleaners who do not have English as a first language¹¹. Often job training and safety information is only passed on in an incidental manner. Such informal practices mirror the informal nature of recruitment in the industry with many staff engaged through a network of friends and relatives.¹²

Cleaning companies commonly deploy tacit and implicit threats to employment as another tool to create a “docile workforce”.¹³ The combination of these factors result in cleaners being loathe to report incidents, press for adequate equipment or refuse unsafe work requests; and are more likely to quietly accept cash in hand payments, and underpayment or non-payment of legal minimum requirements.¹⁴

⁵ WorkCover NSW, *Assessment of the repetitive manual tasks of cleaners.*, p.70

⁶ Interview with cleaner 30/07/2009

⁷ WorkCover NSW, *Assessment of the repetitive manual tasks of cleaners.*

⁸ W MacDonald, ‘The impacts of job demands and workload on stress and fatigue’, *Australian Psychologist*, Volume 38 Number 2, July 2003, pp 102-117.

⁹ V Woods & P Buckle, ‘Musculoskeletal Ill Health Amongst Cleaners and Recommendations for Work Organisational Change’, *International Journal of Ergonomics*, vol. 36, 2006, pp. 61-72.

¹⁰ WorkCover NSW, *Assessment of the repetitive manual tasks of cleaners.*

¹¹ In some contract cleaning workplaces, the percentage of people from a Non English Speaking Background (NESB) is as high as 90%: Shaun Ryan ‘Taken to the Cleaners? The Peculiarities of Employment Relations in NSW Contract Cleaning Industry’. Paper presented at the AIRAANZ conference, Wollongong, January 2001.

¹² Ryan, op. cit, p. 75.

¹³ A recent Fair Work Ombudsman inspection of buildings in Sydney found many instances of job threats being deployed to coerce cleaners into signing AWAs and receiving under-Award payments: ‘\$80,000 fine for threats over pay deal’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6/08/2009.

¹⁴ R Johnstone, M Quinlan & C Mayhew, ‘Outsourcing risk? The regulations of OHS where contractors are employed’, *Comparative Labor Law and Policy Journal*, vol. 22, 2001, pp. 351-393.

“I have problems with some chemicals for example bleach...I told the supervisor that it was impossible to well to put a lot of bleach on the floors because it has the smell... I couldn't breath properly because I had to use a spray and you can use that spray but in open space. But they didn't care. “Just do it it's not our problem” and if you can't do it you can lose your job. I thought that losing my job was that easy for any problem I was going to be dismissed. After sometime I learned that it was not fair that I had rights. They, they abuse you exploit you and if you complain they say that there are many people looking for a job”¹⁵.

Numerous studies are quite clear about what needs to be done to remedy these issues and create a safe and healthy working environment for cleaners that are free from risk:

“Managers and supervisors should work with staff to improve organisation of cleaning to ensure better musculoskeletal health. The importance of organisational changes must be recognised by others in the industry”¹⁶.

The Clean Start Agreement is key to this push for change. The Agreement binds cleaning companies to providing an induction for new starters which has regard for individual language needs, and outlines the information necessary to provide as well as introducing a process for on the job training. It mandates respect for employees, details the formal recruitment process and how the formal structure of work should operate including the application of Duty Schedules outlining work responsibilities. Clean Start cleaning companies are in constant dialogue with the LHMU in order to make these commitments real.

¹⁵ LHMU Interview with cleaner 17/06/2009

¹⁶ Woods & Buckle, 'Musculoskeletal ill health amongst cleaners and recommendations for work organisational change', *International Journal of Industrial Ergonomics*, vol 36, pp 61-77, 2006