

A close-up photograph of a farmer wearing a blue jacket and a cap, kneeling in a field. The farmer is watering a young plant with a watering can. The scene is illuminated by the warm, golden light of a sunrise or sunset, creating a soft glow and highlighting the texture of the soil and the leaves of the plants. The background shows rows of similar young plants stretching into the distance.

# From Farm to Fork: Navigating the Perilous Path of Workplace Safety across Australia's Food Supply Chain

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A woman wearing a white lab coat and a white hairnet is working in a food processing facility. She is focused on her task, handling strawberries. The background shows several blue crates filled with fresh strawberries, and a stainless steel work surface with a scale and other equipment. The lighting is bright, highlighting the red color of the strawberries and the white of her attire.

At the time when consumers are increasingly conscious of the journey their food takes from farm to fork, Australia's agriculture, food, and beverage industries face a critical juncture.

While much attention has been given to food quality and sustainability, there is a growing recognition that the safety and well-being of those who work along this supply chain—from farms to processing plants, packaging, transportation, and warehousing, to restaurants—are equally crucial.

This perspective shift transcends regulatory compliance; it acknowledges that workplace safety is a shared responsibility, encompassing everyone involved in bringing food from the field to the table. **Ensuring that every step in the process from food production to consumption is free from harm to workers, surrounding communities, and the environment is vital.**

We can foster a more sustainable and humane food system by emphasising transparency and ethical practices throughout the value chain. This is akin to how consumers have shifted their purchasing preferences away from conflict diamonds, by demanding ethical and responsible sourcing.

Recent developments, including Australia's focus on psychological well-being and the impact of extreme weather events, underscore the need for a comprehensive approach to both physical and psychological safety.

The Respect@Work legislation in Australia places a positive duty on employers to safeguard their employees' psychosocial well-being, which is now assumed as important as preventing physical injuries. This holistic duty of care is also mandated by the Corporations Act at the board level for Directors and Officers, requiring good governance and comprehensive safety practices.

Increasingly, companies in the agriculture, food and beverage industries are seeking guidance on how to meet these new requirements. **Every role in the food supply chain, from chefs to truck drivers to farmers, deserves attention and protection.** This desire for better culture of care in food production industries stems from the inordinate number of injuries sustained annually.

### The Stark Reality: Alarming Statistics

Despite advancements in workplace health and safety, Safe Work Australia statistics reveal persistent issues with serious injuries, fatalities, and illnesses. The 2022 Key Work Health and Safety Statistics report highlights that the agriculture, forestry, and fishing industry reported 33 worker fatalities in 2021, with a fatality rate of 10.4 per 100,000 workers. These statistics underscore the urgent need for improved and sustainable safety measures.

### Climate Resilience: The New Frontier

As extreme weather events become more frequent, safety protocols must evolve. Enhanced heat stress management, improved air filtration systems, and comprehensive emergency preparedness are no longer optional but essential components of a robust safety strategy for food production areas. For example, the 2019-2020 Black Summer Fires in Sydney severely impacted air quality and led to significant loss of homes, animal life, and biodiversity. More recently, extreme flooding in regional Victoria, South Australia, and Queensland in 2023 cut off sites and communities for weeks, while severe heatwaves in New South Wales and South Australia caused widespread health impacts.

For example, implementing effective air filtration systems is crucial during such events, ensuring employee well-being and safeguarding business continuity in an increasingly unpredictable climate. These systems help mitigate health risks posed by smoke from bushfires and pollutants stirred up by floods.

### Regulatory Context: National Legislation on Psychological Safety

In April 2023, significant changes to Commonwealth work health and safety laws mandated employers to manage hazards and risks to workers' psychological health and safety. Influenced by the Boland Report and ISO 45003:2021 standards, these changes require employers to address psychosocial hazards.

Key developments include:

- Australia's "right to disconnect" law, effective from August 26, 2024, allows employees to not respond to work communications outside of work hours unless unreasonable.
- Safe Work Australia's Code of Practice: Managing Psychosocial Hazards at Work, published in July 2022.
- Work Health and Safety laws requiring employers to manage psychosocial risks.
- ISO 45003:2021 providing guidance for compliance where specific codes are absent.



## The Dual Challenge: Mind and Body

The industry's safety landscape is evolving beyond traditional physical hazards.

While risks like slips, falls, and machinery accidents remain significant, the spotlight is increasingly on psychological safety.

Recent guidelines highlight the importance of creating environments where employees feel secure to voice concerns without fear of reprisal. This dual focus on mental and physical well-being is not just a regulatory requirement; it's a cornerstone of operational excellence. Staying ahead with prevention through risk identification and management can be realised through psychosocially safe workplaces.

## Strategic Integration of Safety for Business Growth

For agriculture, food, and beverage companies, it is imperative to elevate safety from a compliance requirement to a strategic priority. Many organisations are now embedding safety considerations across their operations, from process design to employee training.

However, our observations reveal a lack of awareness about the true value of safety among both leaders and frontline workers. This gap affects the effectiveness of safety initiatives and overlooks the potential benefits of improved services and productivity that a robust safety culture can achieve.

At dss+, we advocate implementing an integrated approach, comprising the right technical model, organisational capabilities, mindsets, and behaviours (culture), and managing processes to achieve excellence. To enable a safety culture shift, it is essential for an organisation to:



- 1 Conduct an **in-depth benchmark diagnostic** to evaluate the maturity of the organisation's current safety management and processes, implementation, and effectiveness against globally recognised benchmarks.
- 2 Identify and prioritise **key areas for safety management improvement and recognise any cultural disparities** across operations and the supply chain.
- 3 Develop a **Safety Improvement Strategy** with a detailed roadmap, including sessions for potential cultural transformation. Foster a culture where safety is everyone's responsibility through open communication and continuous improvement.
- 4 Invest in **data analytics and technology** not just for productivity but as a core component of safety infrastructure. This includes using Internet of Things (IoT) sensors to monitor equipment performance and virtual reality (VR) simulations for high-risk task training.

# Case Example:

## How an Australian Food Manufacturer Achieved a 50% Improvement in Safety Performance

A safety transformation project led by dss+ for a leading food manufacturer in Australia, embodies the company's commitment to enhancing workplace safety. The intent was to develop and implement a robust safety culture among leaders at all levels, ultimately aiming to achieve zero workplace-related injuries and illnesses.

The outcome was heartening and significant: a **50% improvement in safety performance over three years**, accompanied by increased employee engagement and improved safety indicators.

The approach began with dss+ conducting multi-site assessments to evaluate safety perceptions, values, and management elements. Based on these insights, a three-year strategy for focused safety improvements was developed. Senior leaders were trained and coached in safety leadership to drive change management processes, while safety champions were selected from the workforce and coached alongside the leaders. This collaboration embedded key capabilities within the organization and clarified role accountabilities, fostering continuous improvement.

Key takeaways from this project include the importance of leadership involvement in training and coaching, the value of embedding safety champions within the workforce, and the effectiveness of a structured, strategic approach to safety improvements. These efforts resulted in a shift towards a proactive safety culture, demonstrating that with the right commitment and strategy, significant enhancements in safety performance are achievable.

### A Call to Action

The urgency for proactive safety measures in Australia's agriculture, food, and beverage sectors cannot be overstated. As regulatory expectations increase and environmental challenges intensify, companies that prioritise comprehensive safety strategies will not only protect their workforce but also gain a competitive edge.

The path forward requires a significant shift—viewing safety not as a cost but as an investment in business resilience, efficiency, and long-term success.

For industry leaders, the question is no longer whether to act, but how quickly and comprehensively they can implement these crucial changes. The future of the industry depends on it.



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