

# Asia's Leaders in the Occupational Safety and Health Industry: Skye Buatava

World of Safety & Health Asia has returned with another series of interviews with the region's top leaders in the occupational safety and health industry. We are honoured to present Skye Buatava, Director of the Centre for Work Health and Safety and the Director of the 23rd World Congress on Safety and Health at Work as our guest. Skye brings a wealth of experience which includes leadership roles in multi-national organisations, 12+ years within SafeWork NSW, and establishment and management of the Centre for WHS; a cutting-edge research facility within the NSW Government. Her current project is the 23rd World Congress, the largest and longest-running international WHS forum.

## Ms Skye, could you tell us about your journey in the workplace safety and health industry as to how it initially started?

You could say that I “fell” into work health and safety, and I am sure it echoes the experience of some of your readers. In my case, I fell into it at a later stage of my career. I left school at a relatively young age, and joined the workforce early on, starting in the travel industry. My first job was for a flight booking agency! At the time, I was surely attracted by the glamour of helping people go on holidays. I stuck with the travel industry for a while as I eventually joined our national airline, Qantas Airways. I worked there for over a decade, traversing positions across various sectors, in small and large businesses: workplace health and safety was simply not on my radar.

One thing about those days was the long commute I had, around 3-4 hours a day. I was completely fine with it. In those days, there were no flexible work, so we didn't know any better, but I guess my husband was looking for alternatives as he placed a job advertisement under my nose for the work health and safety regulator which happened to be 20 minutes from home. I jumped onto it, got the job, and a few months later, I was hooked.

## To lead such an important position for your country, I believe you must have a strong passion to do so. May I ask as to when and how you discovered this passion?

My first role with the work health and safety regulator was to support the investigations team. This team examined the worst workplace tragedies seeking to ascertain why these incidents occurred, who was culpable, and how to advance compliance and enforcement measures. Being exposed to the most serious of incidents was a really tough introduction into the world of work health and safety, a reality check in some regards and on reflection, I am grateful for that. This made me realise very early on, the significance and importance of work

health and safety and our role as a regulator. Yes, these incidents were awful, and the cost, that is the human cost, the cost of the harm and death in the workplace, was unspeakable. But all appeared to be preventable and the message for me was that I can do something here. I have an important role to play. More than a passion, this became my drive and the reason why I go to work every day. To know that what I do makes a difference to preserve the health and the safety of workers in NSW.

## In terms of workplace safety and health, where are we and how far have we come?

Serious workplace incidents are reducing, and we are now recognising the impact of psychosocial harm – both positives. However, the greatest sign of how far we have come is the rise of people's social conscience and thus, the priority placed on social impact.

Social impact has become an important factor in making decisions nowadays. Many people, for instance, are happy to pay a little more for something produced in an ethical and sustainable manner. Many investors now consider a company's social proposition and impact when choosing where to place their money. Also, when deciding who to work for or to remain working for, the company's social offering can be of equal weight as remuneration in people's decisions.

This is why I think one of the key opportunities of our profession over the next decade will be to leverage this societal shift led by our younger generation and ensure that the provision of a healthy and safe workplace is recognised as a key social benefit. Check out the United National sustainable development goals – number 8. Target 8.8 is specific to our field - *Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment.* Our challenge and opportunity lie within the recognition of this connection to work health and safety.

**Have you ever led or implemented a campaign or policy that still makes you happy because it helped the industry so much?**

Yes, but I'd like to talk about something bigger that I had the privilege to lead, and that has driven real behaviour changes in the industry: the establishment of the Centre for Work Health and Safety (Centre for WHS).

In 2017, I received the opportunity to create a research division which would sit under the regulator and would provide a better way to support better regulatory practices and the prevention of harm. Now, research isn't my area of expertise, but in hindsight, I think that this was exactly what was needed to establish something different, something focused solely on its impact on the prevention of workplace harm.

The approach I took was to learn from the experiences of similar ventures previously created, but to advance the thinking by bringing in the perspectives of the broader WHS community; WHS professionals, researchers, workers' associations, government, and business associations. That's how the skeleton of what's now the Centre for WHS was born.

We are now 6 years in and counting, and the Centre for WHS has become a reference in the world of WHS and harm prevention. It has delivered evidence-based tools that are put into the hands of workplaces and drive the prevention of harm and change behaviour. The work is done in collaboration with top academics all over Australia and beyond, and while the work has contributed to the academic literature, this is not its primary objective. Its primary objective is to make a difference in the workplace and improve the health and safety of workers.

The Centre has also improved regulation using evidence, whether by assessing existing enforcement tools and more appropriately,

targeting those to drive the behaviour change we desire. Or by looking for changes in our constantly evolving work environment to ensure the regulator is providing awareness education and has the capacity to respond to emerging harms, technology and new work practices. Our data science function ensures that machine learning is part of the regulator's intelligence, supporting our inspector resourcing to the right areas.

But I'm most proud of the collaborative nature of the Centre for WHS which brings together a divergent set of minds from a range of academic disciplines, alongside the perspectives of the worker, the business, the regulator, and others in the WHS. The power of the collective is what makes us different, impactful and successful.

**Is there an incident or series of incidents that keeps you awake at night, making you want to do more to prevent workplace safety and health issues?**

What's happening in the gig economy would have to come on top, specifically in the food delivery and in-home care sectors. The gig economy is a complex space, it is a non-traditional form of work engagement, characterised by atypical workplaces which can be on the road, in someone else's home, or in the street. More so, it is resourced by Australia's most vulnerable demographics, with many challenges to harm prevention – multilingualism is one of them.

In 2020, I co-led SafeWork NSW's agile regulatory response to the gig economy's food delivery riders following 5 fatal incidents. Aiming to elevate safety standards, we brought together businesses, workers, researchers and the government to design a holistic approach using evidence to clarify the problems, established a clear regulatory position for

all duty holders and enforcement activities to support the position, and negotiated an industry action influencing the shared responsibilities.

Having all the stakeholders engaged from the start, organically, meant that it became a campaign of sorts. Elevated standards enacted by the delivery platforms ensure the safety of riders. Thankfully, the most pleasing result is we have subsequently seen a steep decline in incidents.

The Centre for WHS is also doing work with in-home care stakeholders in a similar way and the gig economy remains one of the regulator's priorities today.

**Is there a person or people who have had a significant influence on you towards your present role? Perhaps someone who has been a mentor to you? Why and how did this person have an impact on you?**

My manager in my first role at the work health and safety regulator comes to mind. The access and exposure that he afforded me early on, to very emotional situations and sensitive information in relation to serious incidents, cultivated the path for a passion to develop. He had a significant influence on the establishment of my WHS journey, but more so on my development as a WHS leader. His leadership style really inspired me. He was extremely professional, passionate, compassionate, extremely knowledgeable and in the pursuit of positive outcomes, would put aside self-interest for the collective benefit. I cannot overstate his influence as a manager, WHS specialist, human and mentor. I now try to bring forth in my own unique way, to pave the way for the development of the next wave of passionate WHS professionals.

**What, in your opinion, are the most important attributes of a safety practitioner today, and why?**

The role of a WHS practitioner is a tough gig, it can cover such an array of disciplines; everything from ergonomics to engineering. It requires a real mix of technical and soft skills. I do have 3 primary attributes that come to mind; top of the list is without hesitation the ability to engage and consult with a range of audiences. As a practitioner, you must be able to connect with the people doing the work to understand the mark and consider their perspective and context. Context is crucial to any practical solution and without it, your solution may be overridden, dismissed or ignored by those doing the work.

The second attribute in my list would be the ability to analyse and think outside of the box. The problems we are faced with can be so diverse, and sometimes, the most logical control is impractical in different circumstances or environments. We know that there is no one size fits all. For example, steel-capped boots will protect you from the risk of puncture and crush on a construction site, but not when working near crocodiles in their swampy, natural habitat. The ability to analyse and think outside of the box is fundamental to risk management and mitigation, learning how to see hazards and assess risk based on what you are presented with, and creating options for mitigation.

Finally, business acumen and strategic thinking. We are regularly challenged by the de-prioritisation of WHS against other business objectives. Having at least a base level of understanding about businesses might enable you to better align WHS with the business objectives and help you secure support and agreement.

### As a safety practitioner in workplace safety & health, what advice would you provide to the stakeholders in the industry today?

We have one life, and we spend a major part of it in the workplace, so make sure that this time is spent in a healthy and safe environment. What does it mean for you? If you are a business owner or WHS practitioner, this means "protect others", what you do or don't do can affect the lives of your workers. If you are a frontline worker, that means "protect yourself and your colleagues", speak up when you see unhealthy practices, stop work when it's unsafe, and take part in the WHS conversation in your workplace.

We all want the same thing, the prevention of harm at work, and everyone has to play their role for us to achieve this.

If I may, and firstly, thank you for this opportunity. I just want to plug that many of the topics that have been covered during our chat and much more will be discussed during the 23rd World Congress on Safety and Health at Work in Sydney's Darling Harbour. We have some fantastic speakers and great topics, and we would love to see you there. Sydney in November will be stunning. We will have koalas at the venue, multiple demonstrations of the Australian culture and the Gala dinner itself will be held overlooking the Opera House and Sydney Harbour Bridge at Circular Quay: one of a kind. For more information, please visit <https://safety2023sydney.com/>.

#### Kajol Manoharlal

Editor in Chief

World of Safety and Health Asia

## Are you a safety advocate?

