

INSIGHT

Understanding Passenger Vessel Safety: How to Design, Implement and Improve Your SMS



Several years have passed since the fatal Conception dive boat fire claimed 34 lives off the California coast, prompting the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) to renew its efforts to improve passenger vessel safety requirements.

In light of this move, all passenger vessel operators should consider reevaluating their safety programs and procedures to ensure relevant and all-encompassing protocols govern their vessels, offices, facilities and anywhere else they may do business. This can be accomplished by ensuring a strong Safety Management System (SMS).

Developing a robust SMS, which provides a framework for minimizing risks related to safety, security and environmental dangers at every level of an organization, can help leaders begin on this journey.

An SMS outlines the organization's approach to managing risk, plans to mitigate health and safety issues and roadmaps for addressing incidents that occur. It also serves as a guide for employees, communicating the organization's commitment to a safety-conscious culture.

The Elements of a Strong SMS

Maritime, aviation, rail and other intermodal transportation methods serving critical infrastructure face a unique set of risks and liabilities when accidents occur. Incidents in these industries can have far-reaching consequences on employees and operations, and can further impact surrounding areas. As such, commercial and passenger transportation operators are required by law to have a functional SMS that addresses their unique operations.

A comprehensive SMS can help ensure the well-being of your employees, better protect your assets and maintain safe, secure environments for business operations. Per regulatory guidance, it must include clearly defined safety and environmental protection policies, safe operating procedures and the business levels of authority, alongside other specific guidance designed to ensure ongoing safety in the enterprise. This insight is intended to act as a guiding light for employees at all levels and to evidence executive leadership's commitment to compliance and continual improvement.



Though safety policies are unique to each business, there are three key features (aside from the components required by law) that all SMSs should include to help guarantee safer, more productive work environments:

- **Continual improvement measures:** Sometimes called safety assurance measures, continual improvement measures are designed to evaluate the ongoing effectiveness of the SMS and any implemented risk control strategies.
- **Risk management program:** The safety risk management program includes procedures that help safety leaders identify new risks and hazards as they arise, develop new controls to address them, and assess their efficacy.
- **Cultural supports:** Corporate culture is key to curating a safe working environment. SMSs should include clear guidance on the company plans for training, communication and values to help ensure that all employees understand the importance of workplace safety; why certain rules, regulations and protocols are in place; and the potential consequences of not adhering to the SMS guidance.

Step-by-Step to a Stronger SMS

To improve existing protocols, companies should engage in a robust implementation process. This can be conducted in-house, but engaging with experts from ABS Consulting can help you:

1. Establish a baseline of current performance

The first step is an audit that examines current procedures and practices. ABS Consulting experts can help you ensure the highest level of safety and compliance standards throughout your organization by conducting internal reviews to determine the legitimacy and effectiveness of your organization's existing SMS. This involves a review of your manual's governance, management of change and review and approval processes for alignment with applicable regulatory guidance.

2. Identify opportunities for improvement

Using the insights gained from the audit and their extensive experience in building safer operational models, companies can identify compliance gaps, benchmark performance against industry standards and identify opportunities for other improvements that can help reduce incidents and costs, enhance productivity and efficiency, improve reputation and build a strong safety culture that helps maintain stakeholders' confidence.

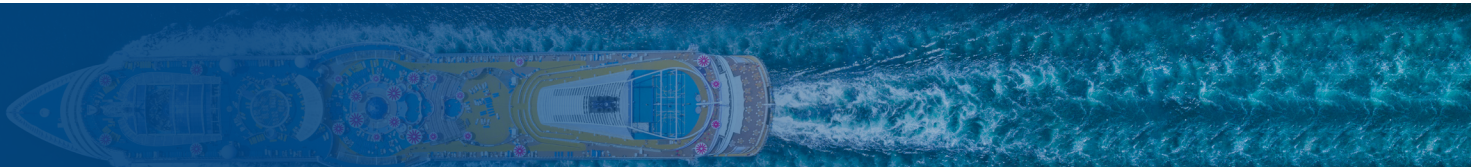
You can use this as a guide to ensure that your new SMS framework both aligns with current International Organization for Standardization (ISO) standards and includes additional measures that help to protect your assets.

3. Develop and/or update standard operational procedures (SOPs) and checklists

You can now begin updating existing operational documentation and identifying areas for supporting checklists within each SOP. It may also be valuable to conduct working sessions with various internal stakeholders to inform further SOP and checklist updates to ensure compliance with all internal policies and regulations. This is imperative for promoting standardization across all internal documents, which will ease the overall implementation process

4. Gain approval and implement efficiencies to drive widespread adoption

Once you've developed a functional and actionable SMS, you can begin to roll-out the new SMS throughout the enterprise and attain buy-in from various business areas. It may also be helpful to explore technological supports that streamline outlined processes like data entry, reporting or any other administrative work that may arise from updated policies. Investing in automation tools like these may help departmental leadership get up to speed faster and adhere to new guidance more effectively.



5. Pursue continual improvement and optimization

Safety management is a continual process. As risks and threats change, so too do the controls needed to address them. Leadership should conduct regular assessments of compliance, address corrective and preventive actions, engage in Root Cause Analyses (RCAs), and adjust their Quality Management Systems (QMSs) as needed to meet evolving operational requirements. They should also be sure to update training and cultural initiatives to reflect any changes that may arise.

Safety and Beyond

A robust SMS not only enhances transparency and stakeholder communication but also helps you to better optimize your operations and improve your bottom line all while adhering to local and federal regulations.

In the long term, an effective and efficient SMS system will help create a strong corporate culture that better supports scaling strategies in a safer environment and reduces the risk of systematic failures, ultimately setting the company up for greater success from a business and financial perspective.

At ABS Consulting, our SMS offering helps organizations achieve these objectives while maintaining compliance with evolving local and federal standards so that their fleets whether comprising ferries, leisure ships, freight trains, towing, or any other type of vessel stay safe and compliant.



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About ABS Consulting

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