

October 2026 *NEWSLETTER*

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Safety Under Pressure

When deadlines become more important than precautions

A deadline is a business requirement, not a substitute for a safety control. When output, delivery or completion dates become the overriding measure of success, essential precautions may be shortened, delayed or quietly abandoned. The immediate result may be faster work; the underlying result may be greater exposure to harm.

When the clock begins to influence safety decisions

Pressure rarely arrives as a direct instruction to break a safety rule. Urgent orders, breakdowns, examination timetables or a request to "make a plan" can lead to rushed inspections, deferred permits, continued use of defective equipment or repairs without proper isolation.

Each adjustment may look minor. Together, they weaken layers of protection. Safety professionals should examine whether the organisation supplied the time, equipment, competent people and authority needed to work safely under actual conditions.

The warning sign: The safe method still exists on paper, but the production schedule can only be achieved by working around it.

What South African OHS legislation requires

The Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993 does not suspend duties during peak production or urgent work. Section 8(1) requires a safe working environment, as far as reasonably practicable. Section 8(2) specifies important elements of this duty:

Section 8(2)(a), (b) and (d): maintain safe systems of work, take reasonably practicable steps to eliminate or mitigate hazards before relying on PPE, identify hazards and precautions, and provide the means to implement those precautions.

Section 8(2)(e): provide the information, instruction, training and supervision necessary, as far as reasonably practicable, to protect employees.

Section 8(2)(f): as far as reasonably practicable, do not permit work or use of plant and machinery before the relevant precautions have been taken.

Section 8(2)(g), (h) and (i): take measures to secure compliance, enforce necessary safety measures, and ensure general supervision by a person trained to understand the hazards and authorised to ensure implementation of precautions.

Section 9(1) extends the employer's duty to people who are not employees but may be directly affected by its activities, such as visitors, learners or members of the public. Section 13(a) addresses employees' knowledge of work-related hazards and precautions. Under section 14(a)–(d), employees must take reasonable care, cooperate, follow lawful safety requirements and report unsafe or unhealthy situations as soon as practicable.

Section 16(1) requires the chief executive officer, as far as reasonably practicable, to ensure that the employer's duties are properly discharged. Under section 16(2), duties may be assigned to persons under the chief executive officer's control without removing that officer's responsibility or liability. Operational deadlines do not transfer the employer's obligations to the employee who was told to work faster.

> **Important distinction:** "Reasonably practicable" has a defined meaning in section 1. It requires consideration of the severity and scope of the risk, reasonably available knowledge, available and suitable controls, and cost relative to the benefits of risk reduction. A delivery deadline or budget target is not, by itself, an exemption from applying required precautions. The Act does not prescribe one universal production pace, stop-work form or deadline-related risk assessment checklist.

Six ways deadline pressure weakens risk controls

1. Essential checks become optional in practice

Pre-use inspections, equipment checks and verification steps may be shortened to recover lost time. A signed checklist then appears reassuring even though a guard, lifting attachment or emergency stop was never meaningfully checked. Inspect the quality of the check, not only whether the form exists.

2. Output targets contradict the spoken safety message

Managers may tell employees to work safely while praising only speed and criticising delays caused by reporting defects. Employees learn which behaviour attracts approval. Management should assess whether its targets, incentives and responses to legitimate stoppages support the precautions it expects.

3. Fatigue and staffing gaps go unrecognised

Extended hours, repeated call-outs, insufficient cover and difficult handovers can affect attention, judgement and supervision. Workload and fatigue should be assessed in relation to the actual task and exposure; the OHS Act does not set one general fatigue threshold for every workplace.

4. Breakdown recovery introduces uncontrolled work

A failed machine creates both a production problem and a new risk profile. Pressure to restart can result in informal repairs, missing isolation checks, unplanned work at height or the use of temporary equipment. The changed work must be assessed and controlled before restart.

5. Contractors and shifts work to different assumptions

A rushed delivery or repair may bring drivers, cleaners, technicians and employees into the same area with unclear traffic routes, access arrangements or handovers. A brief coordination check can reveal hazards that no single team sees in full.

6. Reports are treated as obstacles to completion

When employees believe raising a concern will delay the job or lead to criticism, warning information may stop reaching management. A credible reporting system requires an appropriate response, feedback and effective action, not merely a place to record concerns.

Examples: pressure in everyday workplaces

Example 1 – Manufacturing factory. A large export order is due for collection. A reel guide is damaged, but the supervisor proposes one more production run. The operator has to reach near moving components to keep the machine feeding. The appropriate response is to prevent unsafe operation, assess the defect, arrange competent maintenance and confirm required guarding and operating precautions before restarting. The shipment date may need to change.

Example 2 – School maintenance. A school hall must be ready for an evening function. A maintenance worker is asked to replace a failed light above the stage in the last hour of the day. Suitable access equipment is unavailable and people are preparing the hall below. The work should be rescheduled or properly planned with suitable access equipment, area control and competent persons rather than improvising to meet the event deadline.

Example 3 – Food preparation. A school kitchen is behind schedule and staff begin stacking hot trays in an unsuitable passage near the service exit. A supervisor authorises temporary storage "until lunch is finished". Instead, the team should establish a safe, suitable staging area, keep circulation and emergency access clear, and reorganise the service schedule.

A practical management response: plan the pressure, not the shortcut

Where a deadline is tight, the employer and responsible managers should make the safety decision visible before employees are forced to improvise. A useful risk-based approach is to:

Identify the actual pressure: what changed, which tasks are affected, who will be exposed and what work is now non-routine?
Confirm essential precautions: which controls, competencies, inspections, isolation steps or access arrangements must be in place before the work proceeds?
Provide workable resources: sufficient time, suitable equipment, capable supervision, maintenance support and coordination between affected teams.
Create a clear escalation route: ensure employees know who can authorise a safe alternative, delay, isolation or cessation of unsafe work. Do not expect an employee to resolve an unsafe conflict alone.
Observe work while pressure is highest: check the actual task, not just the schedule, checklist or assurance provided at a meeting.
Review the outcome: record important decisions and corrective actions, verify that controls were effective, and adjust planning so the same pressure does not produce the same shortcuts.

Indicators safety professionals should examine

A rise in pressure-related risk may be visible before an injury occurs. Review patterns such as:

pre-use checks completed unusually quickly or with identical findings across shifts;
recurring temporary repairs, deferred maintenance or late changes to work methods;
repeated overtime, reduced breaks, fatigue concerns or shortages of competent personnel;
work being completed before permits, authorisations or agreed precautions are in place;
increased vehicle and pedestrian interaction during dispatch peaks;
employees describing essential precautions as "too slow" or "not possible today"; and
near misses, defects or safety objections that repeatedly appear just before deadlines.
These indicators warrant investigation; none proves a breach on its own. Look for the link between the operating demand, the decision made and the effectiveness of the controls.

If pressure contributes to an incident or near miss

Investigations should examine why work was rushed, who set the deadline, whether the resources and precautions were adequate, what supervisors observed and whether earlier warnings were addressed. Avoid ending the investigation with "the employee was careless". Individual duties remain relevant, but system and management decisions may also have contributed.

Section 24 of the OHS Act sets reporting requirements for specified serious incidents and dangerous occurrences. General Administrative Regulation 9 requires incidents falling within its recording criteria to be recorded and investigated within seven days, with findings entered in the prescribed record and relevant follow-up. Not every near miss is automatically reportable under section 24 or recordable under regulation 9; other near misses may still merit internal investigation according to their potential consequences.

Questions to ask at the next management review

Which current deadline creates the strongest incentive to bypass a precaution?
What work cannot realistically be completed safely with the resources allocated?
When did management last support a justified delay or stoppage?
Are safety concerns addressed promptly when they threaten a production target?
What evidence shows that critical precautions are maintained on busy and quiet shifts alike?

The key message

Operational urgency may be real, but it does not make hazards less serious. The most effective organisations do not demand that employees choose between meeting the deadline and applying essential precautions. They plan work so that safety requirements remain practical, empower supervisors to intervene and adapt schedules when circumstances change.

A target is not a safety control. When the deadline is at risk, reassess the plan—not the standard of protection.

How Top Compliance can assist

Top Compliance assists organisations with OHS audits, hazard identification and risk assessments, safe working procedures, workplace inspections, management and supervisor training, incident-investigation guidance and practical corrective-action planning.

Legal references: OHS Act 85 of 1993, as amended (section 1, 8, 9, 13, 14, 16 and 24); General Administrative Regulations, 2003 (GN R929, regulation 9).

Sources:

Occupational Health and Safety Act No 85 of 1993

General Administrative Regulations

This newsletter provides general OHS guidance, not site-specific legal advice. Apply relevant regulations, incorporated standards, equipment instructions and risk assessments to the work actually performed.

For more information, please contact us on info@topcompliance.co.za

Yours in Health and Safety

	
Occupational health and safety auditing and consulting	Online safety shop

				
Appointments, checklists and templates	First aid equipment	Signage	Legal posters	Safety Equipment

Courses offered by Top Compliance (Pty) Ltd

ONLINE ACADEMY - https://academy.topcompliance.co.za/		
Occupational Health and Safety Courses	**Online**	**Onsite Excluding travel**
Safety representative – Legal Liability	R980.00	R1300.00
The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability	R1250.00	R 1730.00
Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment	R735.00	R875.00
Food facility health & safety course in terms of R638	R735.00	R875.00
Basic Ladder Safety Course	R735.00	R875.00
Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses		
Fire Marshal - Basic firefighting	R735.00	R875.00
Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning	R810.00	R950.00
First aid		
Level 1 - US 119567 - Perform basic life support and first aid procedures – THEORY MODULE	R400.00	-

ONLINE ACADEMY - https://academy.topcompliance.co.za/
Occupational Health and Safety Courses
Safety representative – Legal Liability
The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability
Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment
Food facility health & safety course in terms of R638
Basic Ladder Safety Course
Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses
Fire Marshal - Basic firefighting
Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning

ONSITE TRAINING	
First Aid Courses:	
Level 1 - US 119567 - Perform basic life support and first aid procedures	2 days
Level 2 - US 120496 - Provide risk-based primary emergency care/first aid in the workplace	3 days
Level 3 - US 376480 - Provide first aid as an advanced first responder	3 days
Level 1 & 2 - US 119567 & 120496	3 days
Level 1, 2 & 3 - US 119567, 120496 & 376480	5 days

Level 2 & 3 - US 120496 & 376480	3 days
Child and infant CPR & choking	6 hours
Adult CPR & choking	6 hours
Adult CPR & choking and AED	1 day
Occupational Health and Safety Courses	
Safety representative – Legal Liability	1 day
The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability	1 day
Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment	1 day
Food facility health & safety course in terms of R638	6 hours
Basic Ladder Safety	6 hours
Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses	
Fire Marshal - Basic firefighting	6 hours
Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning	1 day