



Health and Safety  
Santé et sécurité



# INTERNAL RESPONSIBILITY SYSTEM

## UNDERSTANDING THE INTERNAL RESPONSIBILITY SYSTEM

The Internal Responsibility System (IRS) puts in place an employee-employer partnership in ensuring a safe and healthy workplace. Internal responsibility is based on the realization that regulatory control alone will not make the difference in the workplace safety.

In an effective safety system, employers and employees take the lead by devising and implementing health and safety methods for their own protection.

## HOW IT WORKS

The IRS is the underlying philosophy of the occupational health and safety legislation in all Canadian jurisdictions. Its foundation is that workers and managers are expected to work together to improve their health and safety. Acts and regulations will not always impose or prescribe the specific steps to take for compliance. Instead, it holds employers responsible for compliance with health and safety legislation.

## THE UNION PERSPECTIVE ON IRS

The IRS was an important concept when it first came about, because it started to legitimize the role of workers and their unions in identifying workplace hazards and in the development of prevention. For unions, the IRS is the name government policy makers gave to how they planned to interpret their role in implementing the legislation.

Instead of directly enforcing the law, the government decided that employers and employees should work out their own disputes.

The government would only play a role of last resort. In most cases, the government uses the IRS to justify limited enforcement, stating that it relies primarily on the workplace parties to implement and uphold the laws.

The IRS is based on the idea that workers and employers should work together to prevent workplace injuries and illnesses. However, their interests often conflict. Employers frequently interpret the IRS's cooperative approach to mean that union health and safety activists should police their own membership, rather than putting the responsibility where it belongs: with the employer.

Unions have promoted the concept of joint health and safety committees with management. These committees are in place where unions can raise health and safety concerns and get help from the law, which should force the employer to recognize hazards in the workplace and develop programs for prevention. One of the major faults of the IRS is that it assumes that both sides are working with the same set of objectives. But the employers have different priorities than workers. For example, risk assessment for employers always involves the cost of prevention only in dollars and cents. For workers, the costs are calculated in terms of injury and illness.

A power imbalance also exists. Employers control decision-making and funding, while legislation merely requires the parties to meet. This allows employers to block or ignore needed changes, even when committee representatives agree on them.

Without strong government enforcement, the IRS becomes a mechanism for downloading responsibility from regulators to workplace parties—without ensuring accountability or action.



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