# WHITE PAPER

# Does BS OHSAS 18001 work?

Tim Sparey, BSI's health and safety specialist tutor, challenges the standard to deliver.

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Tim Sparey is the Tutor Development Manager for BSI. He specialises in health and safety and BS OHSAS 18001:2007. Prior to joining BSI, Tim's career began in the hospitality industry as a chef and restaurant manager. Following a return to education to study for a business degree, Tim worked in food transport and distribution as a quality, health and safety and environment manager and went on to achieve a Master of Science degree in occupational health and safety management. Tim has been assessing organisations against the requirements of BS OHSAS 18001 since its conception in 1999 and now teaches organisations the use of the standard to manage risks and improve their health and safety systems. Having previously worked on organisational behaviour studies, Tim has recently developed his enthusiasm for teaching occupational health and safety cultural and behavioural improvement. Tim regularly teaches organisations, local government and institutions to highlight the benefits of risk management and the benefits of the management of business health and safety culture and behavioural improvement.

# Introduction

In 1999 the occupational health and safety assessment series (OHSAS) specification was published with the stated aim of directing users to identify a structured approach to the implementation of a health and safety management system and the assessment of the effectiveness of the controls and the management of improvement.

The specification was revised and published as a British Standard in July 2007. Following guidance in the International Labour Organisation's Occupational Safety and Health<sup>2</sup> publication (ILO OSH), BS OHSAS 18001 included amendments to provide greater emphasis on the management of worker health and enhanced requirements regarding the evaluation of legislative compliance. BS OHSAS 18001 identifies the primary aim for any organisation using the standard as follows, to:

# Establish an OH&S management system to eliminate or minimise risks to personnel and other interested parties who could be exposed to OH&S hazards associated with its activities.

Comments published in periodicals and online forums vary from those identifying significant improvement benefits to those commenting on the inadequacy of the standard in achieving any benefits at all, purporting that it is little more than a means to generate paper. Quantified research into the proposed benefits of implementing the standard has been undertaken, however relating the benefits gained from the use of BS OHSAS 18001 to certification (registration of their OHS management system with a certification body), rather than to the benefits of the standard itself.

There have been many opinions and views as to the effectiveness and benefits of BS OHSAS 18001, often however little statistically relevant quantified data is available to provide clear evidence as to the benefits or drawbacks of the application of the standard.

David Smith<sup>3</sup> (chair of the OHSAS committee and author of publications and occupational health and safety reference books) published the benefits of BS OHSAS 18001 and identifies tangible benefits from the application of the standard, albeit from a survey directed towards certification benefits rather than the benefits of the standard itself. Smith identifies benefits as follows:

- 52% large or significant improvement in regulatory compliance
- 32% decrease in overall costs of accidents
- 17% decrease in insurance premiums
- 4% decrease of over 10% in insurance premiums

Impressive though the claims appear to be, findings have apparently not been substantiated through publication of data and relate directly to the benefits of certification rather than of the standard itself.

This research was undertaken with the primary aim of identifying whether benefits have been achieved and to ascertain whether benefits are in line with the aims of the standard. The secondary aim of the research was to objectively determine whether the standard creates a burden in terms of bureaucracy and cost.

This research has tested others' claims and sought to identify whether use of the standard itself, rather than certification alone, can improve organisation's management of health and safety. Ten years since publication therefore is an opportune time to begin to determine whether there are any tangible benefits from implementing the standard and whether such benefits can be qualified through quantitative results; rather than focussing upon benefits of certification of a BS OHSAS 18001:2007 management system as discussed in other publications.

This paper discusses whether the standard has been beneficial in application and quantifies information from the results of an extensive survey of organisations applying the standard and those assessing against the standard.

# The 'promises' the standard makes

BS OHSAS 18001 does not itself make promises, it does not specify how to manage health and safety, how to implement and design a management system or tell us directly how to make performance improvements. BS OHSAS 18001:2007 sets out generic requirements for an effective management system and lets the organisation determine the best approach to managing their risks.

The scope and foreword to the standard tells us that:

Compliance with this Occupational Health and Safety Assessment Series (OHSAS) Standard cannot confer immunity from legal obligations.

It does not state specific OH&S performance criteria, nor does it give detailed specifications for the design of a management system.

If BS OHSAS 18001 does not tell us how to implement and design a system and how to manage health and safety and improve performance, what does it do? If the standard makes no promises, what does it actually give us?

All capable health and safety personnel know that we need to continually strive to manage health and safety to mitigate risk and to reduce incidents of ill health and personal injury. To achieve this we need a defined structure for formulating an occupational health and safety management system and clear direction. We also need clearly defined responsibilities, competencies, controls and many other elements to effectively manage health and safety. So again, if 18001 does not tell us how, what does it tell us?

The standard sets out the 'overall' aims within its scope:

This Occupational Health and Safety Assessment Series (OHSAS) Standard specifies requirements for an Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) management system, to enable an organisation to control its OH&S risks and improve its OH&S performance.

The introduction to BS OHSAS 18001 tells us that, 'It is intended to apply to all types and sizes of organisations and to accommodate diverse geographical, cultural and social conditions'. Within the scope of the standard it sets out 'specific' aims detailed below:

- (a) Establish an OH&S management system to eliminate or minimise risks to personnel and other interested parties who could be exposed to OH&S hazards associated with its activities;
- (b) Implement, maintain and continually improve an OH&S management system;
- (c) Assure itself of its conformity with its stated OH&S policy;
- (d) Demonstrate conformity with this OHSAS Standard by:

So with these stated aims, but without any promises, how are we to achieve the ultimate goal of improvement and risk reduction if the standard does not explicitly tell us how?

BS OHSAS 18001 specifies requirements throughout and outlines the need to the individual organisation to determine how they will achieve such requirements through the implementation of controls. The standard specifies the word 'shall' meaning an absolute requirement that needs to be achieved, for example, risk assessment shall take into account human behaviour, top management shall demonstrate commitment and a further 82 shalls!

Through its aims, BS OHSAS 18001 purports that if all 'shalls' are managed effectively then risk reduction and improvement will come. The standard tells us that it is applicable to all organisations, wherever they are and whatever they do; therefore realistically the standard cannot state exactly how we should perform a task but simply tell us that we should. A construction site will have different hazards and levels of risk to that of an office, however the process of the management and assessment of risk may well be similar – a somewhat 'standard' approach.

The core aim of the research for this paper was to ascertain whether personnel within organisations were using the standard in accord with its aims and to determine whether any benefit has been achieved. The information below identifies the research methodology and discusses the key findings.

# **Research methodology**

The methodology adopted for this research was to test two hypotheses through conducting two independent anonymous surveys:

- 1. UK organisations opting to apply the requirements of the standard within their management systems.
- 2. Auditors assessing their application of the standard.

Many previous surveys could be considered limiting in their approach as their main focus was to test the benefits of certification, rather than use of BS OHSAS 18001. A population of 788 organisations and 81 auditors was identified for the surveys with the aim of seeking greater validity in results through a larger scale population. Questions were posed to the two populations in order to test, with validity, the aims and objectives of this research. Both questionnaires included information to test the aim, each objective and each of the hypotheses.

A hypotheses approach was determined to ensure the data could be fully tested and to ensure focus on the key aim of the research, namely to determine whether BS OHSAS 18001 is appropriate for use as an occupational health and safety management system standard and whether it can, in application, assist with the improvement of the performance of the management of health and safety. Hypotheses are detailed below:

- 1. That users of BS OHSAS 18001 have evidence of performance improvement.
- 2. That BS OHSAS 18001 helps to promote a positive approach to the management of health and safety and improve a health and safety culture within organisations.

To ensure information returned was as free from bias as possible, it was identified that the surveys were to be conducted using survey software where respondents were identified by a reference number rather than by name or organisation, and no trace to either their ratings of the standard or their comments could be made.

Two sets of similar questions were necessary to evaluate both users and auditors, both questions sets being used with the aim of validating each set of responses through identifying variances (using a standard deviation approach). The questions used in the survey are listed in appendix A for information.

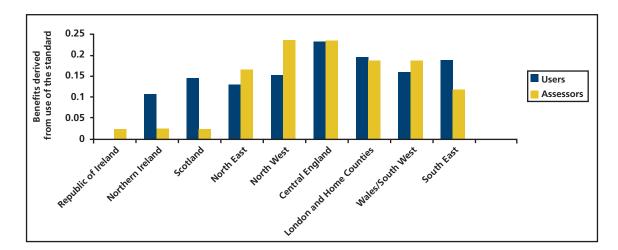
In order to determine the validity of the results, each category of questions from the user survey was tested against the results from the auditor survey using standard deviation (a test of root mean square to determine variance and therefore providing validity of results). Each category was tested by identifying the primary and secondary results (or more if necessary to determine variability) in the user survey and evaluating against the top results from the auditor survey, therefore testing the validity of results. The results from the survey are detailed in the next section including reported perceived strengths and weaknesses.

# What the results showed

Below are the key findings from each question set.

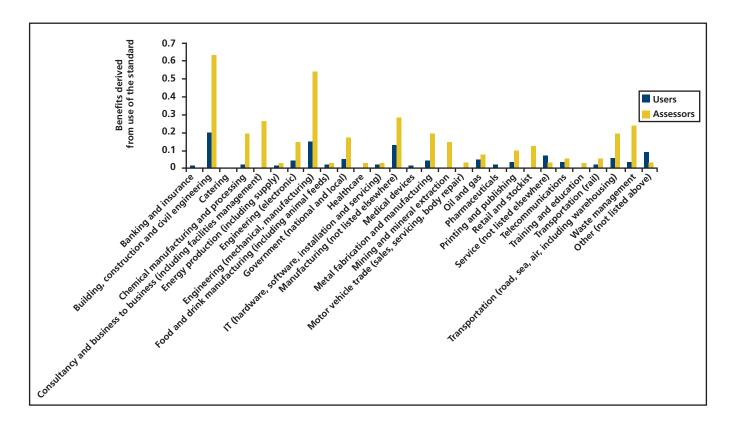
## Location

Location was included in the survey to identify the key areas of the UK where the standard is most used and assessed. Location was plotted against industry type to identify if similar industry types were operating in similar locations; this resulted in a direct correlation between findings as detailed below.



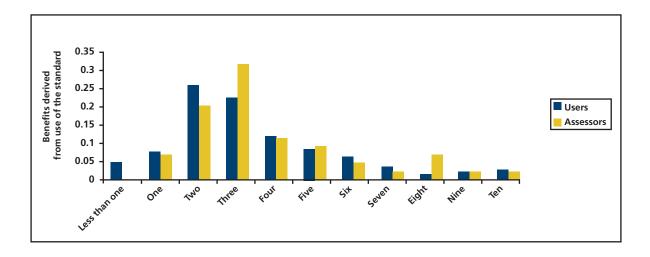
# Industry

The results identified the main industries using BS OHSAS 18001 as engineering, building and construction. Significance of findings has been tested to be very significant with a population standard deviation of only 0.71. Six users of BS OHSAS 18001 within the building and construction industries also identified, through the comments field, that reported improvements to the management of health and safety, health and safety culture and the reduction of rates of injury had been achieved prior to adopting the standard, rather than through the use of it. These claims link well with the aims of BS OHSAS 18001 that improvement can be clearly demonstrated were a structured approach to management is adopted.



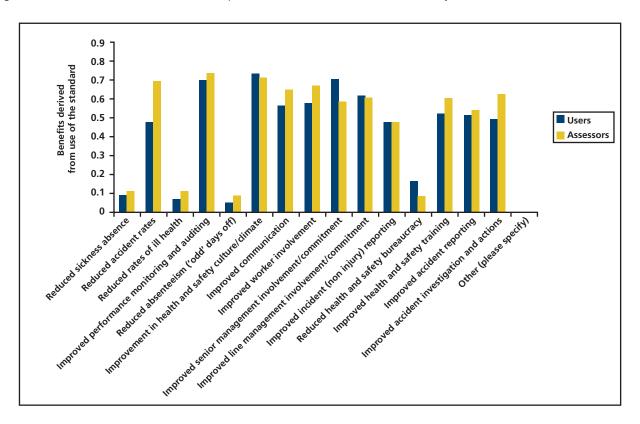
## Years

This category was identified as necessary to evaluate improvements and benefits relevant to period of use. Results identified clear similarities to the years of use and the years of assessing the standard showing a growth in use and assessment around the time of amendment from OHSAS 18001:1999 to BS OHSAS 18001:2007.



# Benefits

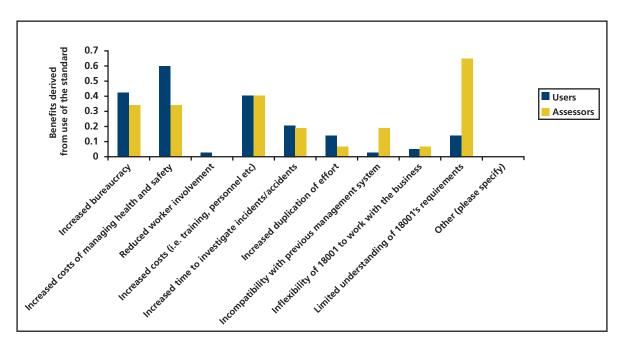
This category is one of the most significant in terms of correlation between users and auditors. Improvements have been seen amongst users regarding: management; worker and senior management commitment and involvement; improved training; accident reporting and investigation; and improved monitoring, measurement and auditing of the system. Results from this category highlight that a significant benefit of the standard is the improvement identified in health and safety culture/climate.



# Drawbacks

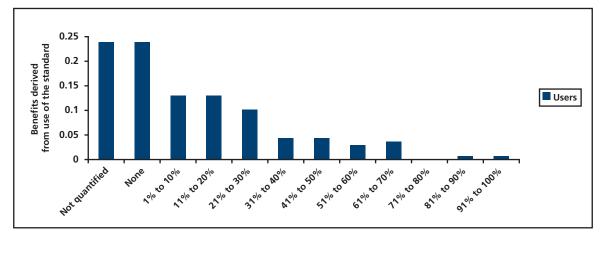
This category identified high levels of users experiencing increased costs of managing health and safety and increased bureaucracy. Users of BS OHSAS 18001 also identified increased costs of training as being a drawback to the use of the standard.

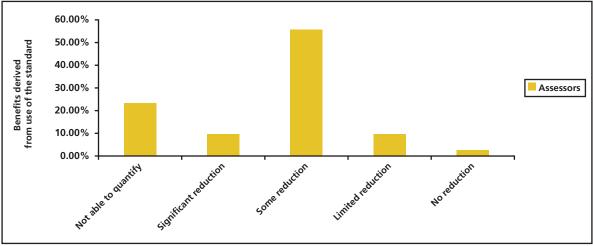
Key findings from the auditor survey identified that the highest return in this category (60%) identified that users had a limited understanding of the requirements of BS OHSAS 18001. Suggestions are that user bureaucracy could be created by a limited understanding of the overall aims of the standard, and that bureaucracy is created through a limited understanding of requirements and an assumed belief that the standard requires significant amounts of documentation.



# Accidents

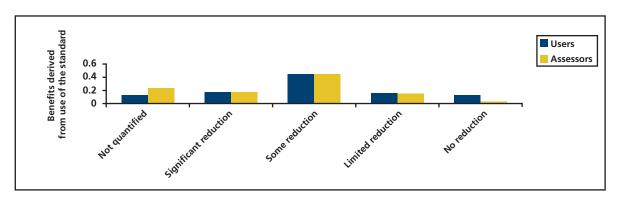
Significant findings in this category relate to a considerably high number of respondents not using their own data to quantify changes in accident rates (including personal injury and occupation related ill-health); some identified no accident rate reduction at all. The survey included free text for respondents to comment, several respondents identified that data was not quantified within their organisations suggesting that some may be unaware of the continual improvement principle and the benefits of effective data evaluation. 51.8% of respondents however reported a reduction in accident rates.





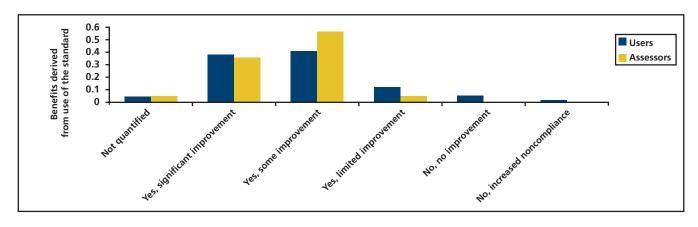
## Risk

Risk reduction was identified as being one of the most significant categories in terms of validity of findings. Both users and auditors identified similar levels of risk reduction in the 'some reduction' answer. When tested, this category showed to be significant with low variability of responses therefore demonstrating that both users and auditors having similar regard to the levels of risk reduction (see 'The pain and the pleasure of implementing the standard' for results).



# Legislation

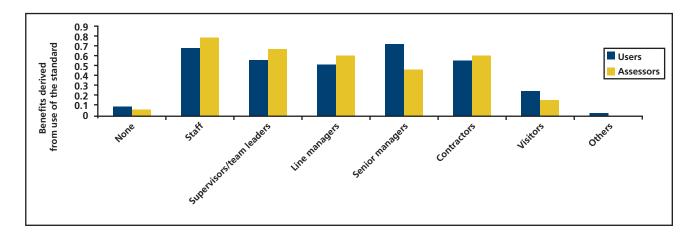
Both users and auditors identified both 'some' and 'significant' improvements with levels of compliance to health and safety legislation since using BS OHSAS 18001. Both surveys identified the 'some improvement' response as being the highest answer and the 'significant improvement' response as being second highest answer. With a low standard deviation between both surveys, it can be seen that findings are significant and use of the standard can improve legal compliance.



## Culture

Disparities between findings in this category were identified with auditors identifying greater cultural improvement amongst staff, and users identifying greater improvement amongst senior management. Variability identified a significantly low deviation.

This category was cross-tabulated against the responses to the benefits category to test validity by checking whether those reporting improved culture in category four (benefits) had also reported improvement in this category. Results of the cross-tabulation were affirmative identifying that respondents answered both categories positively.



# The pain and the pleasure of implementing the standard

Following the identification regarding the validity of the findings from the surveys, this section of the paper identifies links between the questions posed in the user survey and the hypotheses set; it also tests each hypothesis against survey findings to identify whether BS OHSAS 18001 has assisted organisations to improve the management of health and safety.

The hypothesis 'that users of BS OHSAS 18001 have evidence of performance improvement' was tested through survey responses. Respondents to the survey identified improvement in the performance of their management system as highlighted below (percentages are of all respondents to each question):

- Improved monitoring, measurement and auditing (75%)
- Improved communication (61.2%)
- Improved accident reporting (56.1%)
- Improved health and safety training (55.4%)
- Improved accident investigation and actions (54%)
- Improved incident reporting (52.5%)
- Reduced accident rates (51.8%)
- Inflexibility of 18001 to work with the business (4%)
- Risk reduction (44.4% showed some improvement)
- Legislative compliance (37.5% showed significant improvement)

The only clear drawback from use of the standard was identified as being an increased cost in terms of managing health and safety; this could however be described as an increase in investment in employee wellbeing.

Cross-tabulating responses between years of use and accident rate improvement identified that 62.8% of those identifying they had not quantified accident rates had been using the standard for three years or less, therefore it could be drawn that either time is needed to improve accidents rates, or that improvement in the management of health and safety may well lead to increased reporting in the early years of use.

The hypothesis' that BS OHSAS 18001 helps to promote a positive approach to the management of health and safety and improve a health and safety culture within organisations' has also been tested through survey questions as outlined in section 4.3.

- Improved health and safety culture/climate (81.3%)
- Improved senior management involvement/commitment (75.5%)
- Improved manager involvement/commitment (67.6%)
- Improved worker involvement (62.6%)
- Improved communication (61.2%)
- Increased cost of managing health and safety (56.0%)
- Increased cost of training (36.0%)
- Legislative compliance (37.5% showed significant improvement)
- Cultural improvement
  - Senior management (72.2%)
  - Staff (67.4%)
  - Supervisors/team leaders (56.3%)
  - Contractors (55.6%)

Drawbacks regarding the use of BS OHSAS 18001 identified that 40% of respondents believed the standard created an increased level of bureaucracy. Cross-tabulating those responding that the standard created an increased level of bureaucracy identified that 77.5% saw improved health and safety culture within the organisation and they also saw a 63.4% improvement in culture amongst contractors. It could therefore be drawn that investment in the system could create an unwanted level of bureaucracy, however in turn this could create improved cultures within the organisation.

Years of use of BS OHSAS 18001 was also tested against cultural improvement to identify if cultural improvement can be identified with limited use or if it can only be obtained through sustained use of the standard. From the findings it can be seen that improvement in health and safety culture (including worker, manager and senior management involvement and commitment) can be achieved within a relatively short period of time with the highest number of respondents identifying cultural improvements having used the standard for three years or less.

In testing the hypothesis it has been identified that significant numbers of organisations within the population identified improvement in health and safety culture within their organisations and that a high number of those have been using BS OHSAS 18001 for three years or less. It has also been identified that high levels of bureaucracy could also be created therefore impairing the cultural improvement effects. BS OHSAS 18001 identifies that documentation should be kept to the minimum required to achieve effectiveness and efficiency and should be proportional to the level of risk (British Standards Institution. (2007). BS OHSAS 18001: Occupational Health and Safety Management systems – Requirements.), it could therefore be identified that users are creating an unnecessary level of bureaucracy themselves.

# Conclusion based on the research

This section identifies the key conclusions of research based on the objectives:

- To determine the impact and effect of BS OHSAS 18001 regarding its defined scope, and
- To determine whether industry is applying BS OHSAS 18001 to achieve performance improvement, reduce incidents and risk reduction.

Objectives were set with the aim of determining whether BS OHSAS 18001 is appropriate for use as an occupational health and safety management system standard. Objectives were also to determine whether it can, in application, assist with the improvement of the performance of the management of health and safety.

In perusing the first objective, the benefits of use of BS OHSAS 18001 findings identified that the standard had impacted upon organisations both positively and, as perceived by a significant proportion of survey respondents, negatively, in terms of increased costs of training, costs of managing health and safety and an increased level of bureaucracy. The auditor survey also highlighted that from their observations, users had a limited understanding of the requirements of the standard thus linking the two surveys in terms of purported bureaucracy.

The second objective relating to performance improvement was, as with the first objective, achieved through literature review, survey and testing the findings. The objective to identify whether industry was applying BS OHSAS 18001 effectively to improve management system performance was achieved through the testing of hypotheses below.

Specific areas of improvement were seen in terms of accident reduction, performance monitoring and the reporting of accidents and non-injury incidents. User findings are supported by data highlighted below, with percentages identifying information received from all respondents.

Improvement performance monitoring	75.5% improvement
Improved accident reporting	56.1% improvement
Improved training	55.4% improvement
Improved investigation	54.0% improvement
Improved incident reporting	52.5% improvement
Accident rate reduction	51.8% improvement

Users of BS OHSAS 18001 identified that there were however some drawbacks of applying the standard's requirements, significantly an increase in the costs of the management of heath and safety. Such investment is however deemed to be inevitable as little improvement could be hoped to be achieved without investment in time, competencies and required equipment.

Users therefore may need to understand the balance between investment and improvement and the longer term returns that could be achieved. It could be seen however that increased levels of training could lead to improved health and safety culture; therefore identifying this as a positive effect rather than a drawback.

Key findings relating to cultural benefits are highlighted below with percentages identifying information received from all respondents.

Culture/climate improvement	81.3% improvement
Senior management involvement/commitment	75.5% improvement
Line management involvement/commitment	67.6% improvement
Worker involvement improvement	62.6% improvement
Communication improvement	61.2% improvement
Improved incident reporting	52.5% improvement

As with the results of testing the first hypothesis, users of BS OHSAS 18001 identified that there were however some drawbacks with regard to health and safety culture regarding the use of the standard. A number of users (40.0%) identified that application of the standard increased bureaucracy within the business in direct conflict with the aims of the standard. BS OHSAS 18001 specifies that it is 'important that documentation is proportional to the level of complexity, hazards and risks concerned and is kept to the minimum required for effectiveness and efficiency'. Users may therefore need to look further into this requirement to ensure their management systems are not developed with the aim of creating paperwork, but with the aim of managing and reducing risk.

In concluding the summary of findings it has been clearly identified that the aim of the research has been met through the testing of hypotheses set against the two core objectives. It has been concluded that both hypotheses have been proven, leading to the findings that users of BS OHSAS 18001 have evidence of performance improvement and that BS OHSAS 18001 helps to promote a positive approach to the management of health and safety and improve a health and safety culture within organisations. Further research may however be necessary to identify whether users of BS OHSAS 18001 perceive the drawbacks, specifically whether the heightened levels of bureaucracy and the costs of training, are in fact benefits masquerading as the need for improvement of their management systems.

## References

- 1 British Standards Institution. (2007). BS OHSAS 18001: Occupational Health and Safety Management systems Requirements. London. British Standards Institution.
- 2 International Labour Organisation. (2001). *Guidelines on occupational safety and health management systems, ILO-OSH 2001.* Geneva. International Labour Office.
- 3 Smith, D. (2008). OHSAS 18001 provides MS approach for occupational health and safety. *ISO Management systems July-August 2008*, 32-35.

# Appendix A – survey questions

- 1. Location what region of the UK best identifies your main location?
- 2. Industry which of the following identifies your organisation's main activities?
- 3. Years for how many years has your organisation been using BS OHSAS 18001?
- 4. Benefits over the period your organisation has been using BS OHSAS 18001, have you identified any specific benefits/improvements? (please tick any that apply)
- 5. Drawbacks over the period your organisation has been using BS OHSAS 18001, have you identified any specific drawbacks? (please tick any that apply)
- 6. Accidents over the period your organisation has been using BS OHSAS 18001, have you identified any reduction in rates of work related personal injury or ill health? (please identify a percent)
- 7. Risk specific to levels of residual risk relating to work activities, has the level of risk reduced since using BS OHSAS 18001?
- 8. Legislation Since using BS OHSAS 18001, has the level of compliance with health and safety legislation and other requirements improved?
- 9. Culture has your organisation noted any specific health and safety cultural benefits overall or to specific work groups? (please tick any that apply)
- 10. Certification has your organisation noted any specific benefits of third party certification?

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