Taking a carrot and stick approach to workplace safety
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Dr Jason Edwards has been awarded an Advance Queensland Early-Career Research Fellowship to develop life-saving strategies in workplace health and safety regulation.

Adopting a carrot and stick approach is the key to reducing deaths, injuries and illnesses on the job, according to QUT researcher Dr Jason Edwards, who is working with Queensland industry to come up with positive ways to improve workplace safety performance.

Dr Edwards, from QUT’s Centre for Accident Research & Road Safety - Queensland (CARRS-Q) has been awarded a three-year Advance Queensland Early-Career Research Fellowship to develop life-saving strategies in workplace health and safety regulation.

"Workplace injuries and illnesses cost the Australian economy more than $60 billion annually and in Queensland the manufacturing, agriculture, transport and construction industries account for almost 70 per cent of work-related fatalities," Dr Edwards said.

"The aim of this research is to develop evidence-based strategies that reduce productivity losses due to injuries and illnesses.

"Historically the key driving force to encourage safe workplaces has been deterrence through Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) legislation and enforcement of the laws, however the likelihood of punishment is often insufficient to deter unsafe practices.

"Even when applied effectively, the stick approach only encourages compliances to a minimum legal requirement rather than the pursuit of safety excellence."

Dr Edwards said a modern approach was to apply principles of "responsive regulation" to promote workplace health and safety through a combination of educative and directive strategies.

"While existing approaches have had some effect, fatalities and injuries in the workplace remain a major public health and economic concern and we need to direct attention towards supportive approaches that promote an improvement to safety performance," he said.

"My previous research in the heavy vehicle industry indicated that initiatives that are tailored to the layout of a particular industry's structures, and the culture and beliefs of the workforce within it, encourage compliance.

"For example, we found that when organisations provide incident reports to heavy vehicle drivers of crashes, injuries and fatalities involving other drivers, compliance with the road rules and safety initiatives increased."

As part of the study, Dr Edwards will work on the ground with manufacturing, agriculture, transport and construction employees and management and in conjunction with Workplace Health and Safety Queensland.

"Throughout this research project we will be feeding back information to workplaces so that current
practices and experiences can be reviewed in line with our findings and new strategies trialled," he said.

The study is also being funded by Workplace Health and Safety Queensland.

Provided by Queensland University of Technology