

Confidential Safety Information Reporting Scheme (CSIRS)

Incident response and control rail safety workers

The issue

The Office of Transport Safety Investigations (OTSI) received a report that a rail infrastructure manager (RIM) had rail safety workers associated with incident response, control and investigation, performing rail safety work without the required qualifications. In particular, qualifications associated with operating local control panels and those of a Protection Officer (PO) level 4.

The report alleged that there was a skill deficiency within the group of rail safety workers and that there was no competency assurance associated with the role they were performing. It was also alleged that some of the rail safety workers had been involved in five rail safeworking breaches which had not been reported or adequately addressed.

OTSI action

OTSI provided a CSIRS Safety Notification to the RIM and requested that an investigation into the matter be undertaken.

Of the five alleged breaches, OTSI conducted a preliminary assessment and investigated one specific incident. It was alleged that the rail safety worker missed sighting an approaching train while using a protection method known as 'lookout working'. It was alleged that they were performing dual roles and were on the phone at the time. Following a review of audio recordings and an interview with the protection officer it was determined that the alleged incident did not take place.

One of the alleged incidents was not able to be investigated as there was limited information available due to the age of the incident and in order to maintain the confidentiality of the reporter. OTSI requested the RIM to investigate the other three alleged breaches which took place on consecutive days.

Operator response

The RIM provided an initial report in relation to the allegations of qualifications of the rail safety workers. They confirmed that of the 38 personnel, five were not qualified as a PO4 but held either PO2 or PO3 qualifications. These five workers were not permitted to lead investigations into Track Work Authorities or Local Possession Authorities which required a PO4 qualification.

The RIM advised that it was not a prerequisite to be a PO4 to hold the role but that they must be capable of obtaining the qualification. A training plan was provided for the five workers to receive training as either a PO3 or PO4.

The RIM advised that a decision had been made in 2019 that the rail safety workers did not require the qualifications for operating local control panels and the workers were prohibited from completing those activities. In response to the CSIRS report, it was reconfirmed in May 2021 that this qualification was no longer required by the workers. Following this, the RIM advised that another review would be undertaken and they would provide OTSI with an update on the outcome of this further review.

Of the three breaches investigated by the RIM, the allegations were found to be true and there had been breaches by both the rail safety workers and persons within network control. The breaches related to ineffective safety critical communication, incorrect identification of the worksite locations to ensure all potential points of entry were protected and incomplete worksite protection pre-planning activities prior to requesting worksite protection from network control.

The RIM advised that a briefing was conducted after the three incidents to communicate the requirements for completing the worksite protection pre-planning activities prior to requesting worksite protection. Additionally, one of the rail safety workers received coaching regarding identifying the worksite limits and nominating the signals required for protecting the worksite.

A revision to the network rules was also made to provide clearer requirements for protection officers to define the worksite location if the protection is for more than one line.

In relation to the allegation that there was a skills deficiency and no competency assurance activity, the RIM advised that the work group was subjected to random monitoring as were other workers. In the previous six months there had been three interactions with members of the work group.

The RIM has committed to introducing a targeted assurance and monitoring program for this work group. An independent group will complete these assurance activities that will consist of in-field interactions and review of audio for the group of rail safety workers.

Conclusion

While the RIM had made the decision that the qualification to operate local control panels was no longer required, it had not updated its training and qualification standard to reflect this position. The change management processes associated with the removal of qualification had not been effectively managed at the time of the decision or since.

OTSI is satisfied with the response provided by the RIM and has advised the reporter. The matter is now closed but OTSI will follow up with the RIM in relation to the committed assurance activity and the outcome of its review of the qualification to operate local control panels and associated change management processes.

The Confidential Safety Information Reporting Scheme (CSIRS) operates under the provisions of Section 46E of the Passenger Transport Act 1990. It is a voluntary, confidential and non-punitive scheme that enables employees in the public passenger transport sectors of the rail, bus and ferry industries to report safety matters.

OTSI provides feedback to each reporter on the investigation outcomes of a CSIRS report. In selected matters that have significant operational safety matters, OTSI also publishes a CSIRS Outcome Report. For more information on CSIRS, go to otsi.nsw.gov.au.