Resource PSA-GUIDE-001

SWMS Explained: What They Are, When You Need One, and Why They Matter

Safe Work Method Statements, commonly known as SWMS, are one of the most misunderstood safety documents in Australia.

Many businesses believe they need a SWMS for every task they perform. Others complete a SWMS simply to satisfy a client requirement and never look at it again.

The reality sits somewhere in the middle.

What is a SWMS?

A Safe Work Method Statement is a document that identifies:

- High-risk work activities
- Hazards associated with those activities
- Risks that may arise
- Control measures used to reduce those risks

A SWMS should explain how work will be carried out safely.

When is a SWMS Required?

Under Australian WHS legislation, a SWMS is required for High Risk Construction Work.

Examples include work:

- At heights
- Near powered mobile plant
- Near energised electrical installations
- In or near trenches
- In confined spaces
- Adjacent to traffic
- Involving demolition
- Near water where there is a risk of drowning

A SWMS may also be required by clients, principal contractors, or company policy.

What Should a SWMS Include?

A practical SWMS should identify:

The Work Activity

What work is being performed?

The Hazards

What could cause harm?

Examples include:

- Falls
- Moving plant
- Electricity
- Traffic
- Weather conditions

The Risks

How serious are the consequences if something goes wrong?

Control Measures

What controls will be used?

Examples include:

- Exclusion zones
- PPE
- Spotters
- Traffic management
- Isolation procedures

Common SWMS Mistakes

Copying Generic Documents

Many SWMS are downloaded from the internet and never reviewed.

A SWMS should reflect the actual work being performed.

Making Them Too Long

A 50-page SWMS is unlikely to be read on site.

A practical SWMS should be clear, concise and relevant.

Failing to Review the SWMS

Conditions change.

Weather changes.

Sites change.

Workers change.

A SWMS should be reviewed whenever circumstances change.

Treating the SWMS as a Filing Exercise

The SWMS should be discussed with workers before work begins.

A SWMS sitting in a folder does not control risk.

How Does a Good SWMS Improve Safety?

A good SWMS helps workers:

- Understand the work
- Identify hazards
- Apply controls consistently
- Stop and reassess when conditions change

It also helps demonstrate that risks have been considered before work starts.

SWMS, Toolbox Talks and Pre-Starts

The most effective safety systems combine:

- SWMS
- Toolbox talks
- Pre-start inspections

Together these provide planning, communication and verification.

The Bottom Line

A SWMS is not simply a compliance document.

When used properly, it is a practical tool that helps workers identify hazards, manage risks and perform work safely.

The best SWMS are easy to understand, site-specific and actively used by workers, not just filed away in an office.

Practical Safety Advisory provides simple, practical tools for creating SWMS, conducting pre-start inspections and delivering toolbox talks.

Disclaimer