Decluttering health and safety management activities in construction

A process mapping tool

SHINe

Safety and Health Innovation Network

Background

Among emerging concepts in safety research, 'safety clutter' has gained recognition as a potential barrier to effective safety outcomes. Defined by Rae et al. as the "accumulation of safety procedures, documents, roles and activities performed in the name of safety, but that do not contribute to the safety of operational work" (2018,p.195), safety clutter represents the possibility that not all health and safety management activities add value and, in some cases, may actually impede health and safety performance.

Examples of safety clutter include:

- rules created after incidents without connection to law or regulation

- completing irrelevant or excessive paperwork, duplicated activities, and

- 'dead end' activities where the output (e.g., a completed form) is never reviewed or used (Rae et al., 2018).

A comprehensive Safety Clutter Classification (SCC) Model defining the different types of safety clutter that can arise in an organisation's health and safety management system was developed by the Construction Safety Research Alliance (CSRA, 2025). This classification model can help organisations understand the types of safety clutter they may be experiencing.

Purpose

Identifying safety clutter and understanding its type is very useful. However, there is still a need to identify where safety clutter comes from and how it can be appropriately reduced.

The purpose of this document is to provide a step-by-step approach to help construction organisations to:

- identify where safety clutter might be accumulating in their health and safety management activities, and

- work across relevant organisations and stakeholders to find ways to remove or reduce this safety clutter – without exposing organisations to the risk of non-compliance.

The recommended approach utilises a proven process mapping technique to:

- understand exactly where safety clutter has formed, or may potentially form in routinely performed health and safety management activities, and

- how it can be reduced through a collaborative, multi-stakeholder diagnostic and planning exercise.

This process mapping approach provides the opportunity to review organisational health and safety management activities in a systematic way and identify elements of these activities that consume resources, time and effort but do not contribute to the operational safety of work.

The tool described in this document enables construction organisations to:

- visually represent and understand how health and safety management activities are performed in practice

- review health and safety management activities and identify areas in which safety clutter is present

- identify the sources of this safety clutter, and

- work collaboratively with relevant stakeholders (e.g. clients, regulators, subcontractors, unions etc.) to identify opportunities to declutter health and safety management activities.

The need for multi-stakeholder involvement

Our research shows that safety clutter emerges from a complex interplay of forces operating at different levels within and beyond the boundaries of individual organisations in the construction industry. Rather than having a single organisational cause, evidence showed that safety clutter arises from the interactions between multiple stakeholders and construction organisations' experiences of external pressures. These pressures shape elements of the organisational health and safety management system and ultimately determine the way health and safety management activities are practically implemented (See Figure 1).

Understanding the sources of safety clutter helps explain why it exists, as well as identify relevant stakeholders who need to be engaged if decluttering efforts are to be effective.

Given the fact that safety clutter occurs as a result of inter-organisational interactions, it is critical that relevant stakeholders are engaged in conversations about how a health and safety management activity can be decluttered in a way that meets the needs and expectations of all stakeholders (e.g. regulators, clients, unions etc.).

For this reason, it is recommended that the process mapping approach described in this document is most effectively used to facilitate decluttering conversations between relevant stakeholders, rather than within a single construction organisation.
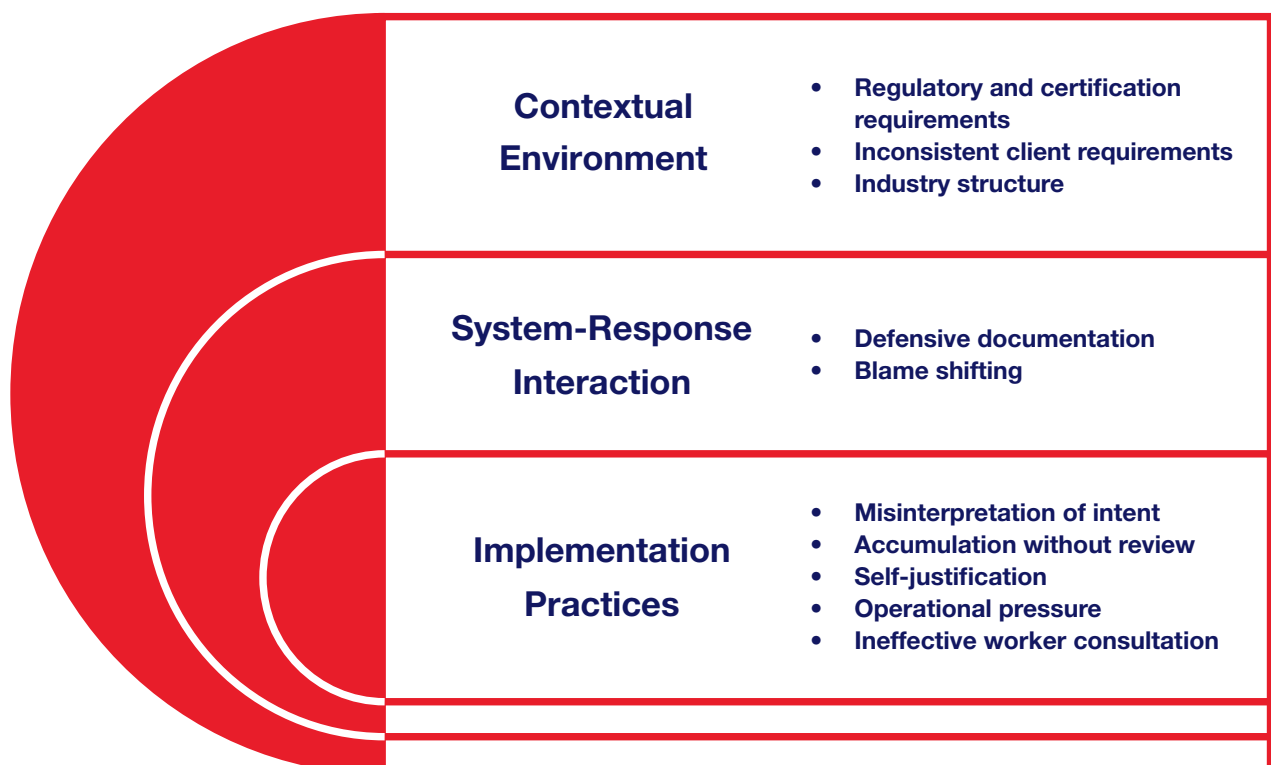
Contextual Environment
- **Regulatory and certification requirements**
- **Inconsistent client requirements**
- **Industry structure**

System-Response Interaction
- **Defensive documentation**
- **Blame shifting**

Implementation Practices
- **Misinterpretation of intent**
- **Accumulation without review**
- **Self-justification**
- **Operational pressure**
- **Ineffective worker consultation**

Figure 1: The multi-level sources of safety clutter

The process mapping and decluttering approach

The decluttering approach comprises four key steps, depicted in Figure 2.

Step 1: Scope safety management activity

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Step 2: Develop process map

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Step 3: Identify safety clutter hotspots
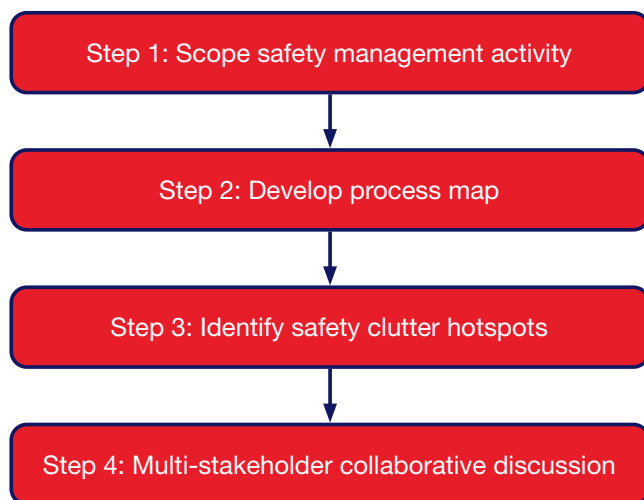
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Step 4: Multi-stakeholder collaborative discussion

Figure 2: Key steps involved in the process mapping and decluttering approach

The remainder of the document describes the four steps in the application of the decluttering approach.

A worked example showing the practical application of the approach to the activity of subcontractor onboarding is provided to illustrate how the approach can be implemented in practice.

Step 1: Decide the health and safety management activity to focus on and define the scope of the decluttering exercise

The first step in the decluttering approach is to decide on the health and safety management activity that is to be the subject of the process mapping and decluttering exercise. There are no hard and fast rules about how to select an activity to be analysed. However, it is best to consult workers, supervisors, health and safety professionals and other people who interact with the health and safety management system to explore their views about the activities that they routinely perform that they perceive to be characterised by safety clutter, i.e., things performed in the name of safety, that do not contribute to the safety of operational work.

Initially, people will likely have a good hunch about what health and safety management activities contain elements of safety clutter. For example, people might identify activities that they think:

- go beyond what is necessary to be effective

- have become disconnected or lacking in relevance to their intended purpose

- are overly complicated and difficult to understand or use, and/or

- are outdated or not supported by facts or required by law.

Once a health and safety management activity has been decided upon, the scope of the decluttering exercise can be defined. Defining the scope involves:

- identifying when the health and safety management activity to be analysed stops and starts

- identifying what is and what isn't included in the health and safety management activity

- identifying the stakeholders who are involved in requiring or performing the safety management activity, and

- identifying what construction project lifecycle stages the analysis will include.

Some health and safety management activities might occur in one stage of a project lifecycle, while others will span multiple

project lifecycle stages. In some instances, the decluttering analysis might deliberately focus on one lifecycle stage, while ignoring others. However, these decisions need to be consciously made at the beginning of the exercise so that it is clear what is included and what is excluded from the analysis.

When defining the scope of the decluttering exercise, it is useful to consider whether suspected safety clutter can be traced back to an external or internal demand arising from an earlier stage in the project lifecycle.

It is recommended that the exercise includes both the stage(s) at which the health and safety management activity is performed, as well as the stage(s) that any suspected safety clutter can be traced back to (if applicable).

Once the scope of the decluttering exercise has been decided, a template 'swimlane' process map can be developed. This will be used in the subsequent process mapping exercise.

The template reflects the decided decluttering analysis scope. It identifies:

• all relevant project stakeholders whose actions and requirements impact or are impacted by the health and safety management activity to be analysed (these are shown down the left-hand side of the template), and

• the project lifecycle stages to be included in the analysis (these are shown across the top row of the template).

An example template developed for the activity of subcontractor onboarding is provided in Figure 3. It shows this activity spanning six distinct lifecycle stages (pre-qualification to post-mobilisation). It also shows five different relevant stakeholders identified for this activity, i.e. the clients, principal contractors, subcontractors, workers and third-party suppliers.
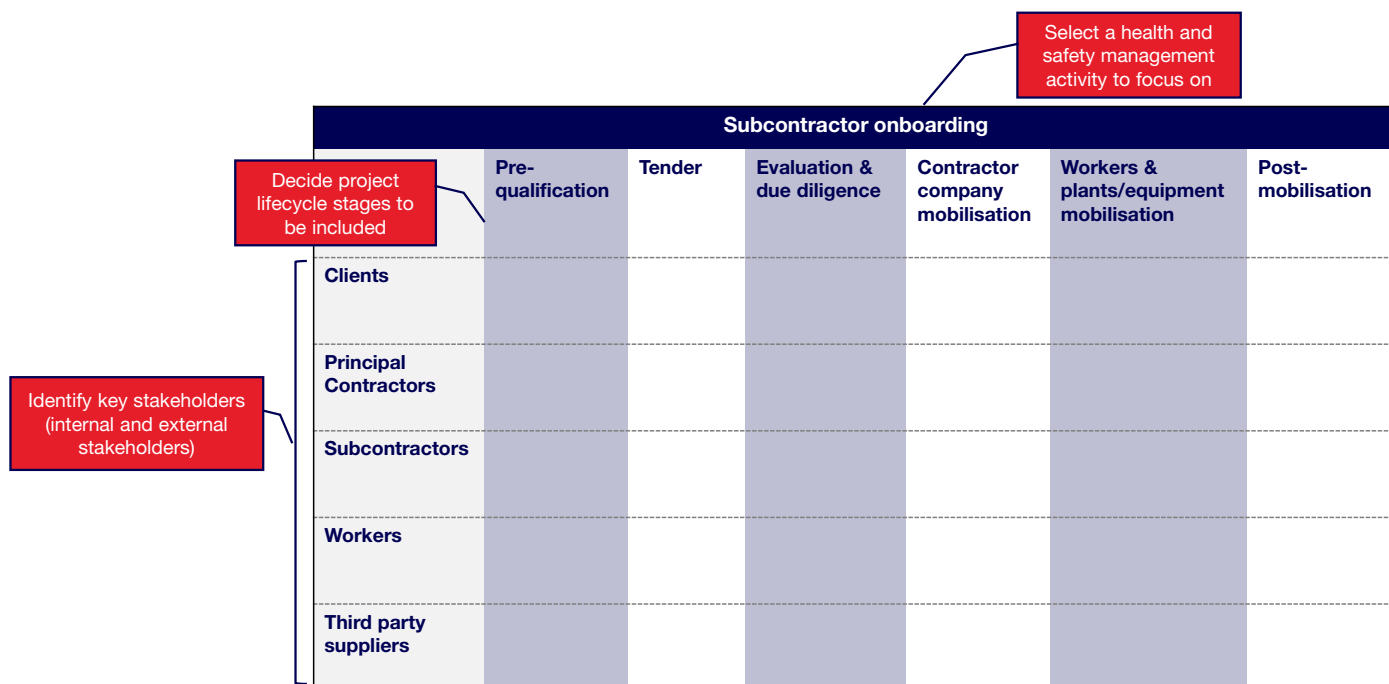
Subcontractor onboarding						
	Pre-qualification	Tender	Evaluation & due diligence	Contractor company mobilisation	Workers & plants/equipment mobilisation	Post-mobilisation
Clients						
Principal Contractors						
Subcontractors						
Workers						
Third party suppliers						

Select a health and safety management activity to focus on

Decide project lifecycle stages to be included

Identify key stakeholders (internal and external stakeholders)

Figure 3: Example 'swimlane' process mapping template developed for the activity of subcontractor onboarding.

Step 2: Develop process map based on stakeholder input

The next step in the decluttering exercise is to populate the 'swimlane' process mapping template.

In order to do this, the people who are most directly involved with the health and safety management activity should be consulted to identify what they actually do in relation to this activity.

For example, in the subcontractor onboarding example, it would be best to start by asking subcontractors what they are required to do in order to be onboarded to a construction project. Principal contractors' health and safety managers can also be asked what their requirements and processes are for subcontractor onboarding. The aim is to collect information about what actually happens in practice, not what is prescribed in formal safety-related policies or procedures.

For each step undertaken in relation to the relevant health and safety management activity, it is helpful to identify:

- who undertakes the work?

- who requires the work?

- where or from whom does the person performing the work get the input they need?

- what are these inputs?

- what outputs flow from the work?

- with whom are these outputs shared?

- do any conditions/decision points logically flow from each step? if so, what are these? and how do they feed into subsequent steps in the health and safety management activity?

At this stage, it is helpful to consult all relevant stakeholders identified in the 'swimlane' template to ensure that the process map is as accurate and complete as possible.

Next, the health and safety management activity workflow is drawn on the 'swimlane' template using process mapping conventions described in Box 1.

The process map should show the sequence of steps, their inputs and outputs and the relationship between steps taken by different stakeholders in relation to the selected health and safety management activity. Steps in the process are represented chronologically in the map's 'swimlanes', corresponding with the stakeholder that performs each identified step in the process.
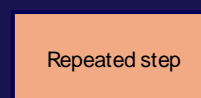
Box 1: Process mapping conventions

Start / End

This marks where the health and safety management activity to be mapped begins and where it ends.

Step

This is a single step that is performed once in relation to the health and safety management activity over the project lifecycle.

Repeated step

This is a step that is performed multiple times in relation to the same health and safety management activity over the lifecycle of a project. It can be undertaken by different stakeholders at different times.

Decision points

This marks the point where a choice or decision is made during the health and safety management activity being mapped.

Flow arrows indicate the chronological sequence in which steps in the health and safety management activity are performed.

Input   Step   *Output*

The inputs into and outputs from a step in the selected health and safety management activity show resources or information required to complete a step in the activity (inputs) and the outputs generated from each step.
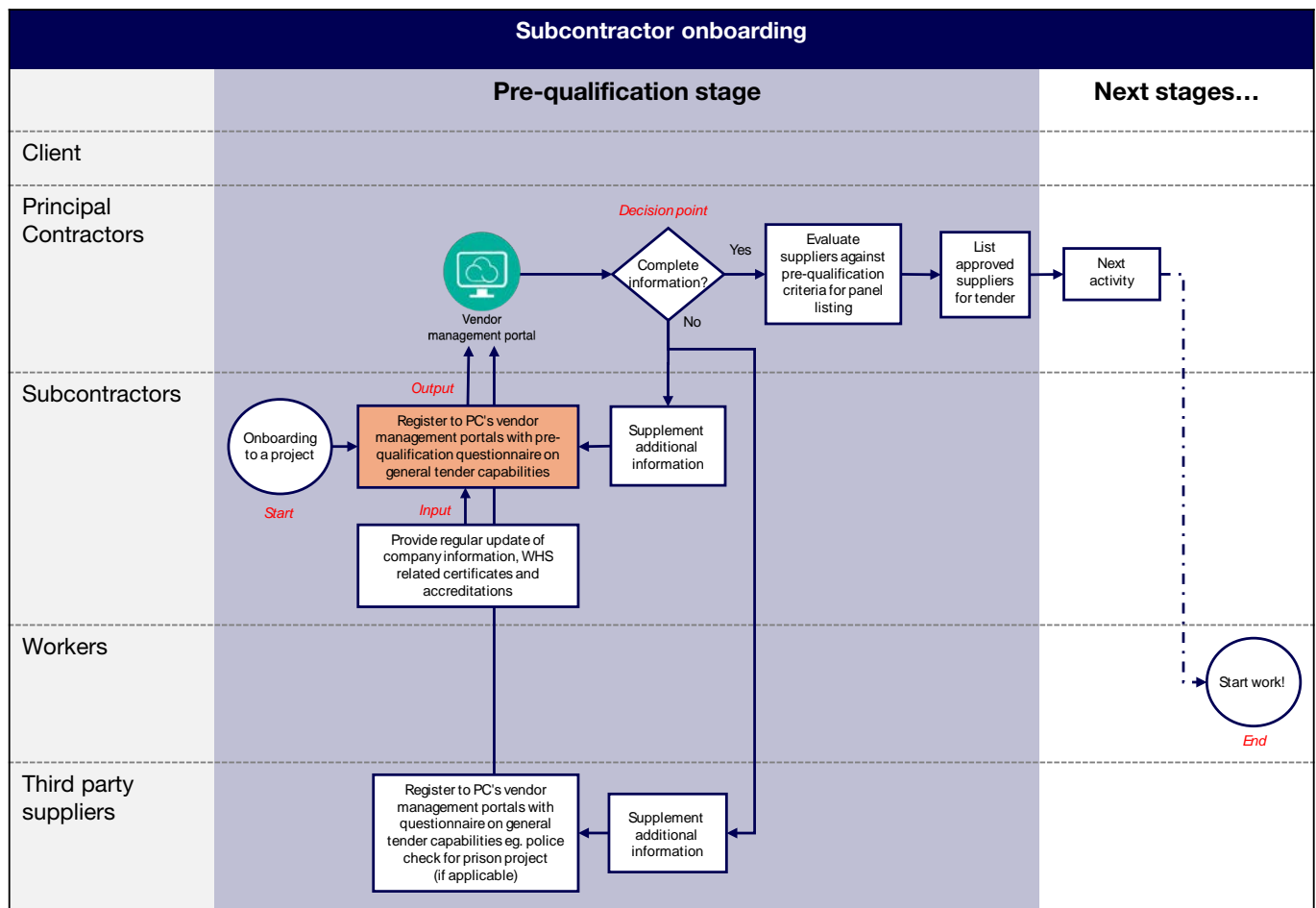
**Figure 4: Example 'swimlane' process map for
subcontractor onboarding (pre-qualification stage only)**

Figure 4 shows an example of a 'swimlane' process map for the activity of subcontractor onboarding. For simplicity, only the pre-qualification stage of the process is shown in this diagram, although the full process map would include all lifecycle stages reflected in the template shown in Figure 3.

Next, the developed process map should be verified. This involves sharing the map with relevant stakeholders to check that the steps are accurately documented and no steps have been missed. At this stage, the sequence of steps should be confirmed, along with the relevant inputs and outputs associated with each step. The alignment of steps with the 'swimlanes' should also be checked to ensure the map accurately reflects the stakeholder who undertakes each step. Any feedback should be reflected in a revised process map.

This checking, feedback and modification should be undertaken iteratively until the relevant stakeholders agree that the process map accurately reflects what is done in practice in relation to the health and safety management activity being analysed.

The output of Step 2 will be an agreed process map showing:

- the steps that are followed in relation to the selected health and safety management activity

- who performs each step (the swimlanes), and

- how the work undertaken in relation to the health and safety management activity flows between stakeholders, and across project lifecycle stages.

Step 3: Identify safety clutter hotspots

This step engages relevant project stakeholders in identifying the areas captured in the process map where safety clutter is believed to exist.

First, the agreed process map for the selected health and safety management activity is shared with relevant stakeholders.

This can be done either in an in-person workshop or digitally.

Next, participants are asked to mark the process map to indicate where they have experienced safety clutter. For example, in a workshop, sticky dots can be used to mark the presence of clutter, or these can be marked up using interactive online tools.

Ideally all participants will mark up the same version of the process map, enabling a quick and easy identification of the places where there is a high level of stakeholder agreement about the presence of safety clutter. These are identified as safety clutter 'hotspots.'

Figure 5 shows an example of a marked-up process map showing safety clutter hotspots identified in the activity of subcontractor onboarding. It shows that steps associated with the requirement for subcontractors to register with principal contractors' vendor management portals, and interaction with these vendor management portals were identified as hotspots for safety clutter.

Participants can also be requested to provide further information about the nature and type of safety clutter experienced at each hotspot (e.g., using sticky notes). This additional detail can subsequently be helpful in identifying opportunities to declutter.

The output of this stage is the identification of areas of consensus (and potentially also disagreement) between relevant stakeholders about the steps in a health and safety management activity in which safety clutter is present.
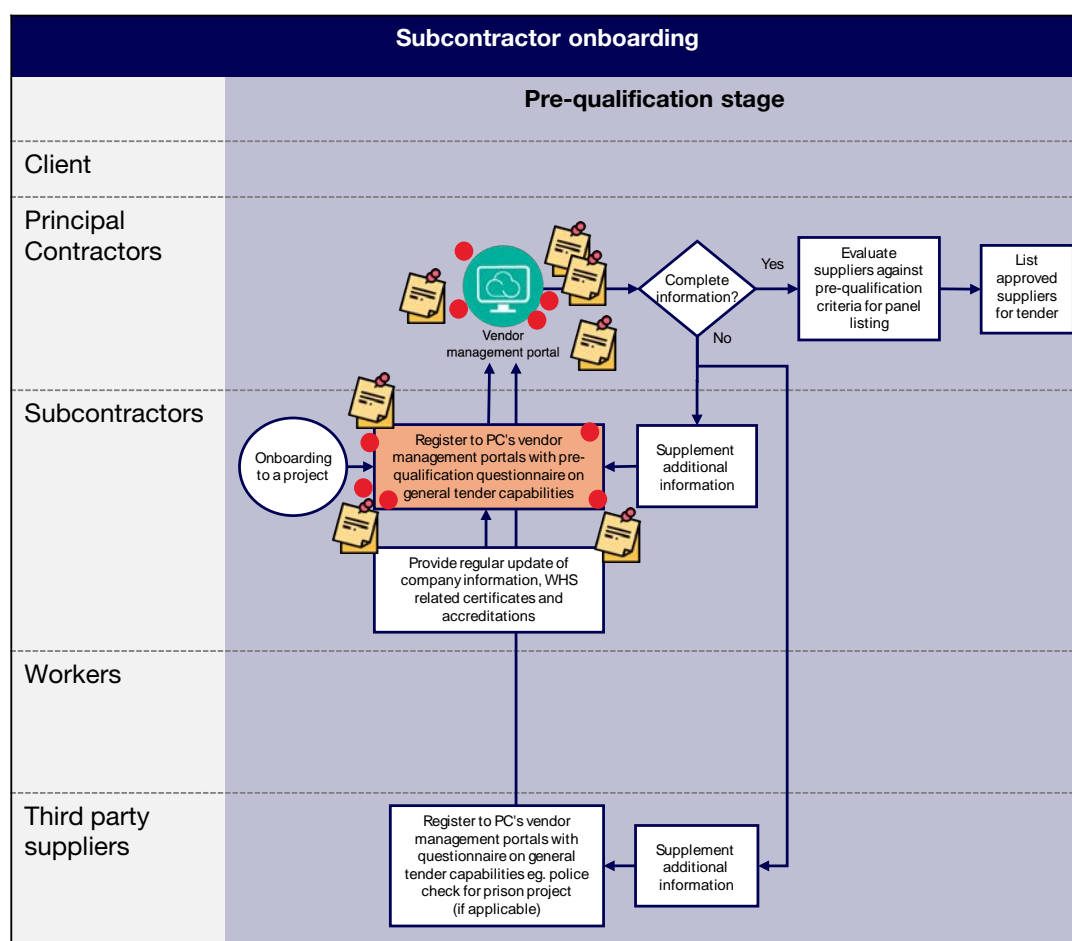

Figure 5: Example safety clutter hotspots in subcontractor onboarding.

Step 4: Engage in collaborative discussion about opportunities to declutter

The final step in the process mapping approach to decluttering health and safety management systems is to facilitate a collaborative discussion between relevant stakeholders about how the health and safety management activity being analysed can potentially be decluttered, particularly around the identified safety clutter hotspots.

This involves considering the sources of the safety clutter and engaging relevant stakeholders in the identification of opportunities to perform the health and safety management activity differently to reduce the safety clutter.

Some suggested guiding questions to inform the discussion are:

- why is the activity done in the current way? (consider internal and external stakeholder requirements or expectations)

- could the safety clutter be reduced by changing the way the activity is done?

- if so, how could the activity be done differently?

- what would it take to achieve this?

- who would need to be involved? and

- how can agreement be reached about a better way of performing the activity?

In the subcontractor onboarding example, stakeholders identified the following opportunities to perform pre-qualification activities differently to reduce safety clutter:

- the client could establish consistent requirements for principal contractors to standardise pre-qualification requirements across projects to reduce duplication of effort

- the principal contractor could reduce their prequalification requirements if a common standard (e.g. ISO certification) is accepted. They could then focus on ensuring detailed project-specific requirements are met after contract award rather than requiring excessive generic documentation pre-award

- industry / accreditation bodies could develop industry-wide verification platforms to ensure a single and consistent approach without requiring additional layers of vetting, and

- the regulator could provide guidance that industry-recognised accreditation schemes are sufficient evidence of subcontractors' health and safety management capability at pre-qualification. This would allow audits to focus on actual health and safety management practices and outcomes, rather than documentation.

It is evident that, to be effectively implemented, these opportunities need support and actions from a variety of stakeholders. This highlights the need for a multi-stakeholder approach to the removal and/or reduction of safety clutter in the construction industry.

Conclusions

Our research shows that decluttering health and safety management systems in the construction industry is hard to achieve when the focus is on health and safety management activities within a single organisation. Safety clutter often arises as a system response to the real or perceived demands and expectations of external stakeholders. For this reason, a collaborative multi-stakeholder approach is recommended.

The 'swimlane' process mapping approach described in this document provides a systematic way to understand the way that routine health and safety management activities are performed in the construction industry, as well as the ways that safety clutter can form.

By using the process mapping approach to identifying safety clutter hotspots in routine health and safety management activities, organisations can have confidence that the activities they identify for improvement are appropriate for decluttering. The multi-stakeholder consultative approach also ensures that organisations can declutter health and safety management activities in ways that are acceptable to important stakeholders (e.g. regulators, clients and unions).

References:

CSRA (2025), A Guide to Decluttering Safety. Available at: https://d80c4d3f-2d16-48ac-938d-798185e65010.filesusr.com/ugd/cc21cf_d7c6471efba44aae9af01d065c2ab05b.pdf

Rae, A. J., Provan, D. J., Weber, D. E., & Dekker, S. W. (2018). Safety clutter: the accumulation and persistence of 'safety' work that does not contribute to operational safety. *Policy and practice in health and safety, 16(2),* 194-211.

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