

A lengthy list of factors associated with job-related accidents has been compiled after a five-year survey.

Personnel

Accidents will happen. There are many reasons why mishaps and "near misses" occur in the workplace. Employees may abuse drugs or alcohol or suffer from fatigue, illness or emotional problems. A five-year study conducted by The Reliability Group, a Florida-based consulting firm, however, revealed that accidents or "close calls" also will happen if workers are not satisfied or challenged enough in their work.

By studying the relationship between the occurrence of accidents and various factors such as job autonomy, challenge, involvement, satisfaction and teamwork, the study found that some 80 variables have a significant statistical effect upon accident rates. The factors most consistently associated with accidents and job-related injuries include: environmental characteristics such as layout and

cleanliness; the mood among workers, especially the degree of cheerfulness; employee selection practices (the amount of care organizations take to hire and promote people who are capable and comfortable in their job); the types of procedures implemented by a company (whether workers find them awkward or natural); role clarity (the degree to which employees know what management expects from them); and job satisfaction and stress.

An interesting finding from the study noted that the level of safety training is not a critical determinant of workplace safety; it ranked 37th on the list. A majority of surveyed employees (55 percent) reported that their companies' safety committees did not have a positive effect on safety. Employee health/well-being also rated surprisingly low at 72 on the list of variables.

"Efforts to provide safety incentives, employee rewards and higher levels of safety training will fail if employees are not challenged or satisfied," said Hank Sarkis, president of the Reliability Group.

The study also measured the correlation between near misses and factors such as equipment inspection, the adequacy of safety training and management's commitment to safety. These findings are especially important, the survey

reported, because if the causes of near misses are not addressed, accidents definitely will follow. The most significant factors out the 70 variables related to near misses include: the amount of emphasis placed on safety by supervisors; the employees' perceptions of management's commitment to safety (managers typically rate their commitment significantly

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higher than their employees do); the layout of work areas; the safeness or riskiness of procedures; noise levels; and job satisfaction and positive thinking, that is, the extent to which people believe that they can reduce accidents through their own efforts and have a positive effect on safety.

Unfortunately, employees often do not report accidents or near misses because they fear retribution from management, the study noted. Of the thousands of employees surveyed, 20 percent said they experienced an accident, but only 81 percent of those employees reported the incident. And when employees do report near misses, they tend to blame faulty equipment instead of human error. Sarkis advised employers not to use self-reported incidents against employees at review time and recommended that companies implement the following steps to create a safe and positive work environment:

1. *Train first-line supervisors to be more team-oriented, by offering management development and leadership skills training.*

2. *Implement an upward feed back program that allows employees to review their supervisors' performance at least twice a year.*

3. *Increase the autonomy and accountability of employees by involving them in the decision-making process. Use their input when planning work procedures, hiring new employees and purchasing equipment.*