

Job satisfaction, cheery workplace reduce injuries

Lowering employee stress can improve safety

Improving safety in the workplace involves more than engineering changes and safety seminars. A study of accidents and work conditions suggests that a more pleasant workplace also is a safer workplace.

The unpublished study was conducted by The Reliability Group in Miami, FL, a management consulting firm. The firm analyzed accident statistics from 3,000 workers and identified the six factors that are most important in determining the safety of a workplace.

Henry Sarkis, president of The Reliability Group and adjunct professor in the School of Business Administration at the University of Miami, tells *Occupational Health Management* that the study results reinforce the idea that poor safety performance is almost always a symptom of other, more-basic problems in the organization.

"The facilities that act more in a supportive vein, coaching employees instead of dictating to them, end up with fewer accidents," Sarkis says. "The culture of the workplace can be very influential. It can be a strong mechanism either for or against safety."

Sarkis outlines these top six factors that influence safety in the workplace:

1. Near misses or close calls.

Workers who report a near miss are almost twice as likely to experience an accident as those who have not reported a near miss. About 32% of the workers studied have reported a near miss, but Sarkis points out that near misses are greatly underreported in most workplaces.

When a near miss is reported, the worker usually cites physical conditions rather than human error. Whether that's true in any given instance is not the most important point, Sarkis says.

Questioning the worker's report will only discourage reporting of near misses, and Sarkis says it is crucial to gather the best data possible on how many near misses occur.

2. Job satisfaction.

Workers who report higher levels of job satisfaction are much less likely to experience an accident than workers who report lower levels. The

Reliability Group measured this factor partly by asking workers if they would recommend the job to a friend.

3. Cheerfulness of the workplace.

There is a significant relationship between job safety and a work environment that is cheerful and fun. Management should create a pleasant workplace, Sarkis says, keeping in mind that the first 20 minutes of the workday can set the tone for the entire shift. The physical fitness warm-ups that some companies practice at the beginning of the day can have a good effect on cheerfulness in the workplace, Sarkis says.

4. Employee selection and placement.

Placing the right person in the right job is an important factor in a safe work environment. Sarkis recommends having all applicants interviewed by several people in the company including their intended peers. All the interviewers should keep in mind the applicant's ability to relate to co-workers, in addition to specific skills.

5. Job autonomy.

Workers who reported accidents also reported significantly lower levels of autonomy than workers who are injury-free. Autonomy was defined as control over how workers do their jobs and the ability to make decisions for themselves.

6. Lack of stress.

Workers reporting accidents also report significantly higher levels of workplace stress than other workers. Interestingly, the study did not find that the level of safety training was a key determinant of safety. That variable ranked 37 out of 120.

While Sarkis says safety training is valuable and effective, he warns that occupational health professionals should not concentrate too much on technical training.

"Safety training is not enough because problems with safety were not usually caused by ignorance of how to work safely," Sarkis says. "Even if you get the employee to do the job exactly the way you say it should be done, he still may be driving to work with white knuckles because the place is such an unpleasant place to work. That stress will defeat his best safety efforts."