
Protecting Your Most Valuable Asset: 4 Best Practices for Reducing Worker Injuries and Illnesses



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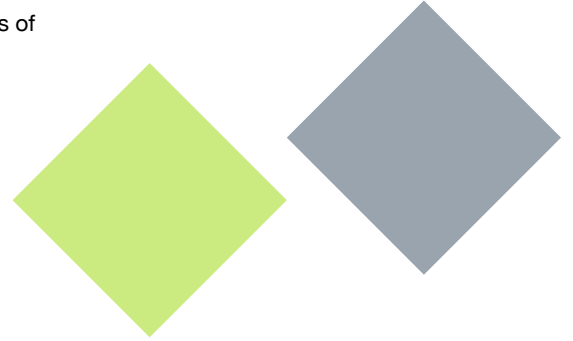
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Every day, millions of people around the world go to work, exchanging their labor for wages that support themselves and their dependents. It is their collective effort that, in a wider context, fuels the global economy and contributes to the ongoing story of human progress.

An unfortunate by-product of this timeless effort is the toll, in countless physical and mental forms, that it takes on those carrying it out. Injuries, illnesses, near-misses and fatalities invariably occur in workplaces. In the United States in 2019, for instance, employers reported 2.8 million non-fatal workplace injuries and illnesses, along with 5,333 worker deaths. The true total of these events — known collectively as “incidents” — is even higher, given that employers should, but do not, report every occurrence.

Although workplace health and safety risks are often high and always present, the good news is that best practices exist to help mitigate them. We will look at some of these top courses of action that organizations can follow to ensure the safest environment possible for its most valuable asset — their workers.

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#1 – Training

It is impossible to expect an employee to properly use a piece of potentially hazardous equipment without first receiving effective training. Without proper instruction, accidents will invariably occur. The potential negative repercussions are many, including financial hits to the organization, such as costs related to production downtime, equipment repair or replacement, higher insurance rates and reputational damage. Most importantly, however, are the potential injuries, illnesses and even fatalities suffered by employees.

Companies can minimize the chances of these catastrophic scenarios occurring by implementing a safety training program for all workers across the organization. Such a program ensures everyone is prepared with the necessary knowledge and skill sets to carry out their duties in the safest manner possible.

An effective training program often stems from a strong health and safety culture that is established from the very top of an organization. In these environments, training is baked into the onboarding process. A new hire to an auto manufacturing plant, for instance, is given full training on the tools and machines they will use and operate as part of their daily routine. Before taking on those responsibilities, they will be required to demonstrate their knowledge by performing their operations under the watch of a supervisor, who can identify and correct any mistakes.

Effective training programs, however, do not stop at the onboarding stage. They feature continuous learning and testing regardless of how long an employee has been with the organization. This includes a schedule of regular testing and instruction at pre-defined intervals, such as every three or six months. Such exercises ensure workers are up to speed on proper operation techniques, and also on any alterations to their usual routines.

A successful training program also instructs workers on how to identify workplace hazards before they become problems, both within their own sphere of work and throughout the wider workplace. If, for instance, a machine operator spots a stack of boxes leaning precariously to one side on a pallet while walking toward the lunch room for her break and alerts the area supervisor, a potential disaster can be averted. Such awareness is more likely to infuse a workplace culture if workers are trained to possess it.

COVID-19 has accelerated the use of remote training for certain tasks that do not involve physical demonstrations of aptitude. Employers should be looking for ways to introduce this virtual approach into their training plans, for both the potential cost and time savings that can be realized.

Another key consideration in building a training program is to account for the diversity of languages that are used by today's modern workforce. With individuals from many different regions of the world now forming today's employment landscape, offering instruction in one or even two languages often is not enough to ensure effective training is communicated properly. Instruction materials should be translated into workers' preferred languages whenever possible.





#2 – Worker Engagement

Accomplished health and safety leaders know that no matter how strong a company's program is, it easily can be eroded by the dark forces of worker complacency and disinterest. When employees are not engaged in their organization's health and safety efforts, mistakes invariably occur, leading to dire consequences. (Companies can predict the level of employee engagement in the culture based on a few leading indicators: [Checklist: The 10 Leading Indicators That Predict Employee Safety Engagement](#).)

A robust employee engagement program is a proven counterforce to complacency. A 2016 Gallup study found that firms that landed in their top quartile of their employee engagement database had 70 percent fewer safety incidents compared with those in the bottom quartile.

How do those top-performing organizations raise the engagement bar? Most rely on a few key tactics to help create a highly involved and enthusiastic workforce:

Jobs that workers find to be challenging and that offer variety are more likely to foster engagement than those that are simply repetitive and boring. Make sure the tasks involved in a particular position are not too far below the skill level of the employee carrying them out. Otherwise, disinterest is destined to creep in. Creating paths for career advancement within the organization also builds a sense of excitement and energy within an employee.

Involving staff in health and safety discussions helps boost interest in an engagement program. This can take many forms: providing regular updates on health and safety initiatives and improvements; soliciting staff input on new practices and potential improvements at the program planning and review stages; and instituting an open-door policy that lets employees know they can always voice their concerns over potential worksite hazards or their employer's overall safety practices.

Celebrating individual and team accomplishments, such as developing new ideas or 100% participation in safety strategies such as toolbox talks, is also key to fostering engagement. On-the-spot recognition of someone properly following a procedure, or a more planned-out form of recognition, such as quarterly awards for top performers, are just two examples of this approach in action.

#3 – Incident Management

A key tactic in protecting workers is effectively managing incidents when they do occur. At the core of this exercise is the incident investigation. According to OSHA, all investigations should include the following measures.

- **Incident reporting:** All injuries and near-misses should be reported. It is imperative that the employer educate staff on the importance of reporting and also let them know that no discipline will be imposed for doing so. [Incident reporting software](#) makes it easy to capture, track, investigate and manage all incidents and near-misses, including injuries and illnesses, spills, property damage and vehicle incidents.
- **Incident investigation:** Investigators should collect as much evidence as possible, including photos, videos, written notes and, if necessary, measurements. Interviews should take place with victims, co-workers, supervisors and anyone else who may have been involved. All interviews should take place in a quiet room, not at the scene of the incident. Key focus areas for interviewers are questions that get to facts surrounding the occurrence: when, who, where and what happened. Questions about any previous similar incidents and the use or non-use of personal protective equipment should be included. (Discover more about best practices for incident management: [The Five Things You Need To Know About Incident Management and Reporting.](#))
- **Reporting:** When the investigation is concluded, officials will determine the root cause(s) of the incident and offer recommendations for prevention of future occurrences. A plan of corrective and preventative actions (CAPAs) should be put in place. Better yet, create automated reminders to ensure CAPAs are carried out when they should be.

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#4 – Technology

Fortunately, a variety of advanced technologies have become widely available over the past few years to help organizations more efficiently carry out the tasks that make up an effective health and safety program.

Central to these efforts are environmental, health, safety and quality (EHSQ) management software solutions. These powerful platforms — available in the traditional desktop versions and, increasingly, via the cloud computing model — allow important data to be captured electronically, rather than through old-school and cumbersome spreadsheet or even pen-and-paper methods. (Software solutions can support a variety of integrated management systems: [How Intelix Supports an EHSQ Integrated Management System.](#))

An EHSQ platform can generate reports and trend analysis instantly, allowing managers to spot patterns and make decisions more quickly. These systems can also generate the often time-consuming compliance reports that are required by law, leaving staff more time to concentrate on other high-value safety planning efforts. EHSQ platforms can also generate automatic reminders and warning notifications that can help ward off dangers and ultimately prevent on-the-job injuries and fatalities.

An increasingly rich source of data for such platforms is being generated by another technology known as the [Internet of Things \(IoT\)](#). The concept involves placing small sensors on physical objects (the “things”) that require monitoring — such as a piece of machinery, a storage unit or even a person — and connecting those sensors over a wireless Internet connection to a database or software application.

This allows for real-time tracking of, for instance, a construction worker's heart rate, body temperature and other physiological signals while he is working at a building site. If the data flowing from the worker indicates any danger to his physical well-being, site supervisors can remove him from the situation for examination before anything catastrophic happens. (Connected work and workplace solutions are becoming more commonplace as a way to support EHS and quality in the workplace: [Connected Work, Connected Workers and the Future of Work.](#))

The possible applications of IoT extend far beyond [construction](#), however, and countless industries are deploying it to protect their workers, including [mining](#), transportation and forestry, to name just a few.

The recent pandemic forced thousands of employers to rethink their methods of delivering health and safety training, given that in-person instruction was often not possible. Internet-based video became much more widely used for instruction that did not require trainers and trainees to be in the same room together. Growth has also been seen in the area of virtual reality, a form of technology long associated with the world of gamers but now entering the corporate environment. It uses computers, software and peripheral hardware to simulate work environments. It allows employers to put trainees into seemingly real situations of danger and ask them to react based on previous classroom-based instruction.

This allows the workers to test their abilities in hazardous situations, such as a chemical spill in a warehouse, without actually being in any physical danger. Additionally, employers can train employees on equipment without having to take it out of commission, such as training a crane operator in some aspects of the job in a virtual environment rather than on the actual machinery.

These are but a few examples of exciting new technologies that are available today to help protect workers. The best approach to incorporating such solutions into your business is to consider what issue you are looking to improve and then seek out a technology solution to do it. Chances are high that an offering already exists or is being developed.



About the Author

GREG ENRIGHT

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About Intelex

With almost 30 years of EHSQ experience, we know a thing or two about how safety, quality and sustainability can preserve lives and protect the planet. And we know you need to drive productivity and operation excellence, too. That's why our technology solutions are built for EHSQ experts by EHSQ experts.

Free Trial:

If you would like a free trial of our software solution, please [click here](#). You will have the opportunity to experience the basic “plug-and-play” software before making a commitment.

Free Demo:

If you would like a demonstration of our software solution, please [click here](#). This includes a product tour and a conversation with our software experts.

Pricing Information:

If you would like to receive a custom quote or pricing-related information, please [click here](#). This includes the total business value that our software will provide, projected ROI, financial benefits via a “hard dollar” analysis and total business benefits via a “soft dollar” analysis.

