Health and Safety in the Modern Work Environment

How to keep diverse, fast-changing workforces safe and well.
INTRODUCTION

The work environment is changing. Workplaces and teams are more diverse and fast-moving than ever. The gig economy, working from home or in the field, hot-desking, bring-your-own-devices, ‘always on’ mentality and many other trends have changed the way we work and the environment we work in.

This changing and continuously evolving work environment brings new challenges for health and safety managers and others in the business concerned with keeping the workforce safe.

Traditional, mostly process-based and compliance-focused health and safety programs are no longer doing the job. Despite ever-improving laws and regulations and increased business investments in health and safety, the number of workplace accidents, diseases and fatalities has not seen substantial improvement.\(^1\)

What is needed is a new approach to health and safety, one that embraces the modern work environment and leverages digital technologies and social networking concepts that empower the workforce with simple, engaging tools and drive the adoption of a safety-led culture.

This paper will discuss the key characteristics of effective health and safety programs for the modern work environment and will explore the role digital technology should play.
THE CURRENT STATE OF WORKPLACE HEALTH AND SAFETY

Today’s workplaces are diverse and fast-moving environments. They involve employees, contractors, sub-contractors, consultants, visitors, customers, suppliers and many others. Businesses operate all day every day and have increasing responsibility for providing safe workplaces to those who work for them, those who contract to them and those who visit their sites.

Most current health and safety systems are very much built around a business model that is increasingly less relevant: the Monday to Friday, 9 to 5 work environment where staff clock in and clock out. Instead, we have remote workers connecting wirelessly from home or their kids’ soccer fields and we have suppliers who are also competitors who are also customers. We have a constant challenge to do more in a tighter time frame and find ourselves in new and uncharted territory on a regular basis.

It comes as no surprise that the number of workplace fatalities in the U.S. and many other Western countries has been on the rise in recent years - despite increasing focus on health and safety and ever stricter laws and regulations.

How do we keep our people safe without slowing the business down to a crawl with red tape, rules and procedures? How do we ensure that workers scattered around the globe are safe and well, and that everyone – from the shop floor to the board room – knows what risks they’re exposed to and how they can manage them best?

Health and safety in the modern work environment demands real-time responsiveness. It demands a grassroots solution that enables the entire workforce – including contractors – to work safely and securely without saddling them with compliance costs and paperwork that are targeted at legal compliance and often “miss the mark” on improving actual safety outcomes.

Fortunately, today’s digital environment allows employers and business owners to leapfrog from a world of paper- or form-based health and safety systems to a true real-time solution.

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1. Workplace Fatalities (U.S.A.)
THE COST OF WORKPLACE ACCIDENTS

Workplace accidents cost $250 billion per year in the U.S. - That’s around 2% of GDP.\(^2\)

It’s important to note that this figure doesn’t cover the ripple effect costs: Who looks after the injured worker’s family while they are out of action? What costs do they incur as a result? If there’s a serious injury or death, the work site may be shut down for lengthy inspections. Will your business cope with that amount of downtime or will you be able to work around it?

And what if the injury happens to a visitor – a supplier or a customer perhaps? What happens to your relationship and what will it cost to rebuild?

Accidents will happen in the workplace. Minimizing them and responding in a real-time fashion is the only way to reduce severity and minimize cost to the business.
SIX CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE HEALTH AND SAFETY PROGRAMS

1. Health and safety is about more than compliance

Many companies focus their health and safety efforts on meeting legal obligations, not realizing the risks involved with that approach.

Take visitor check-ins for example. From a legal standpoint many businesses are now offering a sign-in service that requires visitors to check in. This process usually includes a page or two of health and safety information which – typically – nobody reads.

Such a setup might protect the company from legal fallout to a degree should an accident occur. However, it doesn’t solve the underlying need to provide a healthy and safe work environment for everyone.

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Companies that rely on compliance-focused health and safety systems and programs are not resolving the real issue – empowering their workforce to keep themselves and their co-workers safe. Too often paperwork abounds and staff and visitors typically have to sign up to company protocols. However, that doesn’t do anything to change the nature of the environment itself with all the day-to-day problems associated with a fast-paced work environment.

It also doesn’t address the key problem with most health and safety compliance models: the lack of real-time updating.
2. Health and safety is about everyone

Health and safety issues affect everyone, not just those who work directly for a company. Yet many workplace health and safety systems are set up to support and protect only direct employees based at a single location.

In the old days, that was probably enough but, in today’s modern work environment, health and safety must encompass office staff and remote workers, as well as people who are visiting at your office, including contractors, customers, visitors and so forth. In short, everyone under your “duty of care”.

Most health and safety regimes minimalize one key factor in the modern work environment: The contractor. Statistics from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that 17% of all workers who died as a result of work-related injuries were contracted by and performing work for another business or government entity.\(^3\)

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However, when it comes to contractors, health and safety systems often rely on the traditional legal defense: Passing health and safety responsibility on to the contractor. Increasingly, regulators around the globe are enacting legislation that ‘looks through’ these contract provisions to assign responsibility to the entity which is effectively ‘in control’ of the business or undertaking. This has already been rolled out in the UK, much of the EU, Australia and New Zealand. In the U.S., OSHA is moving rapidly in the same direction with its initiatives around contractors.
Visit any workplace and most likely you will find some “employees” that are – in fact – working for another company including temporary staff, specialists, contractors, sub-contractors, suppliers and customers.

Engaging contractors and other ‘external’ workers in health and safety efforts is important for two reasons. Firstly, businesses have a responsibility to keep everyone who is working for them safe – including contractors. Secondly, uninformed and disconnected contractors can pose a risk to others in the work environment.

Therefore, health and safety programs need to consider and engage everyone in the work environment – whether they are direct employees or not.

3. Skills and qualifications are an important part of health and safety

In today’s work environment people often work in diverse and changing teams. Knowing what work each project member is qualified to do is key to keeping everyone safe – especially in higher risk sectors.

For example, when working on a construction project with a large team, which includes contractors from different sectors and industries, knowing who they are and what they can and can’t do is important, both to the project outcomes, as well as for everyone’s health and safety. How do team leaders know which employee is trained for working at heights, or is able to drive certain equipment? How do staff know which team members have the correct certification and which just like to overstate their skills?

Staff and contractors need tools that enable them to easily see what qualifications and certifications a co-worker has and to respond to or report a co-worker performing work in an unsafe way or work for which they aren’t certified. This increases accountability and transparency on the job and is a key tenant of building safety cultures.

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4. Risks need to be identified and communicated in real-time

Health and safety starts and ends with the people working for the business and it is essential that any health and safety process enables workers to both adhere to the process, but also to report incidents and potential problems in real-time.

A good health and safety regime requires open dialogue and immediate reporting of incidents and any issues that may impact on health and safety.

Incident reporting is critical to a strong health and safety regime, particularly “near misses” and low impact events that could have been much worse. Reporting is a key enabler for the organization to eliminate or mitigate risks before serious injuries occur. For some workplaces, reporting health and safety issues can be perceived as a negative move and is discouraged. However, a good health and safety regime requires open dialogue and immediate reporting of incidents and any issues that may impact on health and safety.

Reporting incidents, risks and concerns however, is only the first step. Sharing that information and responding promptly are critical steps which, sadly, are often left until long after the issue was reported. All too often reports are created (typically in paper format) and then filed away for future reference, while the problem or incident remains unresolved.

Instead, reports should be filed digitally and the information should be rapidly disseminated to those most at risk. Resolving the problem should be the priority rather than the paperwork associated with an incident, yet all too frequently the opposite occurs.

Likewise, over-informing users can also be a problem. If there is a local issue at one location, do staff at every branch or every workplace need to know immediately? Probably not. Digital communication of health and safety issues should only be directed at those in the immediate risk area.
5. **The workforce needs to be empowered to take an active role in identifying risks**

The good news is that most companies have a large pool of intelligent people who often see health and safety issues before management is aware of them simply because they are out there at the work locations. Sadly, many companies don’t make use of this workforce to share and disseminate that information.

By enabling staff and visitors alike to report problems in the workplace, companies are better able to respond. There will always be health and safety risks and incidents. The important thing is how companies handle and resolve them.

6. **Health and safety needs to be social and engaging**

Experienced health and safety managers know very well that workforce participation is the key element to the effectiveness of any health and safety program. Any initiative can only be successful if the workforce buys into them. Therefore, health and safety should be less concerned with meeting legal obligations and more focused on involving and engaging people.

When it comes to engagement, social networking platforms are leading the way and are creating a user experience that is engaging and enjoyable while also real-time and informative for the user.

**Health and safety systems need to leverage social concepts to create engagement.**

There is a significant opportunity for health and safety systems to leverage social networking concepts to create a more engaging user experience. Key aspects to this are being real-time, mobile, collaborative, connecting people to their network and giving each person easy access to the right information when they need it.
HEALTH AND SAFETY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

It’s about more than digitizing existing processes

As with many analog-digital transitions, the first stage is usually to replicate paper-based processes in digital form. By simply transferring from paper to digital (typically PDF forms) some providers hope to deliver reduced cost and added functionality.

But the real benefit to any digital transformation program comes when the process itself is re-written and re-designed around the new technology.

A new way to operate

Instead of providing forms as PDF files to be downloaded, printed off, written on, scanned in and returned by email, a real digital health and safety service should make use of the devices and capabilities that are on offer.

Enable staff to take photos of the issue, upload GPS coordinates, and resolve issues digitally. Real benefit lies not in transferring from analog to digital, but in transforming health and safety from a compliance-based process to something anyone can do at any time.

Mobility is the answer

The key driver behind the health and safety revolution is the advent of the smartphone and tablet. Suddenly computing power and mobility have merged and users have vastly more capability in their pockets than they would have had on their desktops only a few years ago.

Apps on smartphones and tablets are now familiar tools for users, therefore training requirements are minimized. Users typically open a new app and intuitively start to use the features they need.
On top of that, the functionality found in most smartphones and tablets makes them ideal tools for reporting health and safety needs. Cameras, GPS, communication via multiple networks – they are ideally placed to send and receive health and safety updates in real-time.

New technology will continue to emerge

New devices that extend the usefulness of mobile devices are also starting to come onto the market. Smart watches are providing a new and useful tool for those environments where smartphones and tablets are not as easily used. For instance, for urgent alerting and reporting, a smart watch may be preferred for users who are required to wear gloves, or other protective garments that would make retrieving a phone difficult or impossible.

In the future, we expect to see smart glasses and virtual or augmented reality goggles becoming more commonplace in some work environments. These new gadgets will further change how people communicate and collaborate. For health and safety systems to stay relevant and useful, they need to get ready to adopt and leverage these technologies.

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CONCLUSION

Health and safety should never be just about compliance and cost minimization. Health and safety is about making sure everyone goes home safely at the end of each day.

Today’s fast-changing, diverse work environment brings new challenges for those responsible for keeping people safe. In a world where it is no longer just about keeping direct employees in a specific location safe, a new approach to health and safety is needed.

The good news is that new digital technology and concepts offer a new method that has the potential to change the way we approach and manage workplace safety for the better.

By moving from paper-based processes to real-time digital health and safety, and by enabling staff and contractors to take an active role in health and safety, businesses can save time and money, be better equipped to actively respond to problems when they arise and the people most at risk will have more sense of ownership of the issue.

Businesses that embrace these new approaches, technologies and concepts will be ideally positioned to not only keep today’s workforce safe but also tomorrow’s workforce as the work environment continues to change and evolve.

We’ve seen what benefits mobilization and digitization have brought to white-collar office work – now it’s time to bring those same benefits to health and safety, no matter what industry you’re working in.
REFERENCES


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