

Understanding Accidents

Why they happen and what you can do



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With so much focus on health and safety at work, most people would be forgiven for believing that workplace injuries and fatalities should now be a rare phenomenon. Especially as today, many businesses routinely issue and mandate the use of personal protective equipment (PPE). But, as the latest research clearly shows, it's a problem that so far refuses to go quietly (i).

The evidence is clear:

Workplace injuries and illness cost the UK an estimated £13.4 billion in the year 2011/12

Accident compensation alone cost £7.2 million

In the same period there were 173 fatal injuries

There were 24,000 major injuries reported by employees and 114,000 injuries in total

And 212,000 self-reported injuries that led to more than three days' absence from work.

As you can see, the workplace still appears to be a long way from being an entirely safe place to work (i).

Surprisingly, many of these accidents occur on premises which have health and safety systems in place – even where the correct personal protective equipment has been issued. So why is it so difficult to ensure employee safety?

In this paper, we'll look at why accidents happen, to whom and why.

The maintenance black spot

While injuries can occur across a wide range of workplace activities, there are some areas that appear disproportionately dangerous. One in particular is maintenance. Between 10 and 15% of all fatal accidents occur during maintenance activity and some 15 to 20% of all accidents are maintenance-related (ii).

Of course, maintenance right across industry is a routine activity. But for individual workers it often presents a deviation from everyday activity.

As such, they find they're using different tools and equipment, different personal protective equipment and there's often pressure to get equipment back up and running fast. This can inadvertently breed conditions where accidents are significantly more likely than usual.

So who is most likely to suffer an accident? The overwhelming majority (85%) of personal protective equipment-related accidents injure men (iii). In fact, it's worse than that. Between 2005 and 2010, out of 88 UK industry-wide fatalities across workers aged between 16 and 24, 84 were male (iv). And while these are UK figures, they are consistent with others spanning Europe, the US and Canada.

The problem of young men

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There could be a number of reasons for this trend:

Men are more likely to be involved in manual handling and heavy industrial jobs

Younger workers may have received less training and have less experience

More young workers are employed on a casual, temporary or part-time basis

They are also possibly more likely to take risks, less able to make decisions and be reluctant to speak up about safety issues

When it comes to the specific nature of these injuries, almost half affect either workers' hands or feet. This reflects the fact that hands are used in most industrial tasks (filling, carrying, cleaning, operating machinery etc) whereas feet come into contact with spills and are susceptible to having heavy items dropped on them.

Personal protective equipment – provided but not used

A Health and Safety Executive report looking at potential failures in personal protective equipment found nearly a quarter of injuries occurred when equipment was provided but not used. So in 21% of cases, there was a failure to consider using personal protective equipment while in 11% of cases, the failure was to specify appropriate equipment. However, in 23% of injuries personal protective equipment was provided but not used (v).

This is a significant contributor to both downtime and cost. Failure to provide personal protective equipment resulted in estimated costs of around £49 million per year whereas not using the equipment provided cost £65 million.

Unsafe cultures, accident-prone workers

There is still a disappointingly large number of employers who do not provide appropriate personal protective equipment. But where it is provided and not used by individual employees, this is typically due to one of three reasons:

1. A poor safety culture fostered by the employer
2. The nature of the specific incident (e.g emergency or other time pressures)
3. Human factors of tiredness, carelessness or social pressure

When it comes to human factors, the Health and Safety Executive identifies four basic types of failure:

1. A simple slip up during a frequently performed physical action
2. A lapse of attention or memory
3. A mistake in understanding how something works or an error of diagnosis or planning
4. A deliberate breach of rules and procedures

Of course, deliberate violations of the rules can take many, many forms. Key issues to look out for include:

Cultural violations where rules are seen as no longer applying and are not enforced

Situational violations that occur in specific situations (often where time, money or environment play a key role)

Exceptional violations when an individual tries to solve an unusual problem in new ways

Tiredness-related violations brought on by long shifts and the resulting inattention

Comfort-related violations where the right protection isn't used because it is too hot or because it irritates an individual's skin

Social pressure where others place an undue influence on an individual to break or ignore the rules

7 ways to reduce the likelihood of workplace injuries

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While there are many ways to ensure the safety of your workers, there are seven that we recommend you view as a priority:

1. Ensuring clear standards are in place, that they're checked and adjusted regularly
2. Providing more rigorous and appropriate training for workers in order to minimise knowledge waste
3. Fostering an increased awareness of at-risk groups within the business
4. Improving communication about safety rules and the potential consequences for ignoring them with teams and individuals
5. Improving visual management to deliver clear reminders to use the appropriate personal protective equipment for specific tasks
6. More focused monitoring and management by line managers
7. Paying particular attention to personal protective equipment for hands and feet

You will probably never be able to create a 100% safe environment – especially where employees deliberately ignore safety procedures and equipment. But by focusing on a combination of culture, process and equipment, you should be able to minimise accidents and injuries throughout your organisation which will have a positive impact on the bottom line of your business.

About Kimberly-Clark Professional

designed to support your continuous improvement processes through:

Site assessments focusing on areas where people meet process, using LEAN principles

Tailored solutions, designed for aerospace, automotive and metal manufacturing

Integration of solutions in a LEAN manner, based on your unique processes

This approach can identify wastes and provide counter measures to reduce or eliminate them.

We are a credible second pair of eyes, helping you to:

Save time (from trial and error)

Be more efficient

Reduce overall costs

Find out more at www.kcprofessional.co.uk/solutions/the-efficient-workplace

Sources

(i) HSE's At a Glance Guide to Health and Safety Statistics 2011/2012

(ii) Britishmetalforming.com CBM Metal Matters issue summer 2010

(iii) HSE Evidence base for identifying potential failures in the specification, use and maintenance of PPE at work

(iv) British Safety Council Factsheet 2: Why should an employer think about young workers?

(v) HSE Evidence base for identifying potential failures in the specification, use and maintenance of PPE at work