

Safety Is a Choice

By Rebecca A. Morgan
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Workplace safety is more than an objective to be noted in a manual. It's a conscious commitment you, your managers and your employees need to make to reduce and eliminate worker injuries and fatalities.

In the United States over 5,700 people lost their lives to work injuries in 2005. The good news is that that number is below the 14-year average of 6,030 and is also a slight improvement from 2004. The bad news is that over 5,700 people lost their lives to workplace injuries in 2005.

Those 5,700 people worked in industries ranging from financial activities to leisure and hospitality to construction to mining. No major sector escaped entirely. The four most frequently reported work-related fatal events in 2005: highway incidents, falls, struck by object, and homicides.

Only a small percentage of workplace events are fatal. Another 4,300,000 nonfatal workplace injuries and illnesses occurred in 2004, down slightly from 2003. Again, no economic sector escaped. Manufacturing, health care and social assistance, and retail trade led that dark parade.

These failures, and I don't know what else to call them, are the shared responsibility of governments, business owners and management, and workers. Each has to consciously choose safety.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) was created in 1970 to lead the charge for regulating and enforcing workplace safety and health for businesses engaged in interstate commerce. Since then annual workplace fatalities are down by 60%, while annual occupational injury and illness rates have fallen by 40%. The administration encourages states to develop their own regulations, but only 22 states have OSHA approved regulations in place for private businesses. Three states and the Virgin Islands have OSHA approved regulations that apply only to state and local public sector employees.

One could argue that, if business owners and management would voluntarily do what they know they should, government intervention wouldn't be needed at all. There are at least two reasons for regulations: (1) not all business owners will do what they know they should, and (2) a lot of hazards, especially when considering workplace

illnesses, are not known without widespread and significant study. Regulations create awareness that is otherwise diluted or missing.

The Philadelphia site that housed the 1976 American Legion convention didn't intentionally have the bacteria *Legionella pneumophila* in its duct works. Few companies installed asbestos knowing it could kill the workers as well as installers. But certainly some left it there untreated until the government forced containment or removal.

Why would a hospitality business jeopardize employee and guest safety by leaving a puddle of water in a hallway? It is an accident waiting to happen, and one likely to happen to one of those groups the business says is so important. Rarely is ignoring such dangers malicious; it more likely reflects a commitment to safety without urgency. "I'll get to it as soon as I can" indicates other actions are more important now. Those priorities typically reflect management.

But many business owners/managers are committed to providing a safe work environment. Strangely enough, the worker most likely to be harmed may choose to circumvent the safety system. In my over 25 years in manufacturing, the last 16 years as owner of my manufacturing consulting business, I have met a significant number of people missing fingers or hands, with bad backs and knees, with burn marks or with hearing problems. Amazingly, more experienced workers, who should be completely aware of the danger of violating a safety rule, are entirely too often the ones to think the safety system rules don't

Continued on back



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apply to them, at least not for a minute or two. They reach into a machine to get something. They decide not to follow the lockout/tagout procedure for a quick climb into a protected area. When newer employees witness those behaviors without subsequent harm, they've learned a false lesson about their own safety.

The decision to violate safety systems is a choice to be unsafe. Roofers working on pitched roofs are required to wear safety harnesses, yet many

do not. Construction workers grinding or cutting stone are required to wear safety glasses, yet many do not.

While government, owners and management and workers all share responsibility for safety failures, it is the worker who gets hurt who pays the greatest price. Protect yourself. Choose safety. Every time. For others it may be a cost/benefit decision. For you, it's life, injury, illness or death.



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