

HAZARD IDENTIFICATION

Hazard identification is a critical step in building an effective safety culture within any organization. Without knowledge of the hazards, control or elimination of them would be like swatting flies with your eyes closed. Hazard identification is not only the first logical step in building a safety culture but it is also required by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). A number of different standards require the employer to assess the workplace and consequently protect employees from the hazards found during the assessment. Some regulations imply the requirement, some explicate the process.

Hazard identification is not just accomplished by a manager inspecting a job site; the process is multi-faceted. In addition to company policies, conducting a hazard assessment should include the following steps:

1. Employee involvement—Field managers, technicians, and laborers are exposed to the hazards of the job site every day. For many upper-level managers with field experience, it has been years since they wore a tool belt to work. Depending on the amount of time that has elapsed, an upper-level manager may not have direct knowledge of the current hands-on application of a work technique to make a relevant hazard assessment and control decisions. The employees that “swing a hammer” every day have seen the work processes performed and have seen or experienced the injuries. They are able to see the potential for accidents and their input fosters employee involvement, which promotes a “buy-in” effect that is critical to a safety culture. Employee involvement can be as simple as listening to the requests of your employees when they vocalize them, or it can be as structured as a formal Safety Committee. Whatever the mechanism, encourage your employees to be part of the process.
2. Injury data—Whether you keep your own database of injuries or you only use the OSHA 300 Log, reviewing historical injury data as a hazard analysis tool is a must. By identifying an injury cause, you have the opportunity to prevent a duplicate injury. Don’t solely look for trends involving recurring injuries; a single event on an injury log signifies the potential for preventing a repeat occurrence.
3. Inspections—Once the safety plan is in place, periodic and regular job-site inspections should be conducted to ensure that the safety plan is being followed. Inspections should be conducted by the safety manager, project manager, or an independent third party. Any deficiencies should be documented in writing and corrected as quickly as possible and practical, depending on the severity of the threat and the materials needed to resolve the concern.
4. Modifications—Does everything on a job site go according to plan? NO! No matter how much time and effort you put into your plan, most likely, something may change. Materials that were supposed to arrive by a certain date could be back-ordered and force the substitution of different materials. Those materials may have a new set of hazardous properties that need to be evaluated and incorporated into the plan. In another case, demolition may reveal a detail that is misrepresented or not shown on the plans, resulting in the need for a different approach. Missing essential crew members or significant reductions in personnel because of illnesses could affect an operation and possibly force postponement or alteration of that activity. It doesn’t matter what the circumstance is—we all have to overcome unplanned obstacles. When this happens, the safety plan should change and be monitored to prevent an element of disorganization, as a result of the changes, from creeping into the mix.
5. Consultation—Commissioning a third party to assist in hazard identification can make a good safety program great. In any industry, complacency is an obstacle to safety and a third party will identify hazards that an industry professional may have become comfortable with over years of working in that industry. To briefly illustrate how easy it is to become complacent to hazards, think of our nation’s roadways. Everyone knows there is a speed limit and it is easy to make the association of the accidents and injuries that might result from exceeding the speed limit. However, every day, numerous motorists (possibly even some of the readers of this article) exceed the speed limit while on the way to their destination. The reasoning doesn’t matter but the point is we all become complacent with the hazards we deal with on a daily basis. A third-party safety consultant can see those hazards for what they are and not overlook what you may have been dealing with for decades.

In summary, hazard identification is a critical component of an effective safety culture and the basis upon which all other aspects of a safety culture should be built. There are a number of ways to effectively identify hazards, including: employee involvement, injury data, project preplanning, regular safety inspections, and third-party consultation. Once the hazards are identified, they need to be incorporated into a comprehensive safety plan, which is then inspected, monitored, and modified as needed as the project progresses.

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