Safety Noncompliance is a Major Problem

Nearly *all* of the safety professionals in a recently-released survey said that workers in their organizations had at some point failed to wear the necessary safety equipment while on the job.

An exceedingly-high 98 percent of respondents who attended the recent American Society of Safety Engineers (ASSE) show in Baltimore answered “yes” when asked if they had observed workers not wearing safety equipment when they should have been, according to the survey, which was conducted by Kimberly-Clark Professional.

To make matters worse, 30 percent of these respondents said this had happened on numerous occasions. Given this, it’s not surprising that worker compliance with personal protective equipment (PPE) protocols was cited as the top workplace safety issue by all survey respondents.

These findings are in keeping with results from surveys of safety professionals, conducted by Kimberly-Clark Professional at the National Safety Council (NSC) Congress in 2008, 2007, and 2006. Those surveys also found high levels of noncompliance with PPE protocols – 89 percent in 2008, 87 percent in 2007 and 85 percent in 2006.

“Increasingly high noncompliance with PPE protocols is an alarming trend and a serious threat to worker health and safety,” said Gina Tsiropoulos, manufacturing segment marketing manager for Kimberly-Clark Professional. “Whether this is a result of economic conditions, a flawed approach to safety programs, younger workers who are more inclined to take greater risks, or some other reason, it’s essential that workers wear PPE when it is required. PPE protects workers against injury, but it will not work if workers fail to use it *and* use it properly.”

It’s no wonder then that three-quarters of respondents chose workplace accidents and injuries in response to the question: “What is most likely to keep you up at night?” Potential exposure because of noncompliance with PPE protocols was second, at 13 percent, while fear of a global pandemic and its impact on the workforce was a distant third, cited by only 8 percent of respondents.

Most Challenging PPE

When it comes to compliance with PPE use protocols, eye protection was found to be the “most challenging” PPE category, according to 42 percent of respondents, a disturbing though not unexpected finding considering that nearly three out of five workers who experienced eye injuries were found not to be wearing eye protection at the time of the accident, or were wearing the wrong kind of eye protection for the job.[1] Add to this the facts that about 2,000 U.S. workers each day have a job-related eye injury that requires medical treatment,[2] and that thousands are blinded each year from work-related eye injuries that could have been prevented [3] and the magnitude of the problem becomes clear.

The next highest category for noncompliance was hearing protection, also disturbing since occupational noise-induced hearing loss is 100 percent preventable when proper preventative measures are implemented. It was followed by gloves and head protection.

While the reasons for PPE noncompliance was varied, the biggest complaint was that it was “uncomfortable,” selected by 40 percent of respondents, followed by:

- Too hot
- Not available near the work task
- Poor fit
- Unattractive looking

When asked what they had done or intended to do to improve compliance levels, these safety professionals’ top choice was to improve existing education and training programs. This was followed by:

- Increased monitoring of employees
- Purchasing more comfortable PPE
- Tying compliance to individual performance evaluations
- Purchasing more stylish PPE
- Developing incentive programs to encourage greater PPE compliance

PPE of the Future

When safety professionals were asked about their visions for the future of PPE, fit, comfort, and style took precedence. Forty-two percent of respondents said they would like to see PPE that automatically adjusts to fit different body types, hands,

heads, faces, etc. Next was PPE with customizable style and design options, so that workers could select PPE based on their own individual tastes and safety requirements (32 percent). This was followed by PPE designed with integrated climate-control features, providing cooling or warmth as needed (15 percent).

The impact of customization and style on PPE compliance was further underscored by the response to another question. When asked if customizable or individualized style and design options would help increase PPE compliance, 87 percent of respondents said that it would.

'Toxic Towels'

Safety professionals were also asked about another area of concern – the potential health and safety issues for workers posed by oil, grease, heavy metal residues, or toxic elements on re-usable Rental Shop Towels. Sixty percent said they were disturbed by these hazards, with 20 percent of these respondents reporting they were "very concerned."

Worries about the risks to workers from "toxic towels" were the chief reason why safety professionals said they would switch to disposable wiping solutions from re-usable rental shop towels. What was the second most important reason for a potential change? A closed-loop solution that converts used disposable wipers to energy and diverts them from landfills. Not surprising, given the increased emphasis on environmental responsibility in manufacturing.

"Manufacturing facilities today are focused now more than ever before on conserving natural resources and reducing waste," said Tsiropoulos. "So a closed-loop solution for used wipers is a very appealing option."

Survey Methodology

The survey of 132 attendees at the American Society of Safety Engineers (ASSE) show in Baltimore, Md., was conducted via the Internet between June 9 and 13, 2010. All survey respondents said they were responsible for purchasing, selecting, or influencing the purchase or selection of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) or industrial wiping solutions. Ninety percent were safety directors or managers, while the other 10 percent were industrial hygienists, facilities, or general managers, or held other positions. They were employed in the following fields: chemical/plastics manufacturing; construction/utilities; computer, electronics and electrical product manufacturing; food processing; metal manufacturing; transpiration equipment manufacturing or other fields.

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