

An Asset You Can't Afford to Lose

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Upton Sinclair's early 20th century novel, [The Jungle \[1\]](#), has often been credited as the catalyst for the launch of food safety laws in America. It's no wonder, as Sinclair horrified readers with images of maggoty beef and sausage infused with rat guts.

As the author of a novel that inspired such change, one would think Sinclair would have been pleased. However, I was surprised to learn he was somewhat disappointed in his book's impact. His goal, he said, was to inspire change in workplace conditions, not necessarily food safety. He said he gained popularity "not because the public cared anything about the workers, but simply because the public did not want to eat tubercular beef."

After thinking about it, I decided Sinclair had a right to be a little miffed. Businesses can pay so much attention to public perception and their bottom line that they fail to recognize their most important assets — employees.

But is workplace safety really that big of a problem nowadays? After all, the days of gruesome Industrial Revolution-style factory accidents are only nightmares of the past used to fill the pages of high school history books.

While worker safety has improved greatly over the years, it is still an issue. Just this month the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) proposed fines of \$721,000 against a Wisconsin grain company after one of its workers was [engulfed in frozen soybeans \[2\]](#). Luckily, the worker was rescued after four hours, but the accident could have been avoided entirely if the company had taken proper safety precautions. OSHA cited the employer for 10 willful violations, including failing to provide workers with basic safety equipment like body harnesses and lifelines.

The problem of safety in the workplace seems to permeate all manufacturing

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sectors. There is a seemingly endless list of workplace accidents on the OSHA website, including a [natural gas explosion](#) [3] in February that killed six workers and injured 50 others. The company displayed a blatant disregard for safety as it allowed welding to continue during a gas blow. The explosion occurred when the gas came into contact with an ignition source — a blowtorch, perhaps?

According to OSHA's Assistant Secretary of Labor David Michaels, this deadly game is played on a regular basis, with workers paying the price. "We see this time and time again across industries when companies deliberately ignore safety precautions in the interest of completing jobs quickly, and workers end up being killed or seriously hurt."

Sinclair dedicated *The Jungle* to "the workingmen of America," and I think he would be disappointed in the state of worker safety today. It is unacceptable that more than 100 years after his piece was published, employees are still taking second place to earning reports.

Workers should be viewed as a company's number one investment. Without safe, healthy employees, a business would not be able to function, and it surely would lose more money than it would spend by protecting them. Manufacturers need to ensure a safe working environment, not only because it is the ethical action to take, but because workers truly are an asset they cannot afford to lose.

Do you feel safe at work? What is your company doing to ensure employees are safe? Let me know by e-mailing me at lindsey.coblentz@advantagemedia.com [4].

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