

Making Safety the New Toilet Paper



I am writing this on an airplane... One of those sinus-frustrating sojourns from the west coast, seemingly airborne for days...

The business that jetted me across the skies was in San Diego, attending the National Safety Congress & Expo, in order to get the first glance at new technologies relating to the safety arena (I also saw a ten foot tall robot on the show floor, but I digress...).

The show appeared to be a success, with 800+ exhibitors, but I really wasn't too surprised. Safety ought to be relatively recession-proof, right? I mean, some things can afford a little slack, but safety ought to be like toilet paper: A part of your budget that gets locked in and never goes away.

Maybe not, many exhibitors told me. According to one exhibitor, the NSC show attendance was up by 12 percent this year over last. In addition, multiple exhibitors regaled me with the improvements they've seen in their own businesses since 2009. One company, provider of training materials for safety-related topics, said 2009 was tumultuous... So much so that it prompted me to ask: "So, what happens when people cease safety training efforts?" The answer was, basically, that they improvise.

Improvisation means to perform or deliver without previous preparation... not the kind of underpinnings you'd want to a policy that could save lives... or at least fingers.

It's well understood that the recession meant breaks from spending in multiple areas, but let me reinforce the concept of spending to save. There are so many cost-related issues that come with worker injury: lost time, fines for violations, or even potential law suits. I realize I am preaching to the choir here, but the recent slack in safety spending indicates to me that this is a concept that could stand reinforcing.

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A safe and healthy workforce keeps you in business, and separates American manufacturing from some of its less conscientious global competitors. We've worked for years to move past the era of dangerous manufacturing work; let's not blow it in a short period of fiscal caution. We keep touting the favors of American-made, so let's continue to exhibit the best practices that made our manufacturing base something to be proud of. If the industry can't protect the people who made it what it is, we don't have much to boast about, in my opinion.

So today, as I cruise through the friendly skies, back to the Midwest and my loved ones, I silently hope for a safe return. Typically, flying is a breeze for me. My job entails a lot more travel than you might expect, so I am pretty used to buckling into my window seat and nodding off through the drink service and the cookies. But it's unsettling to think that safety might lose its top billing when the budget simply doesn't allow for it. Hopefully the airline industry has done its due diligence. Unfortunately, these latent risks don't often come to the surface until it's too late... at which point, we might be in for a rough landing.

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