



STORM CLOUDS IN AN IMPROVING ECONOMY

INTRODUCTION

Fatality rates over the past 100 years in the United States have plummeted from rates as high as 37 per 100,000 employees in the 1930's to 3.3 fatalities per 100,000 employees today. Much of this progress can be attributed to regulatory changes brought about by the National Safety Council (NSC), the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and its sister Acts (Mine Safety and Health Administration, Longshore and Harbor Workers' Compensation Act); the establishment of safety as a profession; and, the financial incentives created by workers' compensation laws. Unfortunately 2015 reflected one of the largest increases in fatality rates nationally since 2008 and 2016 fatalities in Michigan were the highest in a decade.

A key contributor to the safety and health movement since 1928, the Michigan Safety Conference (MSC) was developed with the sole charter of improving safety and health in Michigan workplaces through education and outreach. The Michigan Safety Conference is a volunteer group of safety, health and environmental professionals who represent a variety of employers in general industry, construction, insurance, education, and government. Collectively they represent hundreds of years of experience in positively impacting the safety and health of Michigan workers.

Hosting its 87th consecutive conference in April, 2017, opinions on current challenges to safety and health programs were solicited from the 170 MSC members and 4,000 attendees. The following article considered and incorporated these contributions into the author's research on some of the critical issues pertinent to today's changing workplaces and evolving workforce.

CHALLENGE

It is of great concern to note the increased rate of fatalities in Michigan. Additionally workers' compensation data indicates that injuries and illnesses, though less frequent, are resulting in more days of lost time and/or restricted duty and costing employers more.

It is an unfortunate, yet not surprising reality, that in a period of increased prosperity and employment, safety programs appear to be failing in some aspects or safety professionals are not given the tools to impact the severity of workplace incidents. The normal and suggested progression as a safety program matures is to focus on lost time - medical or restricted - and first aid incidents. After "managing" or "controlling" the number and severity of incidents, the safety culture of the entity will normally evolve to a proactive vs a reactive posture which emphasizes personal accountability and responsibility to be recognized and shared by all employees.

There are a number of disruptors facing organizations today that are negatively affecting the effective progression of safety programs. These challenges require us to rethink our approach to these programs in response to the modern economy including new areas of focus that expand beyond traditional "workplace hazards".

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Challenges to the effectiveness of traditional safety programs include an environment of increasing employment which stretches diluted supervisory and safety staffing levels; an increase in drug use in the workplace; and an aging workforce.

FULL EMPLOYMENT

An improved economy has triggered full employment and an eagerness for employers to make up for the “lean years” of low productivity and profits. Such a massive employment shift and increased business needs over a short timeframe however, reveals weaknesses in the system. The current system was designed for much lower employee numbers and the luxury of being able to thoroughly train and oversee, in many cases, a more experienced workforce. The necessity of adding newer and inexperienced workers for the sake of production is costing employers time and money.

For example, in the construction industry, temporary workers are engaged on a day-to-day basis to meet contractual obligations. This often results in using workers deficient in training which can overwhelm the supervisors’ ability to oversee all the multiple work activities, as well as the new employees arriving each day.

DRUG USE IN THE WORKFORCE

Secondly, many adults suffering from physical and psychological disabilities bring with them an unfortunate dependence on drugs, both legal and otherwise, into the workplace. Drug use and addiction continue to grow. Medical treatment, including prescription drugs, for workplace and non-work related injuries and illnesses are impacting employee performance. According to the National Safety Council, 29% of employers report prescription drug misuse is causing impaired or decreased job performance with a yearly monetary impact of \$442 billion dollars. Eight percent, or 20.8 million Americans in the adult and adolescent population, are impacted by drugs, and 75% of this population is currently employed.

Drug misuse results in higher absenteeism, increased healthcare expenses and lost productivity. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), “overdose deaths particularly from prescription drugs and heroin, have reached epidemic proportions”. Dr. Thomas Frieden, director of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has said that, “America is awash in opioids, urgent action is critical”. It is safe to assume that we may be poised at a frightening era of unsafe conditions from workers being under the influence.

THE AGING WORKFORCE

Another challenge is the aging of America’s workforce. Due to recent economic conditions, many older workers are remaining on the job past the typical retirement age to make up for retirement assets they lost during the recession. Though many enjoy, and are perfectly capable, of working far past the “normal” retirement years, age-related issues affect even the best intentioned individual. Workers’ compensation data again reveals that workers over 45 years of age take significantly longer to recover and return to work following a lost-time injury, and are likely one of the main contributors to increased severity trends mentioned earlier.

The AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) points out that chronic health conditions such as arthritis, heart disease and orthopedic impairments cause older workers to lose a day or two in a two week period which is double that of other workers without those conditions. In addition, insurance experts and the federal reporting agencies note that older workers incur longer absences for work-induced injuries or illnesses than do younger workers. However, younger workers may miss more work time due to family obligations that are normally not as much of an issue with older employees (such as child or elder parent care).

Older workers are also particularly impacted by diseases that have a long latency period that manifest many years after initial exposure. As workers remain employed longer, these diseases may appear which negatively impact productivity, health insurance and workers compensation costs.

Certain age-related physical changes are inevitable as well. Although perfectly able and willing to continue working, natural age-based physiological changes can impact eyesight, hearing, orthopedic and strength changes in varying degrees in many older individuals. Although personal accommodations are made by individuals to compensate, often sub-consciously, safety professionals must be diligent in performing unbiased monitoring of possibly hazardous exposures. Of course, these issues can also impact younger workers so there is no need to pinpoint individuals due to age, which in itself is discriminatory, but to encourage overall policies that identify deficiencies in safe behaviors. Drug use may also mimic some of these behaviors with inattention or sleepiness as major symptoms.

PERSPECTIVES

Comments from some of the Michigan Safety Conference volunteers show that no matter how much technology changes, many issues still remain the same.

David Woods, Industrial Hygiene Manager with Fibertec IHS, indicates in his experience “very young workers and complacency” as contributing factors to severity in work-related incidents. He further states “older workers are safer, and take their time. Not in a rush to get things done”. However, along with other experts he agrees that “Breaking through the cross sectional boundaries of different divisions is a problem with smaller companies doing more things. Everyone seems to be adding different business units, but not addressing safety issues in those units.”

A.J. Hale, Safety and Loss Prevention Manager for CompOne Administrators, works with a variety of clients and notes “...the age (of the work) force is older and in not as good of shape as they used to be and complacency (such as) done this a 100 times and nothing has ever happened to me”. He believes too many are inactive or are sedentary using computers, advanced plant technology and vehicles rather than getting up and moving. Consequently workers are not as healthy as they could be. He further notes employers giving attention to the wrong things, i.e., “I think we spend too much time being Reactive rather than proactive. Random variability is misread. Management overreacts to the random vs variability. Safety incentives based on injury rates amount to FALSE and MISLEADING feedback, and emphasis on injury rates encourages mere numbers management.”

Retaining older workers has actually become a business necessity. The next generation of employees is smaller than the massive group of “baby boomers” who have dominated the employment world since the 1960’s. Thus, the upturn in the economy comes at a time when although older employees are still

working, the lower number of younger employees who are available are lacking the experience to easily assimilate into safe and productive assets. Business, in many cases, is not able, or willing, to wait for everyone to catch up.

Both groups of workers are critical to effective functioning of Americas' businesses. The experience of the older worker remains an asset, yet some employers are only considering the increased costs of retaining them in favor of, what is actually turning out to be, fewer and fewer younger workers. Based on interviews with younger "millennial" workers (those born around 1980 to 2000) they have indicated a different viewpoint from their predecessors. With the shrinking number of employers offering pension or post-retirement health benefits coupled with the portability of IRA 401 plans, younger workers are more inclined to move on to another employer if they are not satisfied with conditions or opportunities at their present workplace.

Workers from other countries and cultures are also a growing segment of the workforce requiring special attention from employers to assure proper understanding and clear communication.

A final concern is whether there will be the continuing interest in attracting and educating the future safety and health professionals that will be needed.

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

According to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2013, data indicates the 65+ year old age group will increase by 79.2% by 2030 with the 15-24 year old, 25-44 year old and 45-64 year old groups only increasing by 31% (12.3%, 14.6%, and 4.1% respectively).

US News & World Report (6/2013) reports older workers bring critical experience but also may require higher pay and more expensive disability and health insurance costs. The National Council of Compensation Insurance (NCCI) model indicates age has greater impact on injury severity than injury frequency and this is consistent with the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) surveys. The BLS reports that on average, non-fatal illnesses and injuries require 10 days of restricted or lost time for workers over 55 years of age compared to five days for younger workers.

According to current trends in workers' compensation claims both Mr. Woods' and Mr. Hale's earlier statements are actually correct. One independent source (Aons Laser Casualty Database) reports the highest workers' compensation claim costs are coming from employees with less than one year and more than 10 years of tenure.

Zach Hansmann, Construction Safety Manager for Michigan State University, noted the lack of millennials entering the safety professional the field compared to the retiring and soon-to-be retired members who currently dominate. Along with other younger interviewees, Zach is concerned yet committed to bringing his peers together to encourage the growth and education of the replacement professionals that will be needed.

Kevin Smith, Director of Program Development (All Hazards Training Center) University of Findlay, Ohio offered a different perspective from an educational standpoint. He believes opportunities in the safety, health or environmental fields should be emphasized as a viable and attractive career choice starting from Kindergarten through High School. University of Findlay offers school group workshops and "hands

on” activities at the training center. He further supports the option of taking a hazardous waste course or machine guarding course similar to Machine Shop or Auto Mechanics at the high school level. Mr. Smith further stated that University of Findlay’s safety and health graduates achieve almost a 100% employment rate upon graduation.

RECOMMENDATIONS/PERFECT WORLD

If it can be agreed that the arguments above represent some of the current and future problems impacting a safe and healthy workplace (aging workforce, drug use, fewer younger workers, multi-cultural employees, diminishing educational opportunities impeding safety and health practitioners), how will the safety profession meet the challenge? Some ideas to retain a valuable older employee safely and attract the diminishing number of younger workers are as follows:

- a) Developing successful relationships and methods of communication for both an intergenerational and multi-cultural workforce;
- b) Addressing and developing policies to avoid age discrimination issues;
- c) Performing ergonomic assessments and redesigns that impact physical job demands and eliminate unnecessary stressors and support an “age friendly environment”;
- d) Developing workplace programs that clearly address drug use policies and means of rehabilitation;
- e) Creating flexible work schedules and telecommuting policies;
- f) Continually performing Job Assessments to eliminate heavy physical aspects through automation, procedural or administrative methods that keep one with the changing physical capabilities of the modern workforce;
- g) Assessing and supporting improved health of the workforce through more prescriptive wellness programs;
- h) Targeting recruitment strategies that can compete for a dwindling workforce;
- i) Promoting/sponsoring re-education and specialized training of current and future workers to meet industry needs;
- j) Continually monitoring and reviewing job tasks to determine if programs are working – proven by job retention, productivity, zero injury, illness or property damage with immediate remedies implemented;
- k) Securing solid management support to assure realistic budgets and approval for changes;
- l) Developing supervisory training to recognize and positively exploit intergenerational and cultural differences with accountability for safety as part of the review process;
- m) Lobbying and supporting specialized education and degree programs for safety, health and environmental students to assure continuing expertise in the field;
- n) Utilizing insurance/loss control specialists and government entities for training and auditing purposes;
- o) Developing a safety culture that: promotes and rewards proactive activities vs. reactive; creates realistic leading indicators and measurable goals; tracks trends and involves all members from upper and middle management to supervisors and hourly workers;

- p) Developing wellness and active return-to-work programs while modifying work tasks to accommodate partial temporary and permanent disabilities.

ADDITIONAL CONCERNS AND FINAL THOUGHTS

Several MSC volunteers interviewed also expressed concern with a shift due to the current political and business climate that favors maximum profit and reduced regulatory interference to the detriment of worker satisfaction and safety. If this occurs, it becomes a more difficult task to convince employers of the human and monetary costs of ignoring their workers' needs until it is too late. This may discourage new safety professionals from entering the field and obtaining the education and certifications truly necessary to impact worker safety and health as well as the inability to keep and maintain a stable workforce.

The antiquated system of promoting an injured supervisor or line worker to be the de facto "safety person" without adequate training is a road that will only lead to disaster marked by increasing accident frequency and severity. The positive multi-decade long term trend showing reduced incidents each year could easily reverse itself if employers become complacent and do not engage in long-term planning for the challenges that lay ahead.

Supervisors thoroughly trained in safety and health concepts still remains the best option in keeping workers safe (with professional safety personnel providing consultation and training). Supporting that concept, Melody DeBolt, Director of Operations for Great Lakes Safety Training Center, stated that her customers are seeking training programs on the "soft skills". Employers need assistance in training new managers to become leaders by creating effective supervisors out of great workers. Integration of safety and health concepts are part of the training they have developed.

The diminishing role of federal safety regulatory activities is a real possibility that will make the enforcement of government-driven insistence on safety management initiatives less visible and immediate. Although that alone could make the safety professional's job more difficult, only relying "on the stick over the carrot" will not create long-term safety compliance.

A.J. Hale noted, "...2016-44 Deaths in Michigan, 22 due to Fall Protection. How long have Fall Protection Standards been around, how long have we talked about it, how many classes have been held and the list goes on". A.J.'s point is "we are becoming complacent with what we know."

A new generation of safety professionals comfortable with rapidly changing technology in the workplace and the imagination to develop the sophisticated methods needed to meet the challenges of protecting workers should be the goal. Professionals who are skillful in communication and education are key assets in the intergenerational, multi-cultural workforce they oversee.

Members of the Michigan Safety Conference are committed to monitoring the trends affecting accident severity and illuminating the impact of an increasingly diverse workforce. The Conference will focus future educational outreach programs on addressing issues and creating opportunities for safety and health professionals to come together to solve the challenges of the future.

Visit www.michsafetyconference.org to learn more.



About the authors:



Sheila E. Ide, a Board member of the Michigan Safety Conference and Divisional Vice President has spent more than 35 years as a Safety Administrator and Human Resources Director before becoming an independent consultant and speaker for safety and personnel topics. She has written several articles for trade journals, local news and MIOSHA publications. Sheila was instrumental in the development of, and facilitated the first seven years of the Michigan OSHA Training Institute (MTI) offering Michigan workers and employers more than 45 safety, health and construction topics. The MTI provides certificates in General Industry, Construction, Industrial Hygiene and Safety Management tracks.



Joe Galusha, currently serves as the Chairman of the volunteer based Michigan Safety Conference. Joe is also the Group Managing Director of Aon's US Risk Control and Claims group. In is more than 25 years of experience as a safety professional and risk management consultant, Joe has served in a number of roles including the Corporate Director of Safety and Health for Fruit of the Loom, serving as the Corporate Ergonomist for Mazda Corporation and more recently as a consultant in various areas of safety and risk management. Joe, also has significant experience in Event Risk Management and security serving as risk consultant to the NFL on five Superbowls, numerous corporate events, and as a risk consultant to the 2014 World Cup.