

TECH TIPS

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SAFETY'S MOST VULNERABLE EMPLOYEES: NEW AND EXPERIENCED

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New Employees

Many of us began our careers in this industry sitting behind a computer screen, completing whatever safety classes were required to start working. What came next? Usually we were handed a hard hat, then sent out to join a crew to begin our careers, with little or no reinforcement of what we learned about safety. It is probably an eerily familiar scenario across the country. With demand for qualified workers so high, we are in such a hurry to hire someone to fill a position that we don't stop to realize that new employees most likely have never seen or heard about the hazards that exist in our industry, and one exposure to these scenarios via an online class is not enough to create the awareness necessary to keep workers and our communities safe. The new employee will be a part of a crew that will rely on the new hire to keep up with production and meet a company's goals and sadly, production sometimes takes priority over protection.

There are many studies concerning work site accidents, and many, if not all, seem to conclude that the majority of accidents happen with employees who have two years or less of employment. Interestingly, the second most vulnerable group consists of those employees with greater than five years employment. The data tells us we have two primary target groups which require more thorough training: New employees and experienced ones. This article is designed to scratch the surface on what can be done to eliminate these trends and create a safer work environment.

One common practice is to have an existing crew member become a mentor to a new employee. In most industries this process is referred to as a Short Service Employee Program. The mentor guides, protects and becomes a resource for the new employee. Implementing this process is the first step in attempting to reduce historically shown tendencies for accidents. Keep in mind, however, that the new employee will probably be either eager to impress or not be engaged at all. The mentor should be able to teach, while making sure that "being eager" is not permission to perform in an unsafe behavior.

The process should also identify this new employee to others in the field. They need to stand out so many employees can be on the lookout for them. One idea is to have the new employees wear a different colored hard hat or safety vest for the first six months or until there is a sense of confidence that the employee has grasped and is consistently practicing good safety measures. This helps to identify the new employee as someone who is still learning and may need some guidance. Many companies also have programs

that tests employees on certain tasks or operating equipment. This is strongly suggested, as it also gives these employees a certain sense of accomplishment during their probationary period. In addition, the existing employees should lead by example and provide a new employee with a sense of teamwork that demands safety be first in all aspects of daily routines.

Experienced Employees

On the opposite end of the spectrum are employees who have been around for five years or more. Logically, you would think these employees are leaders, that they are experienced in recognizing hazards and they represent the industry in a positive way. Unfortunately, the challenge we have with the experienced employee is complacency. The mental state of "I have done this a million times and nothing has gone wrong" can be every bit as dangerous as the new employee who lacks knowledge and skills.

This mentality starts to intrude into our daily routine with some of our more seasoned employees who don't want to go the extra few steps to ensure a proper traffic control is setup or skip the step of monitoring a confined space because they assume it is okay, or they choose to not use a spotter to backup pieces of equipment. There are hundreds of examples of this type of behavior that we all have identified in root cause analysis investigations. We see this and shake our heads, asking "how did this happen?" knowing it could have been avoided if we simply followed our protocols. The difference is that we need to learn from these incidents, across our industry, and apply them in our monthly, weekly and - yes - daily safety training processes. We must be diligently on the lookout for unsafe behaviors associated with complacency, which can be devastating.

We all have the responsibility to recognize that certain employees - those who are new and those who have adopted a sense of complacency -- are vulnerable during our daily operations. In fact, we might be one of those employees. Either way, we have the responsibility and duty to protect ourselves and those around us each and every day. If you do not already have a structured Short Service Safety Program, it is time to consider one. Concentrate on a program that assists new employees on their beginning journey. Stay focused on the experienced employees who can always be reminded of the negative implications of complacency. We all become the experienced employee, whether we like it or not. Continually correct what you are doing wrong or promote to others what you are doing right! Be Safe!