

Predict the Shortcut Before It Results in an Employee Injury

Introduction

An unsafe act can be defined as a deviation from standard job procedures such as not using personal protective equipment, removing machine guards and using outdated tools.

This is the classic definition of an unsafe act. As we deep dig deep into this definition we must examine a basic reason why these unsafe acts occur. It may be as simple as an employee taking a shortcut to do the job quickly due to supervisor pressure, lack of job knowledge, lack of proper training or equipment or due to their own personal work habits.

Personal work habits maybe the biggest reason why employees take shortcuts. The simple truth is that we all take shortcuts in life that place our safety at risk. Taking a shortcut is becoming more commonplace as our lives get busier and as the concept of multi-tasking becomes a natural part of our lives both at home and in the workplace.

When we perform simply tasks around the house do we always use the proper equipment and consider safety when performing these tasks? When we clean the windows after the end of monsoon do we use the correct ladder? Do we inspect the ladder prior to use to ensure that it is safe? Do we move the ladder throughout the process or do we try to reach as far as possible to avoid having to get off the ladder and move it closer to the area that we need to reach? In these situations, we are putting our own personal safety at risk to get the job or activity done faster.

If these types of shortcuts are common in our everyday lives, they must also be occurring in the workplace. This can be especially troublesome if we have employees taking shortcuts during critical operations such as working from heights, working in confined spaces, conducting lockout operations and driving forklifts. Employee shortcuts within these types of activities can lead to a severe injury or even death. How can we tell if our employees are taking shortcuts when performing these and other tasks?

We can evaluate our operation and determine if our facility is highly susceptible to an employee shortcut by examining seven key areas. These areas include management, supervisors, employees, work environment, safety and work process training, prior injury trends and severe exposures.

Management

The management team leads the way, by setting policy, assigning and supporting responsibility, setting an example and involving employees in a safety program. Management culture will have the most influential impact on the safety shortcut potential within a workplace. Supervisors and employees will often confirm that management supports safety, however, further analysis of management support and perceived management support on the part of supervisors and employees must be evaluated to determine if management places a higher priority on production than they do on safety.

If management places a very high priority on production at the expense of safety, the workplace is ripe for shortcuts to take place during basic and critical work activities. If management has a balanced approach to production and safety such as the development of safety objectives and a formal supervisor accountability program, the potential for a safety shortcut is reduced.

Supervisor

The supervisor also plays a critical role when it comes to the potential for a shortcut. Often times the supervisor's own perception or misperception is that management values production over safety. This mentality can also be a result of past work experience with another employer or stem from their own perception on how to achieve production goals. Management may truly value safety the same way they value production but often times that message is not clearly sent down to the supervisor level.

It is critical for managers and supervisors to have a conversation on the priority of safety relative to production to ensure that the supervisors understand that safety is a priority and unsafe acts or shortcuts to enhance production will not be tolerated. Once again, this can be accomplished by developing a formal safety accountability program and holding the supervisors accountable for their proactive safety activities.

Employees

The characteristics or background of the employee can also be measured to determine if an employee may be more likely to take a shortcut. Conducting informal interviews with employees and focusing on the employee's experience, training, work habits and attitude can determine if a certain employee type will be more likely to take a shortcut. A good starting point when evaluating an employee's shortcut potential is to focus on the employee's age and experience.

Older workers (over 40) have lower incidence rate but more unscheduled absences than employees under the age of 40. When older workers become injured, they typically require more time off from work. Older workers can learn just as well as younger workers but they need well-defined training and education programs especially when dealing with new technology.

An older employee may not ask for help when faced with working with new technology for fear of losing their job or being replaced. If an older employee is working with new technology such as a computerized inventory system on a forklift; management must ensure that the employee is properly trained on the new technology to avoid a potential distraction or shortcut as a result of a lack of knowledge on the new system.

An older employee may continue to use older outdated tools and equipment simply because they are familiar with that type of equipment even though it may not be as safe as newer equipment. They may also feel that by requesting newer equipment that they being a burden on the company. These factors need to be identified and addressed within a work environment to ensure that our older workers are properly trained and are using the safest equipment possible.

The potential for an injury to a younger worker is significant. Every nine minutes a young worker is injured. Most youth find paid employment, either during the summer months or year-round, before graduating from high school. Young workers, ages 14-24, are at risk of workplace injury and illness because of their inexperience at work and their physical, cognitive, and emotional developmental characteristics. They often hesitate to ask questions and may fail to recognize workplace hazards.

Younger employees may have a tendency to be overconfident and may want to prove themselves and be more prone to take risks to show that they belong within a work environment. This especially holds true if a younger employee is hired by a company into a department that has a great deal of older experienced employees.

In addition, younger employees may work too fast to get a job done, may lift too much weight and not ask for help because it takes less time and may start a job without complete instructions or training. All of these characteristics can lead to shortcuts and a high risk of injury. Young employees need thorough training, on-going supervision and coaching in order to reduce the potential for a shortcut and injury.

Safety and Work Process Training

Employee training on job steps and procedures is critical in the prevention of employee shortcuts. Employees that do not fully understand their job, receive limited coaching and supervision are more likely to improvise and take shortcuts because they simply were never trained on how to properly do their jobs.

Many companies spend a significant amount of time and money on compliance training that is important and is required. However, the same companies may not be spending an equal amount of time on teaching their employees on how to actually do their job.

New employees should be provided with detailed work process training. This training should be provided by a safety conscious supervisor, lead person or trainer. Compliance related training can be incorporated within work process training to ensure that the employee can relate the compliance training to the actual work task.

For example, when employees are trained on the use of chemicals, the safety data sheet for that chemical can accompany the training process to augment the understanding of the hazards associated with the specific chemical. In addition, a review of the types of lockout tagout equipment can be conducted when reviewing the operation of the machinery and maintenance work. These activities can help the new employee make a direct correlation between the compliance training that was received to the job function that involves chemical use and lockout tagout.

Prior Injury Trends

An evaluation of past injury trends can also point to shortcuts that were taken which resulted in an employee injury. A comprehensive review of completed accident investigation reports can lead to clues that an injury may have been caused by an employee taking a shortcut. Examples include caught in injuries to release machine jams, failure to lockout equipment, lifting too much weight and the use of the wrong tool. An examination of this information can help determine why the shortcut was taken and how the shortcut can be eliminated to prevent future accidents.

Severe Exposures

Injuries involving machinery can also be the result of an employee taking a shortcut. Older equipment may jam more frequently thus increasing the potential for an employee to reach inside the machine and un-jam the material. In addition, older equipment may require more maintenance activities and thus increase the exposure of an employee taking a shortcut and not properly locking out the equipment.

Employees servicing or maintaining machines or equipment may be exposed to serious physical injury or death if hazardous energy is not properly controlled. Maintenance workers and machine operators are among the several million workers who service equipment and face the greatest risk. Compliance with the lockout tagout standard prevents a large number of fatalities and injuries each year. Lockout tagout shortcuts can stem from an employee not fully understanding the energy control procedures, lack of proper equipment, poor training and lack of accessible equipment.

Government regulation mandates that employees need to be trained to ensure that they know, understand, and follow the provisions of the energy control procedures. However, these written energy control programs can be very complex and involve numerous steps. Employees may not remember all of these steps and simply act on their own without proper knowledge to get the job done quickly.

In order to avoid this type of shortcut; step by step energy control procedures could be posted directly on the affected equipment along with pictures of lockout points and equipment. This best practice allows the authorized employee to review these procedures while they are conducting lockout tag out thus eliminating a misstep or shortcut.

The lack of accessible lockout tagout equipment can lead to an employee taking a shortcut simply because it may take longer to find the equipment than to conduct the lockout procedure. Lockout equipment and devices should be readily accessible to authorized employees directly in the area where the lockout will take place. The use of tool belts and lockout stations posted throughout the facility will improve equipment accessibility.

Government regulation mandates employee training on lockout tagout and it must cover at least three areas: details on the energy control program; elements of the energy control procedure relevant to the employee's duties; and the requirements of the regulation related to lockout/tagout.

This training is often very general in nature and does not mandate hands on training or the use of the lockout devices that will be used by the employees during a lockout tagout. The lack of hands on training or specific training can result in the employee improvising or taking a shortcut to complete the task. Lockout tagout training should be very specific to the machines, equipment and devices and include hands on training in order to reduce the potential for an employee shortcut.

When an object is too heavy for an employee to move, they may attempt to force the object to move by assuming an awkward posture or using momentum to jerk or twist. Rapidly twisting the back while lifting or quickly accelerating objects produces significant forces on the spine, and increases the risk of muscle and ligament strains and sprains as well as wear and tear on the discs.

Heavier objects require more energy to handle and can cause early whole-body and local muscle fatigue. As an employee becomes fatigued, he/she will be more likely to make errors, use improper lifting techniques, take shortcuts and cause an accident that could produce more severe consequences than a back injury.

A possible solution is to avoid an injury associated with lifting heavy objects is to incorporate a group approach to lifting and have two or three workers lift as a team. A more effective solution is to incorporate an engineering control such as a lift table or hoist to move the heavy object.

Many companies implement these policies and these types of material handling devices. However even when employees are trained and required to use a team lift or a lift table or hoist to move a heavy object they are prone to taking a shortcut simply because they may feel that it takes too much time to ask for assistance or to operate a lift table. In these situations; employees need specific training on the importance of a team lift and how the use of lift tables and hoists will prevent a back injury.

Workers are subject to falls if sides and edges, floor holes, and wall openings are not protected. Any time a worker is at a height of six feet or more (construction industry) or four feet or more (general industry), the worker must be protected.

Employees that work from heights and use a fall protection harness may also be prone to taking shortcuts. If an employee is sharing a fall protection harness or is provided a harness that is difficult to adjust, they may not spend the time adjusting the harness in order to achieve a protective fit.

Employees should have their own fall protection harness system, which is adjusted to their body dimensions. Employee should be trained on how to inspect and adjust the harness. Supervisors need to periodically audit the use of fall protection equipment to ensure that it is properly adjusted and will protect the employee in the event of a fall from height.

A confined space has limited openings for entry or exit, is large enough for entering and working, and is not designed for continuous worker occupancy. Permit-required confined spaces are confined spaces that may contain a hazardous atmosphere, may engulf or asphyxiate an entrant and may also contain physical hazards such as exposed live wires.

Taking a shortcut during confined space entry can result in an employee death or severe injury. Common shortcuts that need to be addressed include lack of accessible equipment, poor training and lack of

duplicate equipment if multiple confined space entries are taking place within different departments. Employees should be provided with confined space entry training just prior to entry, an adequate amount of equipment should be readily accessible by authorized employees and supervisors should audit this program and be involved in all stages of the process to ensure a step is not missed and to guard against a shortcut.

Large number of workers died from traumatic injuries suffered in forklift-related incidents from 1980 to 1994. High percent of these fatalities involved a worker on foot being struck by a forklift.

Taking a shortcut through a production area to get back to the a department after lunch or a break can also result in an employee injury as the employee may pass by hazardous machinery, operations and forklift travel. Employees may decide that the best way to get back to their department after lunch or a break is to simply walk through a production area and not follow the designated route of travel.

Forklift traffic and other workers should be separated whenever possible. Guardrails and railings should be implemented to guide and direct employees away from production areas and forklift travel paths. Aisleways should be designated and separate forklift travel paths from pedestrian travel paths.

Shortcuts are human nature and everyone has taken a shortcut, which placed their safety at risk. If we can apply this understanding to the workplace and analyze the seven shortcut focus areas, we may be able to identify the shortcut potential and prevent an employee injury or employee death. Critical factors involve communication between managers, supervisors and employees, detailed work process and safety training, ongoing coaching and audits of hazardous work activities such as confined space entry, the use of fall protection and lockout tagout.

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**Published by : D. L. Shah Trust,
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Sir P. M. Road
Mumbai 400001
email: dlshahtrust@yahoo.co.in
Ph: 022-2283 8890
Subscription: Free on request
(soft copy only)**

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