Unbreakable

When it comes to running a business, there are so many elements out of management's direct control. Economic conditions, market swings, skilled labor shortages, or compliance requirements become the variables which—on a macro level—might determine whether your business is able to retain its market position.

Yet if you can control anything, it's what goes on between your own four walls. So how come there are still so many workers out there who are forgoing their personal protective equipment?

OSHA requires personal protective equipment (PPE) to reduce employee exposure to hazards when engineering and administrative controls are not feasible or effective in reducing these exposures to acceptable levels. Employers are required to determine if PPE should be used to protect their workers.

According to OSHA, 25 states have "OSHA-approved State Plans and have adopted their own standards and enforcement policies. For the most part, these States adopt standards that are identical to Federal OSHA. However, some States have adopted different standards applicable to this topic or may have different enforcement policies."

As companies expand, compliance issues like these become more complex. It's not enough to simply draft a safety requirements edict, file it, and then go off to enact any sort of broad expansion plan. Once you cross state lines, your safety requirements might need an overhaul.

Who Is Your Watchdog?

Besides compliance research, management has a responsibility to serve as a PPE watchdog on the factory floor

“Make safety a part of your culture,” says Karen Jagers, director of marketing for West-Chester Holdings, Inc., a global provider of hand protection products. “Don’t just talk about it; live it.”

So what must management do when getting plant floor employees to don PPE becomes a real challenge? “Make the employees a part of the decision,” says Jagers. “There are usually real reasons that employees don’t want to wear hand protection, such as loss of dexterity, or it’s too hot, not comfortable, or doesn’t fit. An up-to-date PPE program makes use of new industry technologies that dramatically improve employee program acceptance.”

According to Michael Bolden, director of marketing for Encon Safety Products, Inc., progressive safety equipment manufacturers also play a role in trying to improve end user adoption of PPE. “Instead of creating what they think the customer wants, the safety products manufacturer needs to find a way to the front lines of these actual users’ safety advisory committees. The absence of doing so will seriously hamper their ability to provide the product a customer will use.”

Still, safety products manufacturers can only go so far in making their products comfortable and preferable; the rest is up to the end users and their ability to make

PPE current and readily available. “It is still astonishing that many safety devices are stored in places where there are pieces of equipment blocking them, or they have outlived their shelf life and are no longer usable,” says Bolden. “It’s one thing to have the best equipment in the industry available, but another to not be able to get at it.”

Evolving Technologies

According to Jagers, the hand protection industry has been evolving quite rapidly, creating optimism for manufacturers like West-Chester Holdings that the “perfect glove”—with high levels of protection, comfort, and fit that employees will want to wear, is on the horizon. Also, says Jagers:

The continued advancement of high performance yarns has propelled the industry forward with a wider offering of gloves with comfort and protection. Glass fibers or steel cores create higher abrasion and cut resistance gloves without the bulk. In a recent independent quantitative study, over 90 percent of professionals agreed that durability, comfort, and fit were the three most important factors when selecting a work glove. High performance yarns offer all of these benefits while providing protection that employees will wear.

New chemical additives are on the forefront of technological changes. An example of this would be FR (flame-resistant) products which are building momentum. Anti-microbial additives minimize bacteria, and water-resistant surfactants will continue to change the face of hand protection as we know it.

Relative to other areas of PPE design and composition, “Protective eyewear has seen a metamorphosis take place in the past decade,” says Bolden. “Old blockish styled (all-polycarbonate) glasses now have blended materials incorporating PVC, Nylon, and polycarbonate, or other plastic materials to create a product with half the weight and styled to a more comparable look to a designer glass. Many of these new eyewear products are designed for all-day use as well. Even though most products may protect the user—providing it meets the ANSI standard—it doesn’t guarantee that the user will keep them on their head. By incorporating a solid protective device with less weight and a bit of style, the user is likely to wear them 100 percent of the time and be compliant.”

Other similar innovations, says Bolden, have taken place in the respiratory and clothing areas over the last decade as well. Hard hats now have sophisticated adjustment features, creating a more secure fit. Microfiber clothing is now more breathable—while still keeping dangerous corrosives out—and leak detection devices are more sensitive than ever and can prevent catastrophic events and save lives.

Multi-Tiered Responsibility

At the end of the day, it’s up to each individual worker to don the safety apparel. That said, risk can be mitigated by an aggressive approach to managing compliance.

“An organization needs to have a safety professional on staff who is experienced in assessing the needs of the organization based on the hazards that exist in each work cell or workplace. If a careful assessment is not made, there is no way that one can ensure that the right PPE product are on-hand to meet the needs of the users. Most large organizations do invest in these types of resources, but many others do not or have a seriously downsized department,” says Bolden.

“Additionally, it is important when a new standard has been issued from ANSI, CSA, CE or others, that the safety compliance resource (officer) ensures that all manufacturers are in compliance. My company believes in very strict third-party certification from an organization like The Safety Equipment Institute, UL, or another organization which is not part of the manufacturer’s own company. The determination also needs to be made if any of the current PPE products in use are certified to the most current standard and not from a generation before. Most new standards are issued within 5 to 10 years of the last generation.

“Batch testing and product date stamping are two other areas that manufacturers need to investigate, ensuring that proper process controls are in place and adhered to in the event a product failure takes place.”

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