Accident v. Incident: The Results of Our Reader Poll

We recently addressed a controversial topic in the world of workplace safety. In a poll, we asked readers which term should be used in a safety context: accident or incident'

This poll question got more responses than any prior poll (75). The results:

- 48% said only 'incident' should be used
- 33% said 'incident' was preferred but 'accident' was OK in some cases, such as referring to a car accident (OHS Insider uses this approach)
- 19% said that either term was acceptable.

Safety + Health magazine, published by the US's National Safety Council, asked a similar question and got similar results. In their poll, 75% said only incident should be used, while 25% said that incident and accident were interchangeable.

Why is the use of the term 'accident' in the context of workplace safety so controversial' Many safety professionals believe that the word 'accident' suggests that the event just happened, wasn't foreseeable and couldn't have been prevented, when the prevailing wisdom is that safety incidents are largely foreseeable and preventable.

For example, one person commented on the Safety + Health poll by saying, 'I have difficulties accepting the term 'accident.' As parents we teach our kids it's okay to have an accident in your pants. It's okay to fall off your bike, it's only an accident. These examples follow workers into adulthood where everything done is just an 'accident.' Accidents are failures in management systems. Accidents are failures in awareness and sometimes accidents are just poorly executed work plans that did not account for or consider the actual risks. To call these 'accidents' is inappropriate. The term incident or even event is more appropriate for our use in understanding and correcting failures that result in near miss events, injury incidents or worse.'

Another person added, 'We as safety professionals need to be serious about these terms. The term 'accident' implies that there was no definitive cause or means of prevention. 'Incident' simply describes that an event took place and an investigation will determine any further classification. It's important for

employees to get away from a term that takes thinking out of the process ' 'accidents' almost never happen.'

But someone else said, 'We had an employee walking the trail we created around the facility as part of our wellness program and a limb fell out of a tree, creating a contusion and a cut requiring stitches. We could not have foreseen this event and no, we do not routinely inspect every tree on the trail to look for damaged limbs, so I have no problem calling this an accident.'

Is using the term 'accident' in a workplace safety context really that big of a deal' Or does its use encourage a dangerous mindset in employees that sometimes stuff just happens' Tell us what you think in the comments below.