

Cutting PPE to Save Money Is a Dangerous Idea



Companies are always looking to cut costs, especially during challenging economic times. And unfortunately, the OHS budget is often one of the first things they look to trim. One of the line items that draws the most scrutiny are the considerable dollars spent on fall arrest systems, respirators, and other PPE. Senior management may be tempted to buy cheaper—and perhaps inferior quality—PPE or eliminate PPE training. Although it might save some money in the short run, this strategy is likely to result in higher costs in the long run. In addition to increasing workers' risk of injuries and illnesses, cutting corners on PPE can increase the company's risk of liability for violating the PPE requirements in the OHS laws.

But while the business case for not cutting PPE expenditures just to save money may be logically sound, it's also hard to document. In fact, we know next to nothing about how the amount of money companies spends on PPE affects their illness and injury rates and the performance of their OHS programs. But we do know **some** things about the economics of PPE. One source of insight comes from a 3M-commissioned independent report studying the impacts of recession on the use of PPE in the construction industry in Great Britain. Here's a briefing on the study and how to use it to make the business case that cutting PPE costs is penny wise and pound foolish.

The 3M Study

As in Canada, Great Britain's construction industry is one of the country's most dangerous accounting for over 2,800 work fatalities over the past 25 years. The industry also has above average rates for musculoskeletal disorders, mesothelioma, hearing loss, and many other nonfatal injuries. With this in mind, researchers interviewed 226 workers and 127 OHS coordinators who work on large construction sites in England, Scotland, and Wales about their use of PPE.

Problems with PPE. OHS coordinators said they found it difficult to select the correct PPE, often because they faced unknown or unexpected hazards or didn't understand what specifications different products met. One in 4 reported the main challenge in selecting PPE as knowing which level of PPE to use for which hazard—a lack of knowledge that could endanger workers. Workers' main complaint about PPE was that it was uncomfortable.

Actual PPE Use. Most OHS coordinators (70%) thought that workers occasionally didn't use PPE when they should. By contrast, 78% of workers said they always use PPE and only 20% said they occasionally didn't do so. The main reason: lack of comfort. Why the very different responses? OHS coordinators may have been being cautious in their estimates and allowing for mistakes and the occasional oversight. Also, workers may have been unwilling to admit that they don't use PPE all of the time.

PPE Training. The vast majority of OHS coordinators (87%) said that training is the best method for ensuring that workers use PPE. But only 56% of workers said they get regular PPE training. In addition, 55% said they were told what to use by the OHS coordinator when they started work while 30% said they just use what they think is best.

Impact of Economy. The telephone and on-site interviews took

place during a period when a global recession was in its early stages. Some workers (8%) said they had been given cheaper PPE; 11% in the South and a whopping 20% in Scotland said their PPE had been replaced with cheaper substitutes. Workers also said they found it hard to get a hold of PPE when they needed it, suggesting that companies were buying less PPE.

Safety Culture. Many OHS coordinators (48%) felt that the image of workplace health and safety should be improved to increase PPE compliance, suggesting that they weren't getting the support they needed from senior management to enforce PPE use rules.

The 3 Lessons

The 3M study's ("PPE matters: A report on attitudes towards Personal Protective Equipment in the construction industry," 3M, February 2009) findings about the perception and use of PPE in the British construction industry offer lessons that apply to other industries and countries.

Lesson 1. PPE Training Is Critical

PPE training is the best way to ensure that workers understand **why** they need to use PPE and **how** to use it properly. But workers may not be getting the PPE training they need. So, companies shouldn't cut corners when it comes to PPE training but should instead ramp up their PPE training efforts with the understanding that dollars spent in the short term will likely cut costs in the long term by reducing illnesses and injuries.

Lesson 2. Economy May Undercut Safety Efforts

The 3M survey results demonstrate how an economic downturn could cause companies to loosen their safety standards in an effort to save money is already happening. Buying less PPE or

cheaper PPE that's less effective isn't an acceptable way for companies to save money. OHS coordinators need to step up their efforts to convince senior management that, if anything, **more** money needs to be spent on PPE and workplace safety.

Lesson 3. Senior Management Support Is Critical

OHS coordinators can't do all the heavy lifting. They need support from senior management to be taken seriously by workers and be seen as more than bureaucratic clipboard carriers. A safety culture needs to be embedded at the heart of the company to ensure that workplace safety is taken seriously by all stakeholders at all levels of the company. And that culture needs to start at the top of the company.

Takeaway

PPE is a key component of an OHS program. In general, the preference under the OHS laws is to try to eliminate or engineer away hazards and rely on PPE as a measure of last resort. That makes PPE a critical component of the OHS program. Companies that eliminate or cut corners on PPE are thus removing the only protection standing between workers and a hazard. The 3M report is significant because it sheds light on the link between PPE expenditures and workplace illnesses and injuries. It also suggests that when it comes to getting the best safety result from PPE dollars, training workers to use the equipment is just as important as choosing which equipment to buy.