

INSPECTIONS: 5 Tips for More Effective Safety Inspections



Regular workplace safety inspections should be a key component of every company's OHS program. But inspections can be challenging. For example, in a recent OHS Insider poll, readers identified various inspection problems, ranging from getting cooperation from workers and supervisors to following up on the results. And if your inspection program consists only of JHSC inspections, you're missing an opportunity. We recently spoke to Yvonne O'Reilly, CRSP, an OHS consultant and member of the *Insider* Board of Advisors, about workplace safety inspections. We'll explain why inspections are so important for safety compliance and give you five tips for making this important safety compliance tool more effective.

Defining Our Terms

When we refer to inspections in this article, we're talking about general safety inspections of all or part of the workplace. We're not talked about

Results of Safety Inspection Poll

On OHSInsider.com, we asked readers what their biggest workplace safety inspection problems were. The results:

- Getting cooperation from workers and/or supervisors (52%)
- Conducting effective inspections (22%)
- Responding to the results to the inspection, such as

specialized inspections that may be required by the OHS laws, such as fire inspections or inspections of particular types of equipment or hazards (pre-use inspections of fall protection, vehicle circle checks, etc.).

Inspections, Compliance & Due Diligence

Workplace safety inspections are important for a few reasons. First, all jurisdictions require regular workplace safety inspections in their OHS laws. In some jurisdictions, the JHSC to conduct the inspections; in others, the employer is required to conduct inspections or ensure that they're done. [\(See this chart for employers' duties as to workplace safety inspections under the OHS laws of each jurisdiction.\)](#) But in general, both JHSCs and employers have inspection responsibilities.

So you should do safety inspections to comply with the inspection requirements in the OHS law. But inspections can also help ensure that you're complying with *other* OHS requirements. As O'Reilly explains, they can help employers "demonstrate that what should be in place *is* in place." And they can enable employers to be proactive by identifying changes in the workplace and new hazards that need to be addressed as well as opportunities for safety improvements, she says.

Lastly, safety inspections can play an important role in proving due diligence. *Explanation:* If a company is charged with an OHS violation, it can avoid liability if it can prove that it exercised due diligence. The due diligence defence

addressing identified hazards (22%)

- Doing them as regularly as required by OHS law (19%)
- Doing them at all (10%)

doesn't require employers to be perfect; it just requires them to take all reasonable steps to prevent violations from occurring. And conducting regular and effective workplace inspections is one of the reasonable steps that courts are likely to expect employers to take.

The bottom line is that failing to conduct safety inspections can lead to liability and safety incidents, while conducting such inspections can help prevent incidents from happening and help the company avoid liability for OHS violations.

5 SAFETY INSPECTION TIPS

[box]Tip #1: Have Supervisors Conduct Regular Inspections[/box]

O'Reilly says that employers often see safety inspections as the domain of the JHSC. They don't see the value or point in doing inspections from their own perspective. And the OHS laws may be "too subtle," she says, if the law only outlines the minimum inspection requirements for JHSCs and doesn't clearly outline the specific requirements for inspections done by employers. For example, the OHS law may simply say that the employer must ensure inspections are done without stating the frequency of such inspections or who must actually conduct them. Or an employer's inspection duty may just be implied by the general duty clause.

But even if the OHS laws don't explicitly require employers to conduct their own safety inspections, they should do so anyway, she advises. Employer inspections differ from JHSC inspections in several ways. For example, inspections done by JHSC members tend to focus on the "low hanging fruit" or obvious hazards, such as a burnt out light bulb or tear in the carpet, observes O'Reilly. In contrast, employer inspections look at the big picture, including risks that workers may be exposed to and gaps in safety training and communications, she explains. They also focus on the company's overall compliance

with not only the OHS laws but also the company's own OHS program.

In addition, JHSC inspections are done by the members of the JHSC, usually worker members. The committee chooses who does the inspection. And even if the JHSC members get specialized training in being on the committee, they may not be qualified to do thorough inspections. In comparison, the employer chooses who does its inspections and so can ensure that those people are properly trained and qualified, explains O'Reilly. For example, she believes that supervisors should do employer inspections of the areas or departments for which they're responsible. Supervisors are already knowledgeable about the hazards and issues in these areas. And the employer can—and should—provide them with training on how to conduct a proper inspection, she adds.

Lastly, the OHS laws generally require the JHSC to inspect all or part of the workplace only once a month. And JHSCs rarely do inspections more frequently than required. But an employer must determine if once-a-month inspections are sufficient to ensure continual compliance, especially in high risk workplaces. Employer inspections should be done more frequently than once a month unless the workplace is low risk, such as an office building. For example, O'Reilly suggests that supervisors in high risk environments do daily inspections of their areas.

Insider Says: For more on JHSCs and inspections, see “[The Joint Health and Safety Committee, Part 1: The Committee's Role in Workplace Inspections](#)” and “[The Joint Health and Safety Committee, Part 2: Five Steps for Effective Workplace Inspections](#).”

[box]Tip #2: Use Customized Inspection Forms[/box]

For both JHSC and employer inspections, it's important to document each inspection and its results. And there are plenty

of generic, boilerplate inspection forms available for this purpose. But O'Reilly says that such forms should only be a starting point.

To get the most out of your inspections and these forms, you should customize them for your workplace and its hazards, advises O'Reilly. In addition, your inspection form should spell out the requirements of both your jurisdiction's OHS law and your company's OHS program. So instead of asking for verification that fall protection is used when required, the form should have a place for verification that workers used fall protection when at heights of three metres or more (or whatever the applicable OHS law requires), she explains. And if your OHS program, say, requires a certain job to be done by two workers, the form should have a space for verification that this internal requirement is being met, she adds.

O'Reilly also says it's very important for inspection forms to have lots of blank space in which the individuals doing the inspections can write in comments and observations. Lastly, when hazards are identified in an inspection, they should be noted on the inspection forms. But the forms should also note *who* is going to be responsible for correcting or addressing that hazard. Including this information on the form will help ensure proper follow up on identified safety issues, explains O'Reilly.

Insider Says: The OHS Insider has several [workplace inspection checklists](#) that you can download and tailor for your workplace as discussed above.

[box]Tip #3: Give Advanced Notice of JHSC Inspections[/box]

JHSC members may be frustrated by the lack of cooperation that they get from workers and supervisors when doing their inspections. One suggestion for addressing this problem is giving advanced notice of such inspections, says O'Reilly. Supervisors, who may be responsible for production, may react

to a JHSC inspection better if they can plan for it to reduce any interference with the work and slow down of production, which can be a concern in a manufacturing environment. By posting a schedule of upcoming inspections, you give supervisors a chance to adjust their work or production schedules accordingly, explains O'Reilly.

Of course, some would argue that you get a more accurate picture of the workplace when inspections are unannounced and there's some truth to that statement. So O'Reilly recommends using a mixed schedule of announced and unannounced inspections.

[box]Tip #4: Have "Fresh Eyes" Conduct Periodic Inspections[/box]

One advantage of having supervisors conduct employer inspections of their own areas is that they're familiar with the work and hazards and this expertise enhances the inspection process. But there's something to be said about having "fresh eyes" inspect the workplace, notes O'Reilly. When you're too close to something, you can't view it objectively and may not see all aspects of it. So she suggests having supervisors trade off and inspect each other's areas. Or you could put together an inspection team that includes individuals from outside of the safety department, such as members of the HR, operations or engineering staff. And if your company has multiple facilities nearby, have a team from another facility inspect yours and vice versa. But because expertise is so valuable for effective inspections, "fresh eye" inspections may only be appropriate to do occasionally, she warns.

[box]Tip #5: Instill Idea that Everyone Is an Inspector[/box]

The word "inspection" may bring to mind a very formal, structured process. And many safety inspections are—and should be—formal, structured and documented. But the truth is that

all workers regularly conduct inspections without even realizing it, observes O'Reilly. For example, most workers generally look over their work stations before starting their shifts, making sure everything is in place, they have their PPE, etc. And employers can "leverage this general awareness," she says, by instilling in workers the idea that simply being observant and "paying attention to their surroundings" is a type of inspection.

BOTTOM LINE

Workplace safety inspections are opportunities to evaluate the company's whole OHS program, says O'Reilly. So it's important to not only do regular inspections but also do them as effectively as possible. Using these tips, safety coordinators can help improve safety inspections of their workplace and thus ensure the company's compliance with the OHS laws.

INSIDER SOURCE

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