Spot The Safety Violation: The Safety Impacts of Worker Fatigue
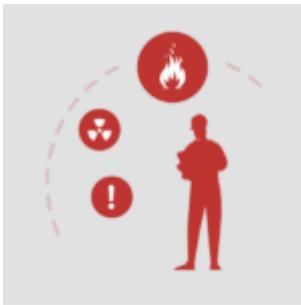
Can you guess why this train derailed and crashed' Here's a hint: the operator may not have been fully alert.

Worker fatigue is a serious safety issue for employers. For example, workers who are overly tired may endanger themselves as well as others. According to [one study](), workers who work nights or rotating shifts may be *twice as likely* to get hurt on the job as workers on day shifts, in large part due to drowsiness and fatigue.

The impact of worker fatigue is particularly serious for workers who operate heavy machinery, such as cranes, trucks'and trains.

This picture shows a Chicago commuter train that crashed at O'Hare International Airport, jumping off the tracks, going through a barrier and climbing an escalator.

The National Transportation Safety Board investigators said the train operator admitted falling asleep before the crash. And even worse, she acknowledged that she'd previously dozed off on the job a month earlier during another incident in which she passed a station without stopping.

But the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) was unaware that the operator was asleep during the prior incident and would have

taken harsher disciplinary measures against her had it known (it just issued her a written warning).

The consequences of this derailment could've been worse. More than 30 people were hurt but no one died and none of the injuries were serious. (The crash did cause about $6 million in damage, though.)

The results of other fatigue-related incidents have been more tragic. For example, On June 7, 2014, a Walmart truck slammed into the back of a luxury van carrying a group that included comedian [Tracy Morgan](), seriously injuring him and several others and killing James McNair, a comedian known as Jimmy Mack.

The truck driver has been charged with vehicular homicide on the theory that, at the time of the crash, he hadn't slept in more than 24 hours. Morgan sued Walmart Stores, claiming the company was partly responsible for the crash because the truck driver [fell asleep]() at the wheel before the accident.

7 Elements of a Fatigue Management System

To prevent and manage worker fatigue, consider [implementing a fatigue management system]() that contains these seven elements:

1. A [Fatigue Management Policy]()
2. Fatigue risk management measures
3. A system for reporting incidents caused by fatigue or situations in which workers feel too tired to work safely
4. Procedures for investigating fatigue-related incidents
5. A program to help workers with sleep disorders
6. Training and education for workers and management on the system
7. A process for auditing it.

If senior management balks at implementing such a system, explain to them that worker fatigue can also hurt the

company's [bottom line](#).

It's also important to educate workers'and supervisors'on [recognizing the signs of fatigue](#). (Consider displaying this [infographic on fatigue](#) in your workplace.)

For example, the CTA's investigation of the [near miss](#) by the train operator consisted of a supervisor's speaking to the operator, who claimed only to have 'closed her eyes' for a moment. That revelation should've put the supervisor on notice that fatigue might have been a factor in the incident and sparked a fuller investigation.

And if workers actually fall asleep on the job, you may able to fire them. (Here's a look at two cases in which arbitrators had to decide [if an employer could fire a worker for sleeping at work](#).)