Summary: A robust safety and health program is essential for reducing workplace injuries and boosting productivity, emphasizing the importance of hazard identification and assessment. Key actions include gathering data, conducting workplace assessments, investigating accidents, and implementing effective controls with employee involvement to ensure ongoing safety.

Find Hazards Before They Find You.

In today's competitive business landscape, an employer's safety and health program is more than just complying with laws and regulations. It serves as a strategy to reduce costs, boost productivity, and enhance community reputation by lowering workers' compensation premiums, improving efficiency, retaining employees, and attracting talent. A primary cause of workplace injuries, illnesses, and incidents is the failure to identify hazards. The six actionable items of Hazard Identification and Assessment are the initial step toward establishing an effective and sustainable safety and health program.

Some hazards, such as housekeeping and tripping hazards, can and should be addressed immediately. Fixing hazards on the spot highlights the importance of safety and health and provides a chance to highlight leadership's commitment to safety.

Hazard Identification and Assessment

Action item 1: Gathering and Sharing Data

Action item 2: Workplace Assessments

Action item 3: Hazard Identification

Action item 4: Accident Investigations

Action item 5: Routine vs Emergency Situations

Action item 6: Implement Controls

Gathering and Sharing Data—Locate operating manuals, Safety Data Sheets (SDS), workplace assessment reports, and historical incident and near-miss investigations to identify potential hazards. Share your findings with employees through a mix of formal and informal training. This includes engaging with workers through surveys and safety meetings, which can also reveal valuable insights.

Workplace Assessments - Hazards can be introduced over time as work practices and processes change, equipment or tools become worn, maintenance is neglected, or housekeeping practices decline. Regularly inspecting the workplace for hazards will help identify shortcomings so that they can be addressed before an incident occurs. Assessments should involve workers, allowing them to share their observations and insights.

Hazard Identification - Identifying health hazards is often more complex than identifying physical safety hazards. Health risks include chemical hazards (solvents, adhesives, toxic dusts), physical hazards (noise, radiation, heat), biological hazards (infectious diseases), and ergonomic risks (heavy lifting, repetitive motions, vibration). Specialized scientific equipment, training and testing labs are required to identify health hazards. These identifications must be performed before mandating personal protective equipment (PPE) be worn.

Accident Investigations - Investigating incidents and near-misses helps identify hazards that could cause future harm. The goal of an investigation should always be to find the root causes. Ask questions like "Why?" and "What led to the failure?" A thorough incident investigation does not end when it's identified that a worker made an error. It asks: "Was the worker provided with appropriate tools and time to do the work?" "Was the worker adequately trained?" and "Was the worker properly supervised?"

Routine vs. Emergency Situations - Plans and procedures must be developed to respond to emergency scenarios and non-routine situations. Non-routine or infrequent tasks, including maintenance and startup/shutdown activities, pose significant hazards. Often, these tasks involve contractors or maintenance personnel who are unfamiliar with internal practices and introduce a new level of risk that must be managed.

Implement Controls – Prioritize addressing hazards starting with the most severe, identified during the hazard assessment. Despite limited resources, employers must protect workers from recognized, serious hazards. Choose controls based on a hierarchy that prioritizes engineering solutions (such as elimination or substitution) first, then safe work practices, administrative controls, and finally personal protective equipment. Use a combination of control methods when no single approach fully safeguards workers.

Addressing workplace hazards is an ongoing effort, not a one-time task. Gaining employees' support and ensuring compliance with safety practices is most effective when workers are educated about hazards and involved in creating controls. Employee engagement with your safety and health program can be the vehicle used to increase productivity, retain skilled workers and attract sought-after talent.

If you have questions or need assistance developing your program, the Illinois On-Site Safety and Health Consultation Program can help. The Illinois Department of Labor offers free consultation services for small and medium-sized businesses, including on-site visits, program development, and air and noise sampling.

This no-cost service, funded primarily by a federal grant through the 21(d) On-Site Consultation Cooperative Agreement, can help you build a safer, more compliant workplace—and may even lower your workers' compensation premiums.

Visit https://worksafe.illinois.gov or contact Harry "Hap" Hileman at 217-993-2111 or harry.hileman@illinois.gov for more information.