

Focusing on the Right Things

By Peter Rice and Steve Bowers

Safety professionals have never been more valued and respected than they are in today's workplace. Combining their hard-earned improvements in professional recognition over the last 50 years, along with the sustainable gains in safety performance, it would appear the safety profession is focused on and doing the right things. How can one argue with success? If we are finally starting to be recognized as an integral part of the U.S. business model, and are helping achieve measurable and sustainable results with current methodologies and efforts, why challenge the status quo?

We must challenge the status quo for many reasons, especially as part of the mission to prevent fatal and nonfatal incidents. Today, safety professionals have tools and opportunities that never before existed in the history of the profession. We need to adopt and employ those tools and opportunities.

Consider the Construction Industry

Safety performance in the construction industry has seen remarkable improvements in both recordable injury rate (RIR) and the days away case rate (DACR) over the last 20 to 30 years (Bureau of Labor Statistics). Since 1992, the industry's DACR has dropped 71%--from 530 cases to 150 cases per 10,000 workers in 2010. That's quite an accomplishment!

Similar performance trends can be found RIR. In 1979, the construction RIR was 16.2 per 100 workers, which equates to 16% of the workforce suffering injuries that required treatment beyond first aid. Performance slowly improved over the next 13 years and by 1992, the RIR had dropped by 20% to 13.1, a definite positive trend, but nothing that could be considered "remarkable."

Since 1992, however, the industry's RIR has dropped significantly, posting an all-time low of 4.0 in 2010. This is not only a remarkable drop of 71%, but for the first time since such records have been kept, the construction industry has posted a lower injury rate than the manufacturing industry.

This should be a great achievement that deserves accolades and celebration, yet one critical performance indicator—construction-related fatality statistics—hasn't followed this trend. In 1992, the construction industry accounted for 14.1 deaths per

100,000 employees. Over the following 13 years, the industry lowered its death rate to 11.1 (2005), which equates to a statistical drop of only 21%.

To recap, between 1992 and 2005, recordable injuries dropped 71% and day away cases dropped 71%, yet fatalities dropped only 21%. Based on these data, it appears the industry has become adept at preventing minor and disabling injuries, but preventing deaths continues to be a challenge. Or, is it really a matter of us focusing on the wrong things?

Since the primary responsibilities of safety professionals are to protect people, property and the environment, and with the loss of human life being the worst possible result of a workplace incident, one would expect that an effective fatality prevention program would be a key component of any safety program. However, based on the statistics cited, it appears the construction industry's fatality prevention programs are not keeping pace.

Improved injury and fatality reporting have given us the information to better recognize and help evaluate the disparity between injury rate reduction to fatality rate reduction. Knowing this, now what can we do as safety professionals to address the fatality rate?

There is no silver bullet. However, each construction employer, supervisor and worker must commit to working incident-free and recognize that workplace injuries and fatalities must not be tolerated, at any level.

One key component that all construction employers should commit to is the adoption and implementation of an effective injury and illness prevention program (IIPP). An IIPP encompasses universal interventions that can substantially reduce the number and severity of workplace injuries. Many states have requirements or voluntary guidelines for such programs and OSHA has a **dedicated website** for employers interested in developing or improving their programs. Most successful IIPPs are based on a common set of key elements that include management leadership, worker participation, hazard identification, hazard prevention and control, education and training, and program evaluation and improvement.

The Role of E-Learning

One new tool that many construction employers are beginning to use is online training, or e-learning. Without addressing the pros and cons of online versus classroom training, most workers in the

U.S. can access the Internet at home, at a friend's home, at work or at the local library. This means that many more workers can now be trained and that many issues associated with classroom training (e.g., inconsistency of content and presenter delivery, travel requirements, lack of facilities, poor timing, cost) can be overcome.

Using the Internet to deliver safety training can be very effective to educate and train workers, and to periodically reinforce safety on the jobsite. Many construction companies use this tool for jobsite orientation (both generic and site-specific); initial knowledge and skills training; and periodic training to reinforce the safety message. In addition, employers can cover OSHA compliance as well as target those activities that cause disabling and fatality incidents such as motor vehicle safety and OSHA's Focus Four topics--falls, struck-by, electrocution and caught in between.

When incorporating online safety training into their programs, employers should ensure that:

- the content is relevant, industry-specific and created by credentialed individuals;
- courses are designed for the specific learner, are self-paced and provide learning structure to increase competency, compliance and retention;
- the application is easy to use and utilizes meaningful interactivity;
- the breadth of the course library serves specific industry and general industry learning needs;
- students can access courses on-demand;
- students have access to customer support 24/7.

As safety professionals, our primary duty is to help protect people from injury and most certainly death by injury. We must collectively and selflessly work to address the disparity between dramatic decreases in recordable injury rates and minor reductions in fatality rates, and to take action to stop preventable deaths that continue to plague the construction industry.

Pete Rice, CSP, CIH, and Steve Bowers, CSP, collectively have nearly 70 years' safety and industrial hygiene program management and training experience. They are part of ClickSafety's content team and are actively involved in building online safety courses. They can be reached at: price@clicksafety.com and sbowers@clicksafety.com. Learn more about ClickSafety at www.clicksafety.com.