Workplace Safety is Everyone's Concern

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Is your business prepared for on-the-job accidents?

by Doug Swanson

The annual cost to the business sector as the result of injuries, physical damage, medical claims and lost productivity is $83 billion.

Too often, those of us who are in business are so busy doing business that we don’t give much time or thought to the critical issue of workplace safety. The statistics tell us we can’t afford this kind of neglect: The National Safety Council reports, for example, that in 1990, 10,500 employees were killed on the job in the United States. Another 1.8 million U.S. workers were hurt as the result of a workplace accident. An analysis by the Rand Corporation estimates that the annual cost to the business sector as the result of injuries, physical damage, medical claims and lost productivity is $83 billion.

I’ll be the first one to admit it: During the time I was general manager for a Southern California water conditioning company, I recall giving very little thought to workplace safety. I assumed my employees knew their jobs; I assumed that the office and plant were reasonably free of hazards. During the time I was in charge, we didn’t have any serious incidents. But not everyone is so fortunate. That’s why it is important that every business owner or manager give consideration to workplace safety — in particular, the prevention of crime and accidents. What follows is a review of ideas which you can put into action now to keep your employees safe.

Criminal assault in the workplace

According to a national survey by the Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company, 2.2 million Americans were physically attacked at work in 1992; 6.3 million were threatened with violence. From the courthouse to the coffee shop, violence has become a sad fact of life. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration reports that 730 people were killed by co-workers or others as a result of workplace violence in 1992.

It is a mistake to assume that our offices are safe from crime of any kind. It is equally wrong to assume that our delivery and service people are necessarily “safe” out on the streets, just because they work in daylight hours, drive marked vehicles and don’t carry lots of cash. The experts all agree: Never make assumptions regarding safety. Take steps now to prevent your employees from becoming victims of crime.

Be proactive

Start by working with your business neighbors to guard against crime. Report suspicious activity in the area around your businesses. Join a “Neighborhood Watch” organization or other group which promotes safety in the local community. When hiring, do thorough background and reference checks on each candidate. Don’t hire anyone who can’t work well with others, or who was dismissed from other employment for inappropriate behavior. Ask any questions, and take all steps legally permissible, to ensure that the person you are hiring is stable and trustworthy, regardless of...
whether or not that person is hired for a “customer contact” position.

Enhance your security measures

Physical security measures don’t have to be expensive or complicated. If your business is located on a busy street, don’t make yourself vulnerable by having the front door open right into the office area (which promotes assault and robbery). Instead, have a counter which “blocks” traffic from stepping into where your employees are working. Keep any cash or important records out of sight, locked up and accessible only to people who need access. Stow away valuable and easily portable equipment (such as your camera, cellular phone or laptop computer) to reduce the possibility of theft.

It doesn’t cost much to install solid-core steel doors, dead-bolt locks and security lighting on the outside of your business — and they’ll scare off all but the most dedicated burglars. Make sure all vehicles are secured (especially after hours) in an enclosed, lighted area. Never leave any keys, tools or valuable equipment inside company trucks where they can be seen by passers-by. If appropriate to your situation, you may wish to invest in alarms for an additional measure of safety.

Safety in numbers

It is important that you take steps to prevent a senseless tragedy from happening in your business by having at least two employees on the premises at all times. There’s safety in numbers, so you’re much more likely to handle a confrontation from a customer, travelling sales person, or a disgruntled former worker without unreasonable risk if there is another person present.

Provide skills training

In order for employees to deal with possible criminal emergencies in the business workplace, they must have information and training. Can employees recognize the danger signs when someone acts in a threatening manner? Will they know how to react? Should you offer your field workers self-defense training to protect themselves in case of physical attack?

In addition to these obvious threats to health and safety, there are other, more subtle hazards which may be present in your business. These hazards come not from criminal activity, but from the procedures, equipment and facilities we use every day.

Lifting

A large percentage of the accidents that occur in the workplace every day come about as the result of improper lifting and other physical activity. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 22 percent of those people hurt on the job suffer some sort of back injury. Other types of physical strain are also common: Leg injuries (13 percent); finger injuries (12 percent); arm wounds (11 percent). As an owner or manager, you need to do your part to prevent these accidents by making sure employees who lift heavy objects have properly-fitted back braces and know how to move objects correctly without undue strain. Also, see that each worker knows how to move equipment and supplies that may pose a physical risk to them.

Equipment

Are all of your employees qualified to operate the equipment they’re using? As a business owner or manager, it’s your responsibility to assure that workers have all the training they need to handle every piece of equipment they use. Even a photocopy machine can present a safety hazard if the employee using it tries to do maintenance with no training. Plant workers need to have protective equipment for the tasks they perform, including face shields, gloves and boots. Permanently installed power tools should have a clearly marked safety zone around it to keep people other than the operator at a safe distance. Visitors to your business should never be allowed to walk near open pits and floor drains and should never, under any circumstances, be allowed to operate power tools.
As long as we’re on the subject of equipment, what about your plant’s electrical system? Is it capable of handling all the load in your office (photocopier, fax, laser printer, etc.) and in the rest of the building (tools, compressors, pumps and lights)? All permanently-wired equipment needs to be grounded, all wires must be insulated. Any extension cords you have must be used correctly. Any leaking pipe fittings should be dealt with immediately. Be sure that anytime a slippery mess is made, (water on the restroom floor, spilled coffee in the office, etc.) that it is cleaned up right away. Encourage all employees to immediately report any safety hazard so that problems can be taken care of quickly.

Chemicals

One of the greatest hazards posed to employees (and, on occasion, customers) comes about through chemical use. Do your employees use chemicals properly? How do you know for sure? Are you aware that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration requires that all businesses have a “written hazard communication program” for workers who use chemicals — including chemicals bought “off the counter” for industrial use? Do you have such a plan?

In 1993, over 3,000 businesses that did not have the program were cited and fined by OSHA. Additionally, the government requires you to have an employee information and training program for chemical use. If you don’t, you’re subject to fines of up to $7,000 per violation. Unless you are willing to risk serious injury (or even death), as well as being legally and financially penalized by the next OSHA investigator who walks into your business, you need to get going on a written plan to help manage your employees’ use of chemicals.

Vehicles

As part of their orientation for the job, all employees who will drive company vehicles need to be trained to wear seat belts, maintain proper speed limits, drive defensively and perform preventative maintenance on their vehicles. Training along these lines will ensure that employees are aware and alert behind the wheel, and that their vehicles perform at their best.

Make sure every truck has a packet of materials in the glove box that explains what to do in case of a traffic accident. Insurance companies often provide check lists to make sure that all of the pertinent information is provided. Also, make sure that drivers call in immediately when an accident happens (no matter how minor) so that someone from the office can go out to the scene with a Polaroid™ camera to photograph the incident. These photos, taken immediately afterward, may prove valuable in supporting your case with insurers.

While thinking about these safety issues, remember, too, that service employees spend a lot of time on other people’s property. Make sure your service workers know how to spot and avoid safety hazards in other people’s homes and businesses. These hazards include wet surfaces, cramped warehouses and garages, exposed wires, hidden gas lines and dogs (a big threat to route drivers and delivery personnel).

It is important that you review the areas covered here, and to give thought to how safe your office and plant really are — and how well your employees can deal with risks. Keep in mind that of the 1.8 million workplace-injuries reported in 1990, about one-third were reported by businesses in the trade and service sectors. You cannot afford to neglect these issues. If this review raises some questions about your company’s preparation for the unexpected, seek advice from a professional. A little investment on your part in safety precautions will go a long way toward creating a better, more productive environment.

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