TerranearPMC Safety Share

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Safety and Health (S&H) professionals are obsessed with accident precursors. That's because the S&H community is in the business of accident prevention. Of course, if an unwanted event does occur, the next step is to minimize the potential damage. For instance, preventative measures for an accidental fire would be to keep open flames away from flammables or to ensure flammables and combustibles are located at least 35 feet from welding operations. On the other hand, should a fire initiate; that is, preventative measures were unsuccessful, minimizing damage due to an occurrence must be the next line of defense. In our scenario, this would involve having the proper fire extinguishers (F/E's) in the immediate area as well as having properly trained individuals to operate the F/E's. In addition, having contact information for the local fire department is also important as this can ensure an expedient and effective response time, so the fire is controlled to minimize damage. And evacuation plans! It's one thing to have a written plan, but can the plan be executed? During the aftermath of the earthquake in Kobe Japan (1995), it was determined that the city's infrastructure and emergency services that were integral parts of the city's response actions, were impaired to the point of being ineffective. This substantially contributed to the city's devastation to a degree that was far worse than anticipated. The point is, having a written emergency plan is one thing, but are practice drills conducted to ensure evacuations are effective?

Naturally, no one wants an accident to occur and so small companies, large corporations and field projects develop controls to prevent or mitigate potential hazards. The identification and control methods for hazards are typically addressed in such S&H documents as procedures and plans.

One of the main factors to control workplace hazards revolves around being able to identify hazards when working at the specific work location. Addressing such concerns prior to task initiation has its limitations as writing S&H plans can only address the specific work tasks for which a project or operation is scheduled to perform. Yet, most incidents seem to stem, not from the workplace hazards that we have identified, but rather from those hazards we have not. This occurs because known hazards have already been addressed with implementing appropriate controls. Meanwhile, while we are out in the field, we may perform our work tasks without noticing such small accident indicators; those in the S&H world refer to as incident precursors.

Take for example, the following scenario: You go out to your vehicle, unlock the door, start the engine, drive off, and 20 minutes later, when you arrive at your destination you can hardly recall what happened during your ride. Yet, perhaps during this ride you were checking directions, enjoying a sandwich, listening to music, maybe even talking on the phone…and doing all of this while navigating through rush hour traffic!

Were you actively observing road conditions or were you compromising your attention as you focused on these other activities? All these activities are embodied into the category of accident precursors. While performing these "extracurricular" tasks, you were not giving full attention to the task at hand. This is typically referred to as "inattention to details." The fact that one is not maintaining 100% focus on an assigned task does not automatically mean that an accident will occur; only that the ***risk*** of an accident significantly increases. Thus, "inattention to details" is an

accident precursor. By eliminating this precursor (i.e. remaining focused), we have reduced the risk of an unwanted event

Studies from major universities have concluded that when you speak on a cell phone — and this includes hands-free phones — the phenomenon called "inattention blindness" occurs. Very simply, this is a person's inability to perceive things that are in plain sight because the brain has prioritized and assigned its processing capacity elsewhere. Research scientists have concluded that people have a limited "attention" capacity. So, as you unintentionally allow your mind to switch priorities from safely operating a vehicle to some other secondary activity, critical details of your surroundings disappear from your mind's eye.

Another accident precursor is "time constraints." Rushing to complete a task so that we may finish "on time" or "on budget" has been a very common accident precursor. We may feel like we must hurry when things don't go according to plan or when we lack resources, trained personnel, or time. If we're already crunched for time, we aren't going to catch up by hurrying and getting hurt. The fact is, that we, as individuals, are the ones placing a time constraint on ourselves. It is rare indeed that our supervisors push us to the point of only focusing on a completed job within a specified time frame. Yes, there have been times, especially in industries where workers get payed by how many items they complete within a given day: something that used to be common in the furniture manufacturing industry, and fortunately, in modern times, has since been abandoned.

Another common red flag accident precursor is deviating from a plan**.** Written plans, procedures, etc. are intended to ensure a specific work task shall be performed in an effective and safe manner. Deviating from a written and approved process without developing the appropriate hazard analysis can easily result in a serious consequence. The most frequent reason why workers deviate from an approved work plan is to save time (maybe due to time constraints?) and therefore decide to take what seems to be a simple short cut. Results can be tragic as with the case of performing electrical work. Throughout the years electricians (as well as lay persons) decide to omit a step – such as forgoing turning off a power switch, thereby working on a live system (this will only take a second!). Too often during these scenarios, a worker gets an electrical shock and even electrocuted. Deviating from a written, approved plan requires a thorough hazard re-evaluation (including a review by the supervisor and even a peer review) including a verification that the controls will be effective to protect those working on the task. Thus, if we have a plan in place that has been communicated to the entire team, and then we deviate from that plan, we put ourselves and others at risk for an accident.

No matter how well a safety plan or procedure is written, if it is not followed verbatim, we are setting ourselves and coworkers for an increased risk. If, on the other hand, it is found that the plan or procedure will not allow work to be performed safely, then we have an obligation to pause work and, with assistance from our supervisor(s) revise the plan. This collaborative approach, ensures buy-in from all affected persons while promoting a greater attention to the tasks; thereby reduce the risk caused by accident precursors.

It's funny how after an argument is over, you think about more clever things you should have said