



GET PROACTIVE— STEPS FOR MITIGATING OR PREVENTING UNSAFE WORK ENVIRONMENTS

A nine-point plan for tracking and eliminating safety hazards in order to safeguard both your people and your bottom line

By *Brian Varner*

Let's face it. For some linen, uniform and facility services companies, safety isn't considered a priority until the business experiences a negative impact on its bottom line. This often stems from rising insurance premiums, due to the high frequency and severity of workers' compensation claims, and it only gets worse if ignored. As premiums keep rising, fewer insurance companies are willing to ensure a company that has a poor track record. There are other consequences too. For instance, the indirect impact of increasing work-related injuries will undermine employee morale. This, in turn, can lead to higher staff turnover. And to make matters worse, all industries—including those in the linen, uniform and facility services space—are confronted with aging work forces.

Amid the labor shortage, many of these employees are taking on extra responsibilities while their co-worker is out of work. What's more, if they're injured due to the extra workload and longer hours, this will have an even greater impact. Research has shown that claim severity is much higher for an older employee, due to increased medical costs and recovery times. As you can see, the impact of an unsafe work environment can produce devastating results for laundry operators on several fronts. However, it doesn't have to be that way if the company adopts a "proactive" approach to incident prevention.

Here are some things to consider when evaluating your company's safety and risk program:

TRAINING: SATISFIED WITH YOUR SAFETY-TRAINING PROGRAM? Training is the

foundation of a robust safety program. New-hire safety orientation and annual refresher safety training with quizzes are essential to ensure that everyone is aware of safety policies and procedures. Most workplace injuries occur in an employee's first year, so an effective safety-training program can reduce claims, exposures and citations. The training should be specific to the linen industry. Too many times I have discovered generic training content and visuals that don't reflect the needs of linen, uniform and facility services companies. Thus, the training is ineffective. In addition, did you know that one of the most common citations that OSHA issues is when employers fail to 1) prove that all employees have completed annual safety training, 2) blood-borne pathogen training (in plants processing healthcare textiles) and 3) hazardous communication training?

AWARENESS: DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION HAVE AN EFFECTIVE SAFETY AWARENESS PROGRAM? After training is completed, a regular communications program is critical to maintaining awareness of all safety issues. For starters, monthly safety-topics programs that address the safety issues of the organization is a great start. Awareness topics target a textile processing facility's safety needs, such as slips and falls, strains, heat stress, etc. The monthly topics are presented in team huddles and signatures of all employee participants are recorded. Weekly safety topics also are an effective communications tool. We recommend that the weekly topics mirror the monthly topic. For example, If strain prevention is the topic for May, then weekly topics for that month might include: Preventing shoulder strains from pulling linen; protecting back strains from lifting heavy objects; and preventing various strains by using lifting equipment or a partner. When building an awareness program, always start with monthly topics first. Utilize the company's loss-run report, or safety summary, to identify trends and issues involving incidents. Also visit the OSHA website and review the company's past OSHA

citations. This will help address your company's specific safety needs.

COMPLIANCE: ROUTINE SAFETY CHECKS?

A comprehensive point-scored safety inspection that's conducted routinely is one of the most beneficial tools for ensuring workplace compliance with OSHA standards. It's important that an audit recap is presented to facility management immediately after the inspection. All "action items" must be noted, and they should include photographs of discoveries (e.g., slip and fall hazards, equipment guards missing, etc.). Management should correct all action items immediately and follow up to ensure that they are maintained. Favorable audit scores can have a positive impact on the incident-frequency rate, which results in savings. Management should design these inspections not only to identify and correct safety issues, but also to address common issues that linen, uniform and facility services companies face in complying with Hygienically Clean certifications (if applicable).

CLAIMS MANAGEMENT: IN-HOUSE EXPERTISE? The loss run report, provided by the insurance carrier, is a valuable tool to understand what is driving frequency and severity. These safety reports are roughly analogous—for insurance purposes—to a credit score.

Loss run reports also provide information on trending and seasonal issues (e.g., heat exhaustion in the summer; slips and falls in the winter, etc.). Proper claims management and learning how injuries occurred at your location will assist you in establishing programs to prevent these injuries from recurring. Consequently, companies can save thousands of dollars in reduced claims and lost time from their employees.

MEASUREMENT: ARE YOU MEASURING PERFORMANCE? What gets measured, gets done! A Safety and Risk Dashboard is a great tool for reviewing with leadership monthly because it will reveal both the successes and opportunities of a safety program. The Dashboard should consist of year-to-year comparisons on: Audit

scores; total recordable incident rate (TRIR); days away restricted or transferred (DART); injuries; strains; and more. Managers should set goals and establish an action plan for all categories with results tied directly to leadership's annual reviews and bonuses. Managers shouldn't reproduce the loss run report as part of the company's safety and risk dashboard. But they should use it as a resource and extract information from the loss run for use on the dashboard. After a quick dashboard review, a leader should have a good idea of how the company is performing with risk and safety issues.

SAFETY PROGRAM: RIGHT LEADERSHIP?

Credentials and education are important. However, does the individual overseeing your safety program have experience in industrial laundries? Moreover, do they exhibit a contagious passion for safety? Safety professionals should work in the plant or other facilities, training employees and managers, conducting inspections and visiting maintenance teams. Safety personnel also should host occasional "Townhall Meetings" to gain a better understanding of what the employees are experiencing daily. The best safety programs feature collaboration between facility employees and the safety team. The safety professional must have a visionary outlook. He or she should understand the importance of collaboration and innovation. An effective safety program must continuously evolve.

ARE YOU IN TROUBLE?


EXPERIENCE MODIFICATION RATE (EMR):


The EMR reflects how much a company will pay in insurance premiums. The EMR is a calculation that insurers use to price workers' compensation premiums. The rating reviews the last three years, and accounts for lagging indicators, such as the severity and frequency of injuries. It offers a projected estimate of future risk. If your rate is above 1.0 or trending upwards, you likely need help. The higher the EMR, the higher the insurance premiums, and the greater the impact on your bottom line.

TRIR: The total recordable incident rate (TRIR) measures of occupational safety. The "result" of this measurement combines the number of safety incidents and the total work hours of all employees with a standard employee group; typically 100 employees working 40 hours a week for 50 weeks per year. Managers can calculate the TRIR by location, region, division, company, etc. It's a great way to compare a linen, uniform and facility services company to the industry average (Bureau of Labor Statistics NAICS Code 812332—Industrial Launderers—Industry average 3.2). If a company is above the industry average or trending upward, management needs to apply a greater emphasis on incident prevention.

PROFIT & LOSS (P&L): Check your P&L line item (Safety, Insurance, Workers' Comp, etc.). If you're experiencing a loss in this area, that's an indicator that your claim frequency and severity are high, and you need to implement a robust safety program to counteract and prevent incidents from occurring. Labor rates offer another indicator. If you're below budgeted labor, staff likely are working harder and longer hours, which increases their odds of an injury.

To lower risks don't be "reactive" on safety. Determine if your safety program needs help. If it does, act now to ensure a safe work environment. You'll sleep better, knowing you're protecting your people and your company.

If you're concerned about incidents and high insurance costs, we can help. We have more than 15 years' experience in commercial laundries, working with safety- and risk-management programs. 

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