

Personal Protective Equipment

Breaking Bad Habits: How to Encourage Workers to Wear PPE

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One of the top safety concerns of HSE managers is the inconsistent use of personal protective equipment. Why don't workers wear their PPE, the additional layer meant to protect their eyesight, head, feet, lungs, or hands from debilitating injuries and illnesses? Honeywell experts share their opinion on reasons for PPE non-compliance, an omnipresent OHS challenge, and ways to tackle it.

The psychology behind compliance

In industrial working environments, PPE use is a mandatory practice, with a specific type of PPE or PPE ensemble required for a certain job or task.

20 million workers use PPE on a regular basis to protect themselves from job hazards, *NIOSH reports*. However, not everyone embraces positive PPE-related behavior and psychologists have tried to come up with the "why".

Several theoretical models, such as the Theory of Planned Behavior, the Trans-theoretical Model, and the Health Belief Model (HBM), have tried to uncover and explain the aspects that influence an individual's compliance with guidelines, which in turn, contributes to the adoption of certain behavior.

Developed in the 1950s, the **HBM** is a popular theoretical model that focuses on people's individual beliefs about health conditions. It includes six components:

1. Perceived susceptibility to a disease or illness, such as occupational diseases and hazards.
2. Perceived severity of a condition, such as fear of contracting an occupational disease.
3. Perceived barriers, such as availability of equipment and PPE discomfort.
4. Perceived benefits of the recommended behavior, such as protection from diseases and infection.
5. Cues to action, such as knowledge of exposure and training guidelines.
6. Self-efficacy, such as the confidence that wearing PPE is beneficial.

In brief, the HBM hypothesizes that people's health-related actions depend on their perception of being at risk, the level of concern and the belief the recommended behavior/solution will help.

Common PPE-related beliefs

"I don't need PPE for this task"

Experience has shown that employees who perform the same task years in a row, without using

protective equipment, are more likely to continue doing so. The rationale includes an inaccurate perception of the occupational hazards and risks or a genuine lack of knowledge.

In a 2019 study, 88.7% of Turkish farmers admitted to not being not well-informed about the negative effects of pesticides on human health, despite their significant level of experience in both farming and the use of pesticides. This also implies a lack of awareness on the use of PPE in pesticide applications.

Benjamin Wyatt, Honeywell Respiratory Specialist –

“Encouraging workers to wear PPE starts with the foundational concept that knowledge creates perspective and perspective drives compliance. Often, employees are not truly aware of the risk, and how that risk might impact their life, beyond work. Properly educating the employee on the hazard(s), how the correct PPE protects the employee and the potential health complications of exposure provide the knowledge needed for the employee to make informed decisions on the job site. Consequently, this knowledge offers the employee perspective on how the consequences of non-compliance may affect not only their life but the quality of life of their family.”

However, educating employees is a complex endeavor, which goes beyond training. ***A 2012 study on Nigerian construction workers*** states that only half of construction workers (56%) received any PPE training at all, with nearly a third simply selecting the protective clothing they thought was most suitable for the appropriate task.

Lisa Lopes, Honeywell Sr. Training & Services Leader –

“I believe the most important way a manager, supervisor or organization can promote the use of PPE is leading by example and consistently communicating safety policies as it relates to PPE wear and overall safety. Engage employees in the discussion where their input and feedback is used to select the best PPE for the job, while understanding and discussing any non-compliance issues and how they affect individuals. Finally, it is the responsibility of the leadership and organization to educate (regularly) on what the consequences are as well as enforcing the use of PPE.”

“It’s uncomfortable”

Jana Bacinska, Honeywell PPE Designer –

“When designing PPE, comfort is a non-negotiable aspect. PPE must fit well, and comfortable materials need to be used, to avoid restricting the user in anyway. Materials are chosen based on working environment conditions. Thermal properties work well in cold climates, but for hot and humid environments we need to focus on breathability and moisture management. When selecting materials, we may need to accept tradeoffs, since the protection function is always primary. However, there is a great ongoing development in the technical materials area, lots of innovative materials, and technologies. These significantly improve fabric features without compromising performance.”

“It doesn’t fit”

John Sujo, Global Product Manager –

“Workers assume that wearing PPE greatly restricts their ability to perform a given job. They believe if they did not wear the PPE in first place, they could perform the job much quicker. One of the reasons why workers don’t wear gloves is related to comfort and fit. Selecting comfortable products with individual fit makes the user perform the same job with better safety, comfort, and increased productivity.”

Learn more about how to ***select the proper gloves.***

“My peers don’t wear it”

Regardless of the group, organization or type of gathering, there’s always the psychological pressure to fit in. And in this case, to do what’s typical for the organization’s safety culture or safety climate, even if that means exposure to dangers.

In a study on ***PPE compliance in wastewater workers***, most respondents “agreed” that seeing others wear PPE reminds them to wear PPE, too. Simply put, a positive safety climate will likely lead to higher PPE compliance.

“PPE gets in the way”

Sometimes, wearing a heavy pair of boots, a thick pair of gloves or an over-protective set of earmuffs can impede movement, dexterity, tactile abilities and proper communication.

“I can’t feel what I touch!” is a common complaint of workers wearing gloves. But with the latest high-density yarns and spinning and knitting technology, there are now possibilities to produce cut-protection gloves without compromising dexterity. Sweaty hands are also deterring workers from putting gloves on. But there have been advancements in this area, too. Honeywell’s antibacterial gloves reduce bacteria development inside the gloves, which in turn, reduces bad odor and allergies.”

“It’s ugly”

Jana Bacinska, Honeywell PPE Designer –

“We are designing for industrial athletes that have many things in common with sports athletes. They should perform at their best, and accomplish physically demanding tasks, even in the harshest conditions possible. So, if they are used to wear widely available, comfortable and good-looking sport gear in their free time, why should they compromise at work? As designers, we have a great opportunity to make PPE not only comfortable and user-friendly, but also appealing. This is the best way to motivate workers to wear their protective equipment, even outside work. ”

“You’ve designed great PPE if workers don’t want to take it off leaving the worksite.”

Furthermore, wearing PPE not only saves lives, but it also “has perceptual and cognitive effects, in addition to physical and ergonomic influences,” ***this research shows.***

“There’s no availability”

A safety-first organization puts continuous emphasis on safety. Its commitment to safety is articulated from the highest level of the organization and translates to resources, incentives, and rewards, as well as frequent and open communication across all levels.

Therefore, PPE scarcity or unavailability should be exceptional situations. ***A recent healthcare worker study*** shows that more than half of healthcare respondents (52%) reported missing one piece of the standard PPE, and 30% reported that at least a piece of single-use PPE was being reused or washed because of shortages.

Conclusions

To recap, to encourage greater PPE compliance, employers should:

1. Invest in worker education and training programs.
2. Get workers involved in PPE choice by asking what comfort and fit issues they experience with their safety gear.
3. Purchase comfortable but efficient PPE.
4. Perform fit tests.
5. Tie compliance with individual performance evaluations.
6. Develop incentive programs to encourage wear and set the example by having supervisors wear PPE.

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