



Safety

How to Set Up the Safety Program Your Machine Shop Needs

James Langford | Apr 11, 2024

During five decades of work to prevent on-the-job injuries, the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration has set rules covering everything from the spacing of ladder rungs to how much light should be filtered out by welding helmets.

One thing it hasn't done is require businesses to develop a comprehensive workplace safety program.

Nonetheless, agency leaders believe doing so is one of the most effective ways for businesses including machine shops and manufacturing facilities to comply with its array of regulations—and protect employees from harm.

“Losing workers to injury or illness, even for a short time, can cause significant disruption and cost—to you as well as the workers and their families,” the agency says in a **guide** listing its recommendations for such programs.

The initiatives are important because they “foster a proactive approach to ‘finding and fixing’ workplace hazards before they can cause injury or illness,” OSHA explains. “Rather than reacting to an incident, management and workers collaborate to identify and solve issues before they occur.”

That's more practical, and constructive, than the typical reactive approach of taking action only after a worker is injured, a new regulation is passed or an outside inspection uncovers a problem, the agency adds.

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One study in Ohio, for instance, found that workers' compensation claims dropped 52 percent after employers worked with the agency to adopt safety programs that followed its recommendations. The

cost per claim fell 80 percent, OSHA says.

Building an effective safety program is much like building a house, says Gil Truesdale, president of Martin Technical, a safety training and consulting firm: It all starts with a plan.

'Safety as a Culture'

"If you try to build your house with no plan, it will never get built," he explains. "It will not be what you need, and there will be no documentation on what you did to be able to replicate it and build it again."

Developing the plan around a safety calendar, with different focus areas for each month, can be particularly effective because it provides a timetable both for initial setup and periodic review.

"A safety plan demonstrates due diligence and shows that your company is forward-thinking, that you want safety as a culture and you're not waiting to buy bandages until someone gets cut."

Gil Truesdale
Martin Technical

One month might focus on personal protective equipment for the head and face, for instance, so managers would gather records on any incidents involving that gear in advance, along with questions or concerns, in order to conduct a full examination and assess what changes might be needed.

If an *OSHA inspection* occurs, the calendar helps demonstrate a good-faith effort to maintain safety standards and comply with agency regulations, he adds.

"If the first thing you do is pull out a safety calendar to show the inspector, then they see that you have a plan and that takes a lot of the stress out of the initial meeting," Truesdale explains. "It demonstrates due diligence and shows that your company is forward-thinking, that you want safety as a culture and you're not waiting to buy bandages until someone gets cut."

Steps Toward a Safer Workplace

Routine evaluation of safety programs is vital to their success, OSHA adds. The agency recommends setting up processes to monitor performance and identify shortcomings.

All programs should include seven core elements, it says:

1. Management leadership
2. Worker participation
3. Hazard identification and assessment
4. Hazard prevention and control
5. Education and training
6. Program evaluation and improvement
7. Communication and coordination for host employers, contractors and staffing agencies

To get started, OSHA suggests 10 basic steps:

- **Prioritize safety and health.** Tell your workers that making sure they finish the day and go home safely is the way you do business. Assure them that you will work with them to find and fix any hazards that could injure them or make them sick.
- **Lead by example.** Practice safety yourself and make it part of your conversations with workers.

- **Implement a reporting system.** Make sure workers can report injuries, illnesses and near misses or close calls without fear of retaliation. Include an option for anonymous reports.
- **Provide training.** Teach your employees how to identify and control hazards with tools such as *OSHA's Hazard Identification Training Tool*.
- **Conduct inspections.** When doing them, ask workers to share any concerns about activity, equipment or materials. The checklists included in *OSHA's Small Business Safety and Health Handbook* may help.
- **Collect hazard control ideas.** Ask employees for their ideas on improvements.
- **Implement hazard controls.** Assign workers the responsibility of choosing, implementing and evaluating the solutions they proposed.
- **Address emergencies.** Identify potential emergencies and develop procedures for responding to them.
- **Seek input on workplace changes.** Before you make significant changes to your workplace, its equipment or organization, ask your workers about how the alterations may affect workplace safety.
- **Make improvements.** Schedule regular discussions of safety and health issues, focusing on how you can improve overall safety.

"Your safety program can and should evolve," the agency explains. "Experimentation, evaluation and program modification are all part of the process. You may also experience setbacks from time to time. What is important is that you learn from setbacks, remain committed to finding out what works best for you and continue to try different approaches."

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