



Safety Culture

Safety Audits: A Powerful Tool to Protect Workers

Matt Morgan | Jun 13, 2024

In facilities where heavy machinery and complex processes are the norm, employers have a responsibility to ensure the safety of their workers. More than just a box-checking exercise, safety audits are a proactive tool.

These audits ensure that manufacturing businesses meet regulatory standards and uncover areas where *safety measures can be improved*, ultimately protecting workers, minimizing lost time and boosting productivity.

Think of a safety audit as the more intense cousin of a safety inspection. Whereas an inspection is a “determination of conformity to specified requirements,” according to *ISO 9000:2015*, which might be done for one element of a manufacturing operation, an audit is a “systematic, independent and documented process for obtaining objective evidence and evaluating it objectively to determine the extent to which the audit criteria are fulfilled.”

Although inspections can be carried out by *internal teams*, audits usually are performed by outside parties. Many safety consultants and suppliers, including *MSC*, conduct safety audits.

“I think like an engineer. I go in and ask, what’s causing this problem? And I try to fix it.”

Damon Cassell
MSC

An auditor’s role is to provide a comprehensive review of safety practices and offer actionable insights to improve workplace safety and prevent incidents before they occur.

Hiring a qualified safety professional to perform an audit for one day could run \$3,000 to \$5,000, says MSC Industrial Safety Consultant Damon Cassell, CSP, which might give pause to employers facing tight margins. The alternative, however, is much *costlier*.

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“The first reportable injury—say, a laceration that doesn’t hit a tendon but needs two stitches—starts at just north of \$30,000 for direct and indirect costs,” he says.

Cassell points out that MSC does safety audits at no charge for customers.

Preparing for a Safety Audit

Audits are beneficial to manufacturing businesses at any stage of preparedness in their safety programs.

Generally, Cassell encourages companies to call him first. “We want to see it, warts and all,” he says. “We want to help them.” Areas of improvement are documented and shared with the company contact, with the goal of outlining steps to take to create a safer facility.

Companies with more developed safety programs can work toward year-round readiness for audits. Preparing employees and the facility not only ensures a smoother audit but also enhances overall safety practices.

Preparation involves continuous *skills and compliance training* for all employees, ensuring that everyone is knowledgeable about safety standards and procedures, and maintaining up-to-date paperwork, allowing for a more thorough and accurate audit process.

The Safety Audit Process

The safety audit process is comprehensive, involving an examination of a facility’s overall safety protocols, equipment and practices, and available incident reports. Through observations and conversations with employees, auditors assess compliance with safety regulations, identify areas of risk and evaluate the effectiveness of existing safety measures.

“We call them safety needs analyses, or SNAs. It’s basically a 100,000-foot overview,” Cassell says. “I come in and look at all the different things, whether it’s *lockout/tagout*, *machine guarding*, fire extinguisher placement, *signs* or *eyewash stations*.”

In his assessment, he follows the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health’s *hierarchy of controls*:

- Elimination: Remove the hazard
- Substitution: Replace the hazard
- Engineering controls: Keep people from the hazard
- Administrative controls: Change how people work
- PPE: Protect the worker with personal protective equipment

“I think like an engineer,” he says. “I go in and ask, what’s causing this problem? And I try to fix it.”

Not surprisingly, safety consultants focus on *recordable and reportable incidents* during audits. “Upward of 80 percent of injuries are repeat, meaning the company didn’t fix what happened before,” Cassell says.

Read more: What Is the NIOSH Hierarchy of Controls, and How Can It Reduce Manufacturing Injuries?

He says that if an assessment reveals something that is not compliant, he will recommend that a specialist in that area come back and do a more detailed audit. “We’ll drill down on those particular aspects, depending on what the customer wants,” he says.

Actions After the Safety Audit

When Cassell visits a facility to conduct an assessment, he leaves behind a lengthy report. In it, he prioritizes the actions that companies need to take to address any observed safety issues, on a scale from 5 to 1.

A priority 4 or 5 is lower, such as a *shoe program*. A priority 1 is most severe, where the potential for injury is greatest. "I usually tell them the 1's right away," he says. "This is what you need to do today." During a few audits, Cassell has recognized a threat to life and limb and asked the manager to stop an employee from working.

The report lays out the auditor's findings and recommendations for safety improvements. In some cases, having the report can help when regulatory bodies such as the Occupational Safety and Health Administration stop by, as it demonstrates that efforts are being made to enhance safety.

"I've had companies visited by OSHA, and they've shown the auditor my report," Cassell says. "Even though there were prospective violations, OSHA didn't cite them since they had started the process of correction."

Does your company have regular safety audits? Why or why not? Let us know in the comments below.

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