

# WHEN IT COMES TO USING PPE IN THE WORKPLACE, THE “EYES” HAVE IT



**T**ravel through any workplace in America and you will most likely find yourself in the middle of a virtual minefield of hazards, coming in all shapes and sizes—sparks, noise, chemicals, falling objects, sharp edges, just to name a few.

Attempts are often made to control a hazard at its source, perhaps by putting a barrier, such as a wall, between the worker and the hazard. But when this isn't a feasible option, other measures must be put into place to safeguard employees and prevent workplace injuries that can result in skyrocketing Workers' Compensation costs for employers.

To that end, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) requires that all employers protect their employees from workplace hazards that can cause injury by not only providing personal protection equipment (PPE) but also making sure their workers know how to use it and when to use it. When using PPE, whether it's safety glasses, gloves, earplugs or full body suits, employers must make sure employees have the proper training regarding:

- When PPE is necessary and how to properly wear it.
- What are its limitations.
- How to determine if the PPE is no longer effective or damaged.
- How to care for the PPE.
- Who to inform should the PPE need to be replaced.

Even though this is old news for employers, managers and even employees, non-compliance is widespread. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, if all workers would just wear gloves, then more than one million hospital emergency visits by U.S. workers per year could be

avoided. Last year, hand injuries alone cost employers over \$500 million dollars (lost time, settlements, etc.).

If there is a lack of commitment in creating a culture that requires employees to automatically don PPE when necessary, employers don't need to look beyond themselves.

A recent survey commissioned by the International Safety Equipment Association (ISEA) of safety influencers in the heavy construction industry revealed that the main reason workers chose *not* to wear PPE when needed was because “employers don't require or enforce usage.”

While many employers realize that the use of PPE can pay huge dividends in workplace safety, plus result in higher morale and lower insurance premiums, many do not update their equipment, assess new situations or require rigorous enforcement.

The adverse result is loss of manpower (which few companies already running bare minimum can afford) and higher Workers' Compensation costs. For some companies, a high number of injuries also hinders their competitiveness when bidding on certain contracts. A high price to pay for the low price of a carton of safety goggles.

So why are some employees still reluctant to wear PPE? A Kimberly-Clark professional survey taken at the 2007 National Safety Council Congress and Expo found that discomfort was given as the most common reason.

A good solution is to involve employees in the selection, and to have a select group that is representative of employees using the gear try different samples and test it. It may be that more than one style is needed to accommodate the workforce.

The second most common reason is the belief that PPE is not necessary for the task. Employees may have performed the same task for many years and never been injured. Showing employees videos of what can happen or having someone who sustained an injury speak to the group is the most effective way to combat this excuse.

Next is the concern that PPE is unattractive or doesn't fit properly. If employees are content with their appearance, they will be more likely to use PPE. Increasingly, manufacturers are looking to improve style; offering some options in color and style can increase use.

Even regulations can be outdated and ineffective. Falls are the leading cause of injury and fatalities in the workplace, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consensus of Fatal Occupational Injuries. Launching a sweeping overhaul of the walking-working surfaces and Personal Protective Equipment Standards (PPE) to prevent injuries from slips, trips and falls, OSHA acknowledged that most of its existing standards for walking-working surfaces are more than 30 years old and inconsistent with both national consensus standards and more-recently promulgated OSHA standards addressing fall protection.

Citing the 2009 death of a worker at a chocolate processing plant who fell from an unguarded work platform, OSHA's proposed rulemaking includes significant revisions to the existing general industry scaffold standards to better protect workers from such injuries.

OSHA has already dramatically altered the fall protection requirements for residential construction workers, with new regulations effective June 16, 2011. Significant changes to general industry standards are also expected in 2011. Employers are being put on notice that fall protection safeguards that are ignored or inadequate can result in substantial penalties.

For employers, PPE can protect not only their employees but also their company's bottom line. An auto parts manufacturer in Michigan, which traditionally saw its claims costs increasing at the rate of 7-8% annually, now suddenly saw them escalating over 20%. A Certified WorkComp Advisor (CWCA) reviewed all open and prior injury claims, OSHA logs, and safety committee minutes, and found that part of the problem was a safety issue centered on employees not wearing safety glasses.

Working closely with the safety committee and the Human Resources Department, they were able to reduce the number of reported injuries and near misses by implementing a PPE training session and a "safe reporting without retaliation" rule that allowed proper reporting of safety glasses issues among co-workers. This action helped in part to reduce the number and size of the company's Workers' Compensation claims and lower its premium costs from \$430,302 in 2004 to \$185,000 in 2008. The company now uses its excellent safety record to beat the competition for work. A win-win for the employer and the employees.

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This article is adapted from an article by Kevin Ring, Lead Workers' Compensation Analyst for the Institute of WorkComp Professionals that appeared in *Risk and Insurance* and other major business publications. The material is provided as general information and is not a substitute for legal or other professional advice.



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