

The Five Essentials of Construction Safety

How to Make Your Company Attractive to Potential Clients and Insurance Companies

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Companies that routinely emphasize the importance of workplace safety are the ones that have a greater chance to survive and prosper. Getting cited by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration for noncompliance can negatively impact the company's bottom line and reputation. An established safety program not only makes the jobsite a safer and more productive place, it also makes the company more attractive to clients and insurance companies. Insurance companies don't want to cover a business with frequent workplace accidents and a history of OSHA violations. If they do decide to offer coverage, it will probably lack the competitive pricing the contractor seeks.

In addition, many potential clients now require evidence of a written safety program from their general contractors, including information on how they will monitor subcontractor safety. A long-term consequence of increased workplace injuries is a higher workers' compensation experience modification that can add significant dollars to a company's premiums over several years.

On a basic level, initiating a company-wide safety program is essential to increasing employee safety awareness, reducing work-related injuries and complying with all applicable regulatory standards.

To ensure that the company adheres to OSHA regulations and is attractive to both insurance companies and potential clients, a company's safety program needs to include the five essentials of safety: 1) an established new hire safety orientation program; 2) a pre-job hazard assessment process; 3) jobsite safety orientation/training; 4) field safety inspections and; 5) toolbox talks. These five essentials should by no means be viewed as the only steps needed to provide a safe working environment, but should be considered a positive and crucial first step to making the company an attractive choice to all parties involved.

1. **New Hire Safety Orientation**

As labor shortages and turnover rates continue to plague the construction industry, providing a safe working environment for both new and experienced employees can seem like a daunting task.

To safeguard the construction site, every new employee should be required to attend a new hire safety orientation session on his first day of employment. Experienced employees should conduct these training sessions at the company's office. At a minimum, the program should cover emergency response, hazard communication, and company safety policies and procedures on such topics as personal protection equipment (PPE), fall protection, and safe lifting techniques.

The program also should include these main elements:

- a) Audio-Visual Presentations: Unfortunately, not everyone enjoys being handed a safety manual and told to study it on their own time. In addition, as has been discovered in many academic settings, a certain percentage of students learns more effectively by being presented materials in a medium that incorporates both audio and visual elements.

Presenting a short video to your new employees covering safety essentials can be an effective training tool. Another benefit to supplementing written safety materials with a video presentation

is that some learners may not have the language skills necessary (e.g., low literacy rate, lack of motivation to read the manual, English as a second language status, etc.) to understand the written information. Visual examples enable them to grasp important safety concepts and procedures more easily.

- b) Review Emergency Response Plans: Reviewing the emergency response plan at both the office and jobsite is required and crucial to the safety of all employees – from office clerks to crane operators. An emergency response plan presentation should include information on:
- * the alarm system used by the company to alert employees to an emergency;
 - * the location of fire extinguishers and emergency exit routes;
 - * the location of an outside meeting place in the event that an evacuation of the building or jobsite is necessary;
 - * How to summon emergency help (i.e., calling 911);
 - * the location of first aid kits and the nearest emergency medical facility;
 - * how weather-related emergency information will be provided to employees;
 - * how, when and to whom a work-related injury should be reported; and
 - * how and when emergency information will be conveyed to employees at each jobsite.
- c) Hazardous Materials Disclosure and Training: As part of OSHA’s Hazard Communication standard, employees must be trained on how to work with and around hazardous materials prior to their initial assignment and whenever a new hazard is introduced into the work area.

A review of the hazard communication program needs to include information on:

- * the location of the inventory list of onsite hazardous substances;
- * what a material safety data sheet (MSDS) is and where it can be found at the main office and/or jobsite;
- * how to read a label on a hazardous substance container;
- * how employees will be informed of any new hazardous substances they may come into contact with; and
- * how general contractors, subcontractors, and other parties will be notified of any hazardous substances they may be exposed to in the course of their business on the jobsite.

General Policy Safety Review

Contractors should review additional safety policies and procedures on subjects such as lockout/tagout, personal protective equipment, fall protection, electrical safety, welding safety, ladder safety, excavation and trenching and confined space, depending on the specific operations the company conducts.

Keeping Documentation

To showcase safety efforts to governing authorities and insurance companies, trainers should complete a written construction safety orientation checklist as proof that all necessary topics have been covered. Many construction companies also provide an employee safety handbook requiring the employee’s signature on a document acknowledging that he received training on company safety policies and procedures and knows the importance of workplace safety. This document should be returned to the human resource department within a predetermined amount of time. To ensure training documentation can be accessed by all interested parties, the construction safety orientation checklist and the signed safety document should be kept in the employee’s human resources file at the company’s office.

2. **Pre-Job Hazard Assessment**

Prior to starting any new job, it is important for the project manager (or foreman on a smaller job) to evaluate the potential workplace hazards to employees at the construction site. This includes the potential hazards resulting from the operations of other subcontractors working at the site. Using his experience in the field, the project manager or foreman should determine the necessary personal protective equipment to be used and safety policies to be followed in order to reduce these hazards.

3. **Jobsite Safety Orientation, Training**

Prior to beginning any work on the job, the site foreman and supervisors of other affected parties should receive a copy of the pre-job hazard assessment form. It is the foreman's responsibility to review potential workplace hazards for that particular construction site with all the employees involved. This includes advising employees on what types of PPEs are required for work and whether any specific company safety policies apply, such as the use of fall protection or confined space procedures. Some companies use a PPE assessment and certification of training checklist form for each employee, which is returned to the human resources department at the end of each job.

The foreman also should keep a copy of information regarding emergency response procedures and important telephone numbers in their trailer or gang box at the construction site. Subcontractors should obtain this information from the general contractor prior to the start of their work and then relay that information to employees as part of the jobsite orientation.

4. **Field Safety Inspection Checklist**

On longer jobs, a field safety inspection checklist is a useful tool the foreman can complete at least weekly to ensure new hazards on the jobsite are dealt with. This visual inspection also provides a means to determine if employees follow safety policies and procedures.

The foreman should be held responsible for providing retraining to any employee not following required policies and procedures. If an employee refuses to follow the rules, disciplinary action should be taken.

As part of the weekly field safety inspection process, the foreman should restock the first aid kit at the jobsite as needed. A weekly signoff sheet serves as a reminder for this task and ensures compliance with OSHA regulation 1926.50. The completed form should then be sent to the main office and filed at the conclusion of each job.

5. **Tool Box Talks**

As many in construction know, the construction site foreman serves as the conduit of information for employees in the field. In addition, due to the foreman's close relationship with the construction crew, the foreman often receives admiration and respect.

With this in mind, many companies make the site foreman responsible for conducting "toolbox talks" on a weekly basis. Toolbox topics should incorporate information on relevant safety issues (e.g., if a "near miss" or an accident recently occurred, a discussion on how to prevent a similar accident should be discussed). Employee attendance and sign off should be mandatory. A copy of the talk and the completed signoff sheet must be retained at the jobsite in a easily accessible location in the event of an OSHA inspection.

Employees depend on supervisors to provide a safe working environment. In addition, federal and state agencies, insurance companies and clients expect companies to enforce policies and procedures to keep employees safe. Enforcing safety procedures not only complies with OSHA regulations and makes companies more attractive to potential clients, it also reduce insurance costs.

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