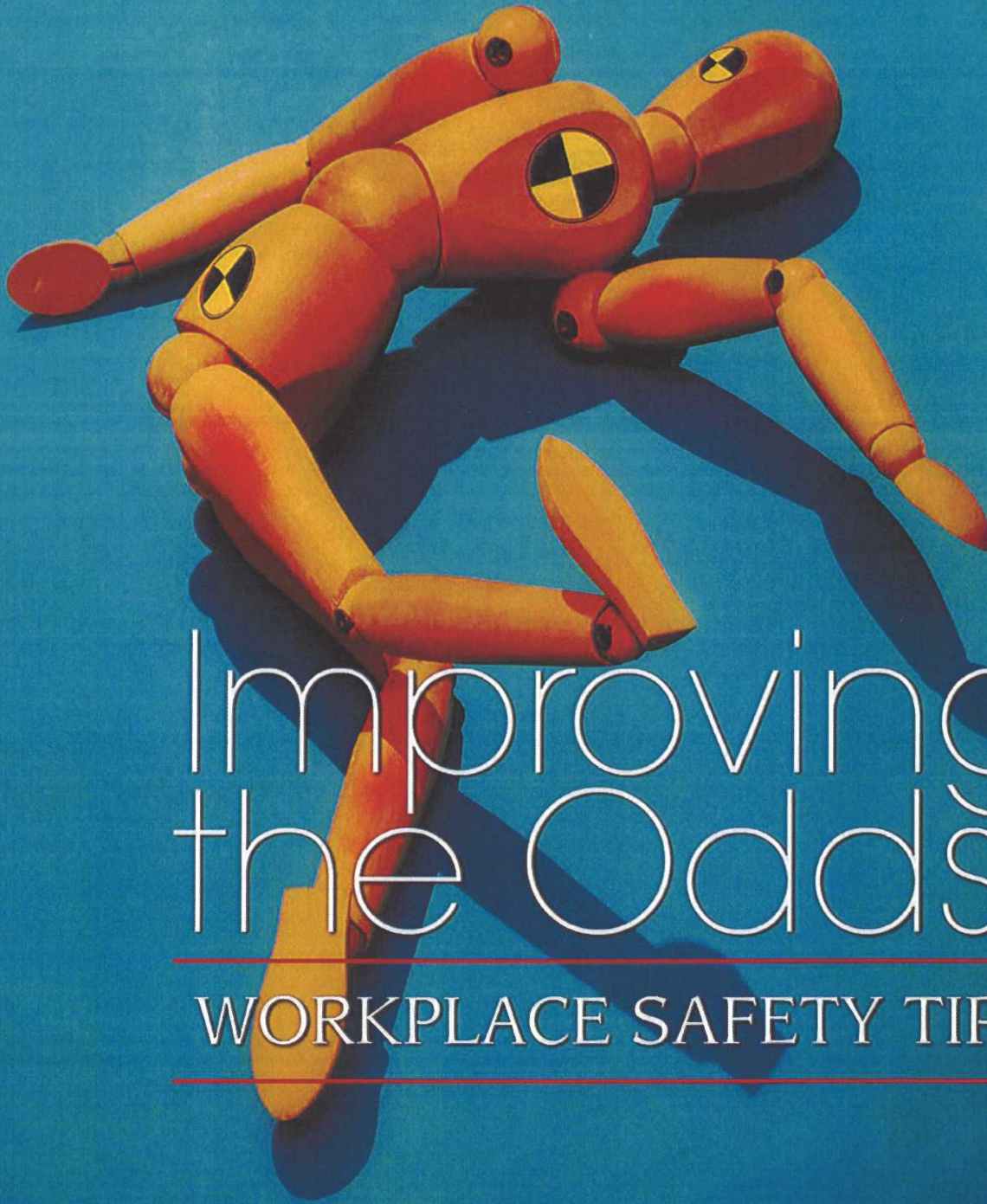


MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

By Tracy Ecclesine Ivie



Improving the Odds:

WORKPLACE SAFETY TIPS

WHEN IT COMES TO WORKPLACE SAFETY, THE STAKES ARE HIGH.

According to OSHA, nearly four million people are injured on the job every year, with workplace injuries and illnesses costing companies approximately \$170 billion. Besides medical and administrative costs, companies may also encounter fines, lawsuits and higher insurance premiums—not to mention damaged employee morale.

"Although many people believe accidents are a normal part of doing business, most can be avoided," says Steve Daluge, vice president of risk control services at Captive Resources, LLC, consultant to Elite Distributors Insurance Company (EDIC), a captive insurer that IMARK was instrumental in helping to launch in the early 1990s.

"In my mind, every accident is preventable," he says. "If you have a solid safety program in place and you're committed to doing everything right, zero accidents are what you're trying to achieve."

That may seem like an impossible goal, but there are many things companies can do to improve their odds when it comes to safety. Not surprisingly, everything starts at the top, says Daluge. "You've got to have upper management's buy-in to the safety program. They typically will develop a policy statement and it really builds from that. Middle management is given specific responsibilities which they're accountable for, and then you bring it down to the employee level with rules and regulations they need to follow."

Once there's a management commitment, what are some best practices to implement in the field? Several IMARK companies that are also EDIC members with top safety records have weighed in.

SAFETY COORDINATORS/ COMMITTEES

Alameda Electric has one safety coordinator at each of its 11 branches. "Their job is to walk through and pay attention, making sure that people are doing things correctly. That's important," says Greg Berkowitz, vice president of sales and operations. The safety coordinators are headed by the HR department, which conducts informal meetings every quarter or so. As a further safety measure, at least one person at each location is also CPR-certified.

TRAINING

"Training is huge," he says. The company sends safety tips regularly to branch managers to address problems involved with lifting, cutting and other warehouse operations. "Those are common sense type injuries—and they're very trainable and fixable. We make sure our employees in the warehouse are trained on the forklift because it is a moving machine and very dangerous, so at least twice a year

in our main branch we will get them certified and in our outlying branches once a year, so we don't have issues which cost the company money."

Springfield Electric takes the training a step further, requiring all employees to complete a monthly online questionnaire through a program the company purchased from an outside vendor. Employees must read through training materials and pass a 10-15 question quiz. If they don't score high enough, they must retake the test until they get it right. Topics have included back safety, defensive driving on ice, heat stroke in the summer, even tornado awareness. ("We're in Illinois," explains vice president Nikki Baker about the continual twister threat in our nation's heartland.)

"Safety is an expectation," says Chris Carter, corporate operations manager for Springfield Electric. "I think there's a consistent message going out to all of our locations, a consistent emphasis on safety. It's part of their performance reviews." In addition, employees are given a safety rating

from A to D, based on their accident history. If they're in the lower tiers, Springfield may assign a coach to provide additional training or do a "ride-along." If an employee continues to have a low rating, he or she may be reassigned to a less safety-sensitive position or additional disciplinary action is taken.

BONUSES/INCENTIVES

Many companies offer bonuses to employees, particularly drivers. At Western Extralite, drivers who are accident-free for one quarter receive a \$50 bonus. If they have a clean record the following quarter, the bonus escalates to \$75, and then \$100 for the next, etc. Drivers who get into accidents or exhibit unsafe behaviors must start over with no bonus.

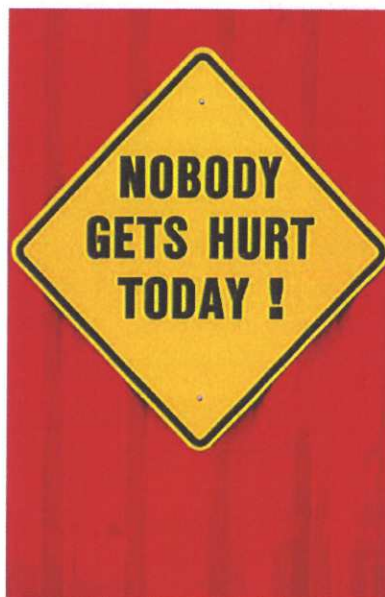
At Alameda Electric, drivers are eligible for bonuses every month, which are affected by safety violations, speeding, complaints, accidents and anything safety-related. For small infractions, they might lose a monthly bonus; for something major, they could lose all their bonuses for the year. Drivers with good records will see approximately \$1 to \$1.50 an hour extra in their paychecks.

"That's a considerable amount of money for them," says Berkowitz. "It's very, very critical that they are doing a good job. If we have a driver that is not driving safely, or is not handling things correctly at a job site, that is where we typically have a greater degree of risk, so we have incentives for them because it's very important that that doesn't happen." Some companies also reward managers for clean safety records or penalize them for too many accidents. "If the branch manager is not leading with safety, then we

have a problem because they need to be the ones that are driving that culture through their branch," says Berkowitz. "Fortunately, we don't have a lot of issues with that."

SAFETY SCORECARD/AUDIT

EDIC provides member companies with independent consultants who point out areas that need improving. Periodically, the risk control coordi-



nator from Captive Resources rates each company against a watchlist criteria established by the Board and provides members a risk control scorecard. Alameda Electric, which received EDIC's Award of Excellence last year, audits its locations quarterly, with safety as an important component of that audit. "We will make sure we have certain things in place like fire extinguishers and maps on how to leave the premises for non-employees on-site." Cleanliness is also part of the safety audit. "In our industry, it's very easy to get a lot of clutter. There are a lot of items that can be stuck around desks. One thing you don't want is

someone tripping over a box that shouldn't have been there."

For more on safety programs, companies can consult their insurance providers, which often have safety specialists on call. EDIC's members are able to call on loss control consultants from Gallagher Barrett, and also Captive Resources' risk coordinator, at any time. OSHA and the National Safety Council also offer excellent resources.

SAFER EQUIPMENT AND ERGONOMICS

Based on the recommendation of their loss control consultant, Springfield Electric purchased hydraulic wire cutters to help prevent carpal tunnel syndrome. People in the warehouse can just push a button for easy operation, as opposed to standard ratchet cutters, which require more force. "It was somewhat of a proactive move. It's also quicker and more efficient," says Carter. He adds that the hydraulic cutters save money in the long run because one carpal tunnel claim would be a lot more expensive than the cost of the cutters.

Western Extralite bought about 100 ergonomic box cutters, with thumb guards and three-position "stops" that regulate the length of the exposed blade. "When the blade extends too far, that's when accidents happen," says Phil Levy, the company's HR manager. The blade is also easy to change and the handle is a non-slip surface so users have a better grip.

Also on the company's agenda of safety improvements are steel-toed shoes to help protect the foot against heavy or sharp objects. The office staff uses phone headsets so people can be hands-free. "This is easier

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on shoulders and necks," says Levy, "and people are more productive." The company also bought ergonomic chairs, which are adjustable in many directions. The chairs are more comfortable and reduce back and neck strain.

Western Extralite also invested in "uplighting" during a green renovation a few years ago. The lights bounce up at the ceiling, instead of shining down on employees, which helps prevent eyestrain and is easier on the eyes. Western Extralite also provides mats behind counters where people stand all day to give them more of a cushion.

"A lot of these things are not inexpensive," says Levy, noting that besides being safer, they result in less absenteeism. "I think the

benefits from having a culture of safety are fewer accidents, and you're creating a more positive environment for your employees. When employees see that you care, that's a benefit to the company."

Daluge says that companies receive \$3 back in benefits for every dollar they invest in employee safety, especially items like pallet jacks and better lift tables (See sidebar for ergonomic guidelines).

Adds Berkowitz, "It's very important to minimize your claims and disabilities as much as you possibly can. Safety is essential for any company. It's just something you've got to continue to improve upon. I don't think you can ever stop improving on it."

Five Principles of Ergonomics

- Make workstations adjustable; fit the job to the employee and not the employee to the job.
- Maintain the body in a neutral position. Keep everything within reach; items should be lifted between knees and shoulders whenever possible.
- Implement a pre-work stretching program for workers involved with lifting or repetitive jobs.
- Facilitate task variety or rotate employees in and out of highly repetitive jobs.
- Consider engineering controls (lift tables, pallet jacks, conveyor systems, mechanical material handling devices).

Source: Steve Daluge, Captive Resources

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