

RISK – PART OF THE JOB?

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We all want a safe work environment, but do industry professionals believe a certain amount of risk is necessary to get the job done? Do employees disregard safety standards to meet deadlines? Is there a safer way to complete the job, but still finish on time? These and similar questions were asked in a survey of Washington State trucking industry employers and employees. In 2006, 25 waste hauling employers and 40 waste hauling employees responded to questions about safety perception, company safety culture, work-related injuries and job satisfaction. The Trucking Injury Reduction Emphasis (TIRES) project developed the survey to better understand the needs of the industry and how to prevent injuries from occurring.

Here's what they had to say:

Is safety a priority to companies?

The majority of both employers and employees who responded to the survey believe that safety is important to their companies; however, there is more to the story. Thirty-five percent of the employees who responded to the survey were injured in the previous year. Safety is important, but injuries are common. Are injuries just part of the job or can they be prevented?

Is taking risks part of the job?

In general employers did not believe that workers should take risks on the job. When employees were asked the same question, over one-third agreed that taking risks is part of the job. There is quite a disparity here between

employer and employee perception of the risk expected to complete the job.

Only 1 of the 25 employers who responded agreed that their workers expect they will be in an accident or injured in the next 12 months. Nearly half of the workers believed that a member of their team would be involved in an accident or injured in the next 12 months. Apparently workers are a lot less optimistic than their employers believe.

If workers assume that risks are necessary to complete the job and employers do not, then it sounds like there is a communication breakdown somewhere. What is the risk that workers are encountering and do they feel safe in expressing it to management? Is there a training issue that needs to be resolved or do workers need support in refusing unsafe work?

Worker safety is important to management; however, is the message being properly relayed to workers?

Nearly half of the workers stated that they regularly feel pressured by management to work longer hours or faster. Is this pressure effective management or is the desire to meet deadlines impacting the safety of the workers?

It's important to note that these are employees who enjoy their work and would take the job again if offered. They appreciate their jobs enough that they are willing to risk their health for the job. Almost half of the employees stated that their companies have a maximum weight limit for manual lifting of waste/recycling; however, nearly half of these workers admitted that they sometimes ignore the rule to stay on

schedule. Do you as a manager applaud this worker for getting the job done or are you serious about the weight limit rule being followed? Do your workers know your true feelings on this issue? If worker safety is important, how best can you support your workers so that they can make safe work decisions?

Injuries

The focus of injury prevention efforts should be on the most common (and costly) injury types. Workers' compensation data and this survey agree that these are back, shoulder or arm/hand over-exertions or strains. The next most common injury types were injuries from:

- Getting struck by or against objects.
- Motor-vehicle crashes.
- Slips, trips or falls.

TIRES reviewed workers' compensation data before embarking on this project and found these to be the most common claims as well. This data has informed injury prevention tools that are being used by the waste/recycling industry to target these injury types. The tools can be downloaded at www.KeepTruckingSafe.org.

What can be done?

Employees do not need to risk their health to get the job done. Injury prevention strategies can be implemented to remove the risk. Include employees in safety process planning and solution development. Great ideas for risk and hazard reduction can come from employees. Management support and participation in safety meetings is also vital to improve company safety culture. When safety is important to management, it becomes important to employees. Ask for suggestions and support employees who refuse unsafe work such as lifting an over-weight garbage bin. More information on safe work practices can be found at www.KeepTruckingSafe.org.

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