

# Accident Investigations

## Learning from Mistakes

by Joe Freeman

*Safety programs focus on proactive injury prevention and the creation of a framework in which work activity is performed. An effective first step for any safety program is the implementation of appropriate employee training. A properly trained employee is less likely to perform a task incorrectly or to demonstrate high-risk behavior.*

An accident can be defined as any unplanned event that results in property damage or injury. Accident investigations are unlike other elements of a safety program because they are initiated following an incident. Information collected during an accident investigation is critically important because, while it can't predict risk, it can provide insight into the types of risk inherent in the workplace and the impact such exposures can have on employee safety.

### Why aren't investigations utilized more effectively?

Accident investigations can be difficult to perform. They often require a significant time commitment from trained safety specialists, the injured employee, management personnel and witnesses. Additionally, it can be uncomfortable to question or discipline an injured employee. This is especially true following a serious incident. An investigator may be tempted to think "Hasn't this person already been through enough?"

Difficult though it may be for everyone involved, a proper investigation provides the means to offset the cost of the event itself by providing the information necessary to prevent a potentially costly recurrence. Failure to follow up can mean that the data created by the incident is wasted—the exposure is not identified, the risk may remain unresolved and a similar incident could occur.

### First—report the incident

The first step following an accident or injury is to report the occurrence. Employees should be encouraged to report accidents or injuries as quickly as possible. First aid or medical

care should be provided immediately, if required. An individual familiar with the work environment, processes and procedures should initiate an investigation as soon as possible following the event. The immediate supervisor should either take part in the investigation directly or be available to answer questions.

### Second—determine the cause

It is imperative to determine the cause of the incident. Depending on the circumstances, one or more causes may be identified. Items to be evaluated during any investigation include the following:

- The task being performed
- Material and equipment involved
- The work environment
- Personnel involved
- Manager(s) of the involved person(s)

**Task review**—Determining whether company procedures were followed prior to the incident. If not, it's important to establish why the procedures were sidestepped. When an employee deviates from standard procedures, the cause is frequently due to changes that make procedures more difficult to perform or altogether unsafe.

**Material and equipment review**—Must include an evaluation of equipment performance. Did equipment fail? Was the incident caused by poor design or substandard maintenance? This provides a good



opportunity to verify that industry standard practices are being followed with the material or equipment in question. Such a review should identify whether personal protective equipment may be necessary in an area where it was previously thought to be unnecessary. The use of safety equipment, such as guarding or equipment locks and tags, should also be evaluated.

**Appraisal of the work environment**—At the time the incident occurs, it is important to evaluate the work environment and record pertinent information. Weather conditions should be noted, including the temperature in the area where the incident occurred. Noise levels, lighting, air quality and housekeeping should also be recorded in this portion of the evaluation.

**Personnel involved**—Should include a review of each employee's experience and training. The answers to the following questions may provide insight into the cause of the incident:

- Was the employee working in his or her usual area and performing a familiar task?
- Did the employee have an adequate level of training for the job?

- What was the employee's physical and mental status at the time of the incident?
- Was the employee tired at the time of the incident?
- Did the incident occur during the employee's normally scheduled shift?

Other factors related to employee stressors should also be investigated. This could include a variety of personal or work-related stressors ranging from a recent death in the family to fulfillment of a rush order.

**Management**—The employee's relationship to management is one of the most important factors to consider and one of the easiest to overlook. Potential contributing factors, such as the level of communication and availability of safety policies and procedures, may play a role in how safely an employee performs. The orientation process may need to be reviewed and modified if the injury involved a less experienced employee. Oversight of the employee and enforcement of existing policies should also be reviewed. If it is determined that an employee was not following policy at the time of the incident, is documentation available to show that policies are routinely enforced by management? Have other

employees been observed performing the same behavior that led to the incident under investigation? If so, has this behavior been addressed?

### Beefing up inspections

Investigative procedures should also include an assessment of prior hazards and evaluation of mitigation techniques implemented. Following any type of incident, one can never ask too many questions regarding cause and effect:

- Was new equipment installed immediately prior to the incident? Was the equipment evaluated prior to initiating work?
- Are regular safety inspections conducted?
- Was the hazard identified through the inspection process?
  - If the answer is “yes,” was effective corrective action taken?
  - If the answer is “no,” why was action not taken?
- Does the inspection protocol need to be changed?
- Do inspectors need additional training or additional time to perform the inspections?

### The final report

Once all information surrounding the incident is collected and evaluated, the results of the investigation should be reported per organizational procedure. The resultant findings should include a plan of corrective action designed to prevent or reduce the likelihood of an incident being repeated.

It should be noted that generating a corrective action plan is not enough to ensure safety.

The most difficult part of the corrective process can be implementation of the recommended actions. Making suggested changes requires training, oversight, ongoing evaluation and, most importantly, verification that the suggested corrective action does not create other unanticipated exposures.

When performed properly, accident investigations are one of the most useful tools available to a safety professional or individual responsible for employee safety. The specialists from SilverStone Group’s Claims Management and Loss Prevention team can create a customized program designed to help your organization move forward to safety.



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