Safety Culture and Social Media

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Thu, 2015-03-26 13:19

Soon, social media will be tapped as a resource to build safety cultures.

American culture heavily is impacted by social media. Cultures once formed around the workplace, school, church or other places where people gathered to build relationships.

Today, people get together and form cultures in cyberspace. It is just a matter of time until these cyber cultures are tapped as a resource to build organizational and safety cultures.

Organizations that have been challenged by their own logistics now have a way to connect previously disconnected workers and to form safety cultures via social media. Already, Facebook and LinkedIn have invited companies to form their own groups online. Many companies have used the Internet to distribute safety manuals and guidelines to their scattered workforces via shared, restricted-access web sites. Adding opportunities for their workers to chat with each other and share ideas, experiences and best practices is a logical extension of Internet and cell phone usage.

Although logistically challenged organizations will be among the first to use social media, other organizations without logistical problems will follow in close order. We often joke about people sitting across a table texting each other rather than speaking. However, this joke is becoming the new reality. We are becoming more and more users of social media and texting, and less and less users of interpersonal conversation.

Recognizing this reality is the first step toward forming company and safety cultures via social media.

Sharing in Real Time

Sharing everyday experiences and ideas in real time is a great lure to participation for workers. The ability to immediately communicate accident-investigation findings or even to have a safety stand down via everyone's smart phones could prove invaluable. Immediate access (without travel) to another employee with greater expertise could improve JSAs and other forms of pre-job planning.

The fact is, workers already communicate with some of their fellow employees via social media. Groups of friends, family members at work and neighbors who also are work associates "friend" each other and regularly communicate. An organization easily can create an online work community to facilitate the connection of these groups. Several types of social media already facilitate multiple groupings of contacts such as family and friends. Adding business associates is a simple next step, for which the technology already exists.

Organizations already are experimenting with the use of social media to enhance safety in their cultures. The ones that were quickly successful had three commonalities in their approaches.

First, they started with a beta group to prove the concept before expanding it to broader groups or

organization-wide. The small groups were selected to be representative of organizational sub-cultures that already existed and had some degree of commonality and communication already. The problems encountered in each group were solved before expanding the cyber community to more members. Complex organizations selected more than one beta group, if they felt they were needed, to be a cross-section sampling of the overall organization.

Second, the group members' experiences were monitored through surveys and focus group interviews to test the progress and analyze challenges. Overall usage of the media also was tracked to see what percentage of participants used the media, how often and for how long. Length of comments and strings of dialogue also were measured to see if they were growing.

Third, successful organizations made sure everyone had the same access to social media by providing the same types of smart phones to everyone in the groups and making sure everyone had adequate access and instructions for using the site. Help desks commonly were provided for the users of the beta site through internal IT departments and help features were available through the social media programs used.

Advantages of Social Media

The organizations with successful beta groups began to expand the site offerings to larger groups in their organization. They were pleased with the beta groups and reported several perceived advantages provided by social media. The most common were:

- Interpersonal communication among workers drastically increased and barriers to talking to each other about safety issues seemed to disappear. Perceptions of the importance and contribution of fellow workers grew in relation to increased knowledge of what others were thinking and how they reacted to organizational issues. Perceptions of teamwork and looking out for each other in safety reached new heights.
- Communication of safety data improved. Accident and near-miss reports reached everyone via posts and were discussed among workers on the same social media. The testing of knowledge about recent events indicated much greater awareness of details and significance. Lessons learned from incidents more widely were known among workers. Communication of safety data greatly was enhanced and workers preferred getting the communication by social media rather than by more traditional communication methods.
- Perceptions of organizational leaders responding to safety suggestions changed radically. Workers felt leaders were more in touch with workplace issues and were listening to workers more openly. The need for formal suggestions was replaced by an ongoing dialogue between workers and leaders.
- Organizations with logistical challenges felt they finally were giving workers opportunities to network with each other and share best practices. The yearly meetings of limited numbers gave way to larger groups being able to get together daily.

These ideas only scratch the surface of what social media potentially could do for safety culture. Use and experience will teach the rest over time. Technology changes as quickly as our ability to use it and that will open even more opportunities. Security of data certainly will be an issue, as it already is with all Internet and broadcast media, but we certainly will run a race with hackers and cyber-crooks to stay ahead of their thievery.

Society, in general, is becoming a social media society. Savvy safety professionals will get together with their CIOs, IT departments and with the growing group of cooperative providers to look ahead and explore the opportunities to use this world-changing social media to their advantage.

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Source URL: http://ehstoday.com/safety/safety-culture-and-social-media