

Using Podcasts to Improve Safety: A Versatile New Communication Media

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Introduction—What Is This Podcast Thing?

Communicating information is a challenge that has plagued professionals for many years. Several innovative safety managers have identified a new solution, Podcasting.

Wikipedia defines podcast as “*a series of digital media files (either audio or video) that are released episodically and downloaded through web syndication.*” It goes on to state, “*The mode of delivery differentiates podcasting from other means of accessing media files over the Internet, such as direct download, or streamed webcasting. A list of all the audio or video files currently associated with a given series is maintained centrally on the distributor's server as a web feed, and the listener or viewer employs special client application software known as a podcatcher that can access this web feed, check it for updates, and download any new files in the series.*” ¹

Podcasts are now being leveraged to help magazines reach their subscribers (The Wall Street Journal ², Harvard Business Review ³), safety managers to reach and train their logistically-challenged workers, and organizational leaders to share their safety vision and strategy with workers they seldom contact in person. This new media is proving to be versatile and popular with many users who have found it challenging to reach their desired audience using standard communication tools. Our discovery of these potential uses was spread over three major projects.



Figure 1. A New Way to Enhance Expertise

Over a three-year period, we trained personnel from a client company to implement new approaches to safety at their sites throughout North America and Europe. The first training involved twenty selected employees who were to become the “Internal Consultant”, responsible for implementing change within the organization. As they completed the training and began implementing the new strategies, the emails and phone calls began. Questions will inevitably arise after the completion of any training, when the work begins and theories are applied to practice. We became the help desk. After quickly noticing repetition of many of the questions, in the fall of 2007, we found ourselves saying, “I wish I could record my answer and just play it back when the next call comes in!”

In December of 2007, we formulized a list of common questions and began recording our answers. Through trial and error, we discovered the Apple podcast specifications⁴ and started recording our sessions in the iTunes format. The recordings required editing and then transferring to a platform conducive to publishing audio and video files on the internet. On the fourth of January 2008, The *Safety Culture Excellence Podcast*⁵ went online.

As we recorded and posted our original “answers to questions”, we received a barrage of requests for other topics to be covered and new questions to be answered. Although we had a standing list of such issues, we quickly made a practice of moving requested topics to the top of the list. The favorable responses, thanking us for the quick reaction to the inquiries in a sharable format, reinforced our decisions to mass publish what some would feel is proprietary information. With each engagement, unique questions would be presented and new, advanced thinking would be initiated. The list of topics began to grow.

As we publicized the podcasts to our increasing number of trained Internal Consultants, a great thing started to happen; our podcast download rate increased and our personal phone calls and emails from the internal consultants decreased. Our vision of answering the question once and playing it back was becoming a reality. What has resulted is the ability to increase the competence and confidence of safety leaders in 48 countries, without the need of additional travel. We had learned how to leverage our impact on a diverse population worldwide, without any additional costs to organizations looking to improving safety.

Another interesting early development took us by surprise. When monitoring the download location tracking mechanism for our podcasts, we found that our clients were only a very small percentage of those who were regularly downloading. In fact, the countries in which our clients maintained facilities and conducted work, were initially only a small percentage of the countries where subscribers were active. We had created an audience significantly larger and more diverse than we originally intended. This expanded audience quickly joined the others in voicing their requested topics and asking their questions. Once again, the list grew.

Sample topic requests received in January and February of 2010 included:

1. How should I determine a safety focus for 2010?
2. How does a site determine the effectiveness of a safety committee?
3. We tend to create new safety rules on a weekly basis, what are your thoughts on this?
4. How would you define an accident vs. incident?
5. Is there a best practices strategy to identify risk influencers?
6. What is the best way to create a safety perception survey?
7. How do I make safety communication sticky?
8. Can you help me explain to my workers why driving on the phone is so dangerous?
9. Can you give an example of what a supervisor can do to effectively lead safety?
10. What do you look for when assessing a Behavior-Based Safety Process?

Over the past two years, the number of subscribers has increased into the thousands. This has propelled us into a unique position to be able offer strategies to individuals all over the world at a cost that can't be beat, free. This is safety after all. If there are ideas that can be used to help people prevent a life from being lost, we believe these strategies should be shared willingly and in a manner that facilitates self-implementation.

We have been able to meet with many of these subscribers at some of the public events held by ASSE and other safety organizations and conferences. In speaking at a recent event, we were flattered when several individuals requested to take our picture in front of the podcast banner displayed near the podium. One woman accompanying her safety manager husband, told us we were to blame for her not being able to listen to music in the car any longer. Since her husband had recently discovered the podcast, he had been listening to the topics on their daily commute to work. As soon as we began to humorously offer our apologies, she exclaimed, "Yes! That is the same voice in my car!" We were then surprised when she said, "After listening to the podcasts, I look at my own personal safety in a new light, even though I've been married to a safety professional for more than twenty years." Her statement highlights the potential power that the information shared through podcasts presents.



Figure 2. I Never See You, How Do We Communicate Effectively?

With these experiences still fresh in our minds, we began a project and discovered a problem during the early stages of a culture assessment. The client held excellent safety meetings with almost all of their employees, with the exception of one division. This division encompassed a mobile workforce of two hundred and fifty that spent most of their time in company vehicles and at remote client locations on a daily basis. On average, these employees saw other representative from their company on an annual basis, quarterly on a slow year. Frustration was expressed about the ability to conduct meaningful safety meetings and share timely safety communication with this population. The proverbial light bulbs immediately shone brightly above our heads. BINGO!

We discussed our podcast experience with the client and began collaborating on how we might use something similar to address this problem. After exploring alternatives, the client decided to purchase iPods for each employee. The individual was able to use half the iPod's memory for personal files such, as music, and the other half would be reserved for downloading company specific material. The safety director for this division assigned personnel to record both the video and audio from safety meetings. They posted the non-sensitive information to iTunes and the company specific information to a secure company intranet. The organization now tracks both the downloading of safety information, and for retention of knowledge through informal phone conversations, newsletter quizzes, and monthly reports.

The organization quickly learned that this new media of communication was not limited to safety meetings. Accident reports were shared on the sensitive location, allowing the lessons-learned to be put to immediate use throughout the company, in a consistently communicated manner. Following this experience, the organization further recognized how removed this division was from executive level messages. The Chief Executive Officer was prompted to deliver a video podcast to reinforce his previously communicated value of safety. This was so successful that they are now used in the other division's safety meetings throughout the company.

When other departments of the organization witnessed the successes from these efforts, other department-specific podcasts began to follow suit. Corporate communications is now divided into two categories: interactive and passive. Interactive communication is that which needs to entail two-way discussions of idea interchanges to accomplish the purpose. Passive communication is simply to transfer of information or ideas which is generally 'For Your Information' (FYI) and does not necessitate any particular interchange or discussion. All passive information is included on podcasts even if this is redundant to written or e-communication. The organization feels that the redundancy is so easy and inexpensive that it is worthwhile. They also point out that people respond to the podcasts even when they tend to accumulate emails or snail mails unopened.



Figure 3. Consistently Communicating at All Levels

We recently identified another usage of this versatile new media. This organization did not involve serious logistical challenges; they simply had a top level of corporate managers who had limited contact with employees. This created frustration around the flow of information, as it cascaded down throughout the organization. These leaders wanted more than their words to reach the employee population, they wanted to be both seen and heard. Podcasts were the ideal vehicle to accomplish this task as well.

As of 2010, employees all over the world download the leaders' messages, translated into five different languages, on a frequent basis. Through this, the organization feels they have addressed the communication gap and skewed information that previously negatively impacted the effectiveness of

communication. The messages are repeated at the right intervals to establish levels of expectation and there is no longer distortion of the messages due to passing the content through others. Moreover, everyone receives the same message from the same source, with consistent inflection and emphasis. There is no need to interpret or decipher.

Communication of safety is now viewed as a strategically managed and measured process. Analyses of the collected data indicate the messages are better received and the expectations are clearer. Furthermore, there is a perception that communication now results in quicker and more productive action.

Based on the collective experiences of those in our firm and our progressive client companies, we believe podcasts can help to improve safety in several ways:

1. Overcome Logistical Communication Challenges

Podcasts can reach a remote or mobile workforce in ways that traditional communication cannot. Whether used to replace meetings or verbalize information to everyone regardless of location, podcasts can be an effective strategy. The only requirement is an internet connection for someone to download and listen immediately, or save for later, there is almost no place they cannot reach and almost no one who cannot retrieve them individually or receive on a device at some time during their work week or month.

2. Ensure Uniformity of Message

There is no better way to ensure that everyone receives the same message than by letting the same person deliver it to everyone. Yet, this is not always practical through the traditional communication channels. Moreover, the ability to replay podcasted message eliminates misunderstandings or misinterpretations. Many communication experts stress the importance of the messenger as well as the message. Podcasts are a strategy to ensure the right messenger delivers the right message to the entire audience.

3. Eliminate Message Drift

When messages must be relayed through organizational levels, there is a tendency for the message to be modified, minimized, or, drift. Eliminating the need to relay messages through others can potentially eliminate this problem. Everyone hears the same message in the same words, inflection, sincerity and body language (if using video podcasts). Such messages are clearer and increase believability.

4. Multiply or Leverage Ability for Leaders or Experts to Communicate

Regardless of travel or meeting schedules, it is difficult for many leaders and experts to reach a large audience at once. The web has facilitated this, but still imposes scheduling problems for live events such as webinars. Podcasts are available on-demand and can reach an unlimited audience over a relatively short period of time. This ability multiplies the impact of leaders and experts and highly leverages their often busy schedules.

5. Facilitate International Messages

With the increasing costs, danger, and limitations of international travel, podcasts can be a great alternative. They are accessible globally and can be easily translated by the sender or receiver into other languages.

6. Support Traditional Channels and Media

Almost any method of communication can be improved by a supporting alternate media. The ability to hear the communicator (i.e., manager, executive, consultant, etc.) discuss the new policy, rather than simply reading it or worse having it read to you, can sometimes be the difference between understanding and simply being exposed to a message.

7. Lower Communication Costs

Whether you are advertising or simply sending a message, podcasts are inexpensive, compared to most other communication media. Considering the potential audience, the cost per listener does not increase as the number of listeners goes up.

As technology advances, the utilization of new communicate methods can help the important message, priority, and value of safety, reach more people more effectively. Podcast technology is not overly complicated and most organizations can master it in a short time with reasonable expense. The advantages of such communications can quickly make the investment in equipment and technology pay huge dividends in increased and sustained effectiveness.

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