



Using Podcasts to Improve Safety

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

What is a Podcast?

Wikipedia defines podcast as “a series of digital media files (either audio or video) that are released episodically and downloaded through web syndication.” It also states:

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. Podcasts are now being leveraged to help publishers (e.g., The Wall Street Journal, Harvard Business Review) reach their subscribers, safety managers reach and train their logistically challenged workers, and organizational leaders convey their safety vision and strategy to workers with whom they seldom interact. 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. This article discusses three major projects in which the authors discovered potential uses for podcasts.

Project 1: Enhancing Expertise

Over a 3-year period, the authors trained personnel from a client company to implement new approaches to safety at its sites throughout North America and Europe. The first training involved 20 employees who were to become the internal consultants, responsible for implementing change within the organization. As they completed the training and began implementing the new strategies, the e-mails and phone calls began. Questions will inevitably arise after the completion of any training, when the work begins and theories are applied to practice. As a result of many repeat questions, a formulized list of common questions was created and answers were recorded. Through trial and error, the authors learned of the Apple podcast specifications and started recording sessions in the iTunes format (Apple). After editing the recordings and transferring them to a platform conducive to publishing audio and video files on the Internet, the authors published The Safety Culture Excellence podcast. As the answers to the original questions were recorded and posted, requests for other topics and new questions came in. Although a standing list of such issues existed, requested topics were moved to the top of the list. The favorable responses and gratitude for the quick reaction to the inquiries in a sharable format reinforced the 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.

Sample Questions From Project 1

- How should I determine a safety focus for 2010?
- How does a site determine the effectiveness of a safety committee?
- We tend to create new safety rules on a weekly basis. What are your thoughts on this?
- How would you define an accident versus incident?
- Is there a best practices strategy to identify risk influencers?
- What is the best way to create a safety perception survey?
- How do I make safety communication stick?
- Can you help me explain to my workers why driving while talking on the phone is so dangerous?
- Can you give an example of what a supervisor can do to effectively lead safety?
- What do you look for when assessing a behavior-based safety process?

As the podcasts were publicized to an increasing number of trained internal consultants, the podcast download rate increased and the personal phone calls and e-mails from the internal consultants decreased. What has resulted is the ability to increase the competence and confidence of safety leaders in 48 countries, without the need for additional travel. We learned how to leverage the impact on a diverse population worldwide, without



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any additional costs to organizations looking to improve safety. Another interesting early development was surprising. The download location tracking mechanism showed that the clients were only a small percentage of those who were regularly downloading. In fact, the countries in which clients maintained facilities and conducted work were initially only a small percentage of the countries where subscribers were active. The audience was significantly larger and more diverse than originally intended. The expanded audience quickly joined the others in suggesting topics and asking questions. Once again, the list grew. Over the past 2 years, the number of subscribers has increased into the thousands. This has propelled into a unique position to be able to offer strategies to individuals all over the world for free. This is safety after all. If ideas can be used to help prevent a life from being lost, those strategies should be shared willingly and in a manner that facilitates self-implementation.

The authors have met with various subscribers at some public events and conferences. At a recent event, several individuals asked to take our picture in front of the podcast banner displayed near the podium. One woman accompanying her husband, a safety manager, 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 20 years." Her statement highlights the potential power that information shared through podcasts presents.

Project 2: I Never See You. How Do We Communicate Effectively?

With these experiences still fresh, the authors began a new project and discovered a problem during the early stages of a culture assessment. The client held excellent safety meetings with almost all of its employees, with the exception of one division. This division encompassed a mobile workforce of 250 who spent most of their time in company vehicles and at remote client locations on a daily basis. Typically, these employees saw other representatives from their company on an annual basis, or quarterly in a slow year. Frustration was expressed about the ability to conduct meaningful safety meetings and share timely safety communication. The podcast experience was introduced to the client and collaboration began on how a similar solution could address their problem. After exploring alternatives, the client decided to purchase iPods for each employee. The individual was able to use half of the device's memory for personal files, with the other half 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 nonsensitive information to iTunes and the company-specific information to a secure company intranet. The organization tracks the downloading of safety information, and monitors for retention of knowledge through informal phone conversations, newsletter quizzes and monthly reports. The organization quickly learned that this new method of communication was not limited to safety meetings. Incident reports were shared on the secured site, 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 CEO was prompted to deliver a video podcast to reinforce his previously communicated value of safety. This was so successful that podcasts are now used in the other divisions' safety meetings throughout the company. When other departments 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 information or ideas 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. It also points out that people respond to the podcasts even when they tend to accumulate e-mails or unopened snail mail.



Project 3: Consistently Communicating at All Levels

Another usage of this versatile new media was recently discovered. The particular organization did not involve serious logistical challenges; the firm 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 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 it has addressed the communication gap and repositioned information that previously negatively impacted the effectiveness of communication. The messages are repeated at the right intervals to establish levels of expectation and messages are no longer distorted 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.

7 Ways Podcasts Improve Safety

Based on experience, the authors believe podcasts can help to improve safety in several ways.

Overcome Logistical Challenges

Podcasts can reach a remote or mobile workforce in ways that traditional communication cannot. Whether used to replace meetings or verbalize information regardless of location, podcasts can be an effective strategy. The only requirement is an Internet connection.

Ensure Message Uniformity

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 traditional communication channels. Moreover, the ability to replay podcasts 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.

Eliminate Message Drift

When messages must be relayed through organizational levels, the messages are often 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.

Multiply Leverage Leaders' & Experts Ability to Communicate

Regardless of travel or meeting schedules, it is difficult for many leaders and experts to reach a large audience at once. The Internet 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.

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.



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Support Traditional Channels & Media

Almost any method of communication can be improved by a supporting alternate media. The ability to hear the communicator (e.g., manager, executive, consultant) 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.

Reduce Communication Costs

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

Conclusion

As technology advances, the utilization of new communication 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.