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Occupational Health and Safety

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The domino effect of ignoring unsafe practices

Understanding unsafe acts, unsafe conditions, near misses and accidents

In occupational health and safety (OHS), words matter. The difference between terms such as *unsafe acts*, *unsafe conditions*, *near misses*, and *accidents* is more than just semantic; it directly influences how safety is managed in the workplace. When everyone shares a common understanding of these concepts, organisations are better equipped to identify risks, implement preventive measures, and protect their most valuable asset, their employees.

The [Occupational Health and Safety Act, No. 85 of 1993](#) (OHSA) places clear responsibilities on both employers and employees. Employers are legally obligated to provide and maintain, as far as reasonably practicable, a working environment that is safe and without risks to health. Employees, on the other hand, are required to comply with safety instructions and take reasonable care of themselves and others. This legal framework makes it vital that all staff, management, professionals, and operational workers alike fully understand what unsafe behaviour and unsafe environments look like, how to recognise them, and how to prevent them from escalating into serious incidents.

Unsafe acts

An unsafe act occurs when a person engages in behaviour that violates established safety procedures, rules, or accepted practices. Common examples include failing to wear the required personal protective equipment (PPE), bypassing machine guards, taking shortcuts when operating equipment, or operating machinery without the proper training.

For instance, a worker who enters a confined space without proper ventilation testing or a permit is committing an unsafe act. Similarly, an office employee who stands on a swivel chair to reach a high shelf instead of using a step ladder is taking an unnecessary risk.

Unsafe acts are often rooted in human behaviour whether through complacency, overconfidence, or time pressure to complete a task quickly. While they may appear minor, unsafe acts significantly increase the likelihood of accidents. Section 14(a) of the OHSA makes it clear that every employee must *"take reasonable care for the health and safety of himself and of other persons who may be affected by his acts or omissions."* In other words, ignoring safety protocols not only endangers the worker but also exposes the employer to legal and operational risks.

The most effective way to reduce unsafe acts is through continuous training, consistent supervision, and strict enforcement of health and safety procedures, supported by the company's disciplinary code of conduct to address non-compliance. Employees should be reminded regularly of their legal responsibilities, while management must ensure that rules are consistently applied and disciplinary measures are in place when required.

Unsafe conditions

An unsafe condition refers to a hazardous physical state, defect, or environmental factor in the workplace that has the potential to cause harm. Examples include a slippery factory floor due to an oil spill, exposed electrical wiring, unguarded moving machine parts, or inadequate lighting in stairwells.

Unlike unsafe acts, which depend on human behaviour, unsafe conditions exist independently of worker actions. However, they can still result in injuries or fatalities even when employees follow every procedure correctly. For example, a well-trained worker could still trip and fall on poorly maintained flooring, or a worker could be electrocuted by faulty wiring.

The OHSA places direct responsibility on employers to eliminate unsafe conditions. Section 8(2)(d) specifically requires employers to *“establish, as far as is reasonably practicable, what hazards to the health and safety of persons are attached to any work which is performed, and [to] provide the means to eliminate or mitigate such hazards.”* This legal obligation means that regular inspections, maintenance programs, and thorough [risk assessments](#) are not optional they are mandatory.

Practical measures for preventing unsafe conditions include conducting daily housekeeping checks, implementing preventative maintenance schedules, keeping safety signage visible, and ensuring all hazards are logged and rectified promptly. A culture of open reporting must also be established so that employees feel empowered to point out unsafe conditions without fear of reprisal.

Near misses

A near miss is an event that could have caused injury or damage but did not. For example, a heavy object falling from scaffolding but landing just beside a worker, or a forklift narrowly avoiding a collision with a pedestrian in a warehouse. Although no harm occurs, the potential for a serious accident is clear.

Near misses are often dismissed as “close calls,” but they provide organisations with valuable opportunities to intervene before something worse happens. Each near miss highlights a weakness in systems, training, or environmental controls that must be corrected.

Unfortunately, many near misses go unreported because employees fear blame or because “nothing happened.” This mindset must change. The OHSA requires employers to provide *information, instruction, training, and supervision* under Section 8(2)(e), which extends to fostering awareness about the importance of reporting near misses. Encouraging near-miss reporting allows for proactive corrective measures, preventing accidents that could otherwise result in injury, downtime, or costly litigation.

An effective strategy is to create a non-punitive reporting culture, where employees are recognised and appreciated for identifying risks before harm occurs. Management should communicate openly about lessons learned from near misses and demonstrate commitment by taking visible corrective action.

Accidents

An accident is an unplanned and unexpected event that results in injury, illness, property damage, or loss. Examples include a worker breaking an arm after slipping on a wet surface, a fire outbreak due to faulty wiring, or machinery damaging expensive equipment due to malfunction.

Accidents carry both human and financial costs. Injured workers may suffer long-term consequences, families may be affected, productivity declines, and the employer faces potential legal claims, compensation costs, and reputational harm. Section 24 of the OHSA requires that certain accidents such as those resulting in serious injury, illness, or death be reported immediately to the Department of Employment and Labour. Failure to do so may result in fines, criminal, personal and vicarious liability, and further penalties during investigations.

It is essential that every accident is followed by a formal investigation to identify root causes and implement corrective measures. Investigations must not focus solely on blame but rather on system weaknesses whether they involve unsafe acts, unsafe conditions, or gaps in training and supervision.

The importance of [training and legal liability](#)

Training is the cornerstone of workplace safety. Employers have a legal and moral duty to ensure that all employees are adequately trained to perform their duties safely. This includes induction training, refresher courses, [emergency preparedness drills](#), and job-specific competency programs.

From a legal perspective, [proper training](#) demonstrates compliance with OHSA obligations. If an accident occurs and an investigation reveals that workers were not properly trained, employers may face fines, imprisonment, or civil

claims. On the other hand, if employees are found to have ignored safety instructions despite receiving adequate training, liability may shift to the employee.

Section 14(c) of the OHSA reinforces employee accountability, requiring every worker to “*carry out any lawful order given to him, and obey the health and safety rules and procedures laid down by his employer.*” This means that training not only protects workers physically but also equips them legally to meet their obligations.

The benefits of ongoing training extend beyond compliance. Training builds awareness of hazards, empowers staff to [identify and report risks](#), improves emergency response readiness, and strengthens overall safety culture. Well-trained employees are also more confident and productive, knowing they are supported by clear procedures and competent leadership.

Building a culture of prevention

The goal of OHS management is prevention. This requires more than compliance with regulations it demands leadership commitment, open communication, and active employee engagement. A true safety culture ensures that unsafe acts are corrected immediately, unsafe conditions are eliminated, near misses are reported and investigated, and accidents are treated as opportunities for learning.

Practical steps toward prevention include regular safety audits, visible management involvement in safety programs, effective reporting systems, and recognition for employees who contribute positively to workplace safety. Leaders must demonstrate through their actions that safety is a priority equal to productivity and profitability.

Unsafe acts, unsafe conditions, near misses, and accidents are not just abstract terms; they are critical indicators that help shape the safety performance of every workplace. By understanding these concepts and their legal implications under the OHSA, organisations can reduce risks, prevent harm, and ensure compliance with South African law.

Training is at the heart of this effort, bridging the gap between legal obligations and practical implementation. When employers invest in continuous training and employees take ownership of their responsibilities, the workplace becomes safer, more productive, and legally protected.

Every unsafe act corrected, every unsafe condition addressed, every near miss reported, and every accident investigated moves us closer to the goal of zero harm. Building a culture of prevention is not just about meeting legal requirements it is about valuing human life and sustaining operations for the long term.

What’s more dangerous: unsafe acts or unsafe conditions?

Research shows that unsafe acts (human behaviour) are generally more dangerous than unsafe conditions.

Here’s why:

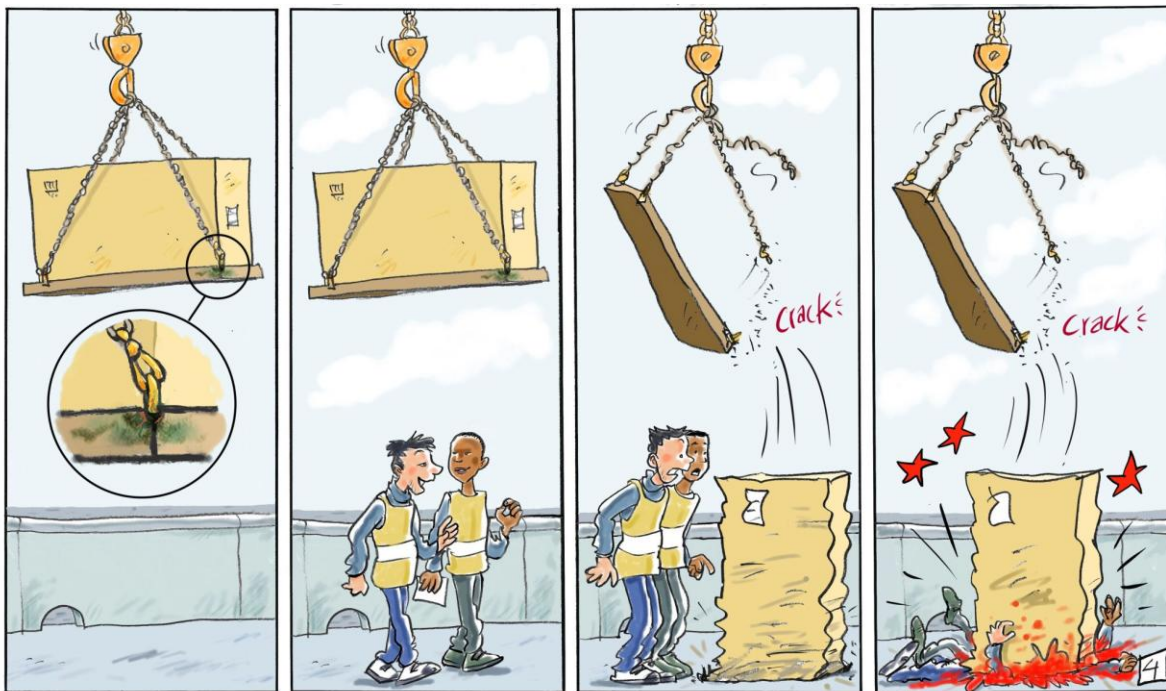
- Unsafe conditions (e.g., wet floors, broken guardrails, poor lighting) certainly create hazards.
- But unsafe acts (e.g., ignoring procedures, bypassing safety devices, not wearing PPE) are involved in up to 80–90% of workplace accidents according to global safety studies.
- Unsafe conditions on their own don’t always lead to harm—if people act safely, they can often avoid injury. But when workers take shortcuts, fail to follow procedures, or ignore risks, the likelihood of an accident escalates dramatically.
- The most dangerous situation is when unsafe acts and unsafe conditions combine—that’s when near misses turn into serious accidents.

While both are important to control, unsafe acts are statistically the bigger driver of accidents. That’s why training, supervision, and a strong safety culture are just as critical as maintaining equipment and facilities.

Every accident is the final link in a chain that begins with an unsafe act or condition.

Should you require further assistance or advice feel free to email us on info@topcompliance.co.za

Yours in Health and Safety



Unsafe condition. • Unsafe act • Near miss • Accident

				
Occupational health and safety auditing and consulting		Online safety shop		
				
Appointments, checklists and templates	First aid equipment	Signage	Legal posters	Safety Equipment

Courses offered by Top Compliance (Pty) Ltd

ONLINE ACADEMY - https://academy.topcompliance.co.za/		
Occupational Health and Safety Courses		
	Online	Onsite Excluding travel
Safety representative – Legal Liability	R980.00	R1300.00
The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability	R1250.00	R 1730.00
Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment	R735.00	R875.00
Food facility health & safety course in terms of R638	R735.00	R875.00

Basic Ladder Safety Course	R735.00	R810.00
Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses		
Fire Marshal - Basic firefighting	R735.00	R875.00
Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning	R810.00	R950.00

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Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning		

ONSITE TRAINING	
First Aid Courses:	
Level 1 - US 119567 - Perform basic life support and first aid procedures	2 days
Level 2 - US 120496 - Provide risk-based primary emergency care/first aid in the workplace	3 days
Level 3 - US 376480 - Provide first aid as an advanced first responder	3 days
Level 1 & 2 - US 119567 & 120496	3 days
Level 1, 2 & 3 - US 119567, 120496 & 376480	5 days
Level 2 & 3 - US 120496 & 376480	3 days
Child and infant CPR & choking	6 hours
Adult CPR & choking	6 hours
Adult CPR & choking and AED	1 day
Occupational Health and Safety Courses	
Safety representative – Legal Liability	1 day
The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability	1 day
Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment	1 day
Food facility health & safety course in terms of R638	6 hours
Basic Ladder Safety	6 hours
Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses	
Fire Marshal - Basic firefighting	6 hours
Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning	1 day