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Occupational Health and Safety

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Contact details:

Pat: 082 442 8521 (08h00 – 16h30)

Email: p.wessels@topcompliance.co.za

Website: <https://www.topcompliance.co.za>

Familiar Work, Hidden Risk

When routine creates complacency

Routine is necessary in every workplace. Repetition allows people to develop skill, work efficiently and perform tasks with confidence. The risk begins when familiarity changes the way hazards are perceived and controlled.

Familiarity can hide changing risk

Routine work often feels safe because it is predictable. Employees know the task, know the equipment and may have completed the same activity hundreds or thousands of times without an incident.

That experience is valuable, but repeated success can also create false reassurance. A hazard does not disappear because the task is familiar or because nothing has gone wrong before. Equipment deteriorates, work areas change, people become distracted, controls weaken and small deviations can gradually become accepted.

The danger has not necessarily changed. The way people respond to the danger may have changed.

When attention becomes automatic

During a new or unfamiliar task, employees generally pay deliberate attention to each step. With repetition, many actions become increasingly automatic. This is useful for efficiency, but it can also reduce conscious attention to individual checks and precautions.

Consider a machine operator who completes the same pre-use inspection every morning. Initially, each guard, switch, emergency stop and visible defect is deliberately checked. After months of finding everything satisfactory, the inspection may gradually become a quick visual scan. Eventually, the checklist may be completed largely from expectation rather than observation.

The checklist has not changed. The equipment may not have changed. The quality of the inspection has changed.

“Nothing has happened before” is not a control

One of the most dangerous forms of reassurance in occupational health and safety is: “We have been doing it this way for years and nothing has happened.”

The absence of an incident does not prove that a practice is safe. An employee may climb onto an unsuitable chair many times without falling. A forklift may reverse through the same pedestrian area for months without a collision. A machine operator may reach past a guard repeatedly without injury. A maintenance employee may omit an isolation verification step and successfully complete several jobs.

Each successful shortcut can unintentionally reinforce the belief that the additional precaution is unnecessary. Risk has not been removed merely because the unwanted event has not yet occurred.

When a shortcut becomes the normal method

A shortcut may begin as an exception. Perhaps the correct ladder is stored in another building. An employee uses a chair “just this once”. Nothing happens. The same thing happens the following week. Other employees see it being done. A supervisor walks past without intervening.

Eventually, using the chair is no longer seen as unusual. It has become normal practice.

Shortcuts may develop because employees are trying to complete work efficiently, because procedures are impractical, because the correct equipment is not readily available, or because supervision and workplace culture tolerate the deviation.

This is why simply telling employees to “follow the procedure” may not solve the problem. Safety professionals should also ask: Why has the shortcut become easier than the safe method?

Do not use “complacency” as the entire explanation

After an incident, it is easy to conclude that “the employee became complacent”. That may describe part of what was observed, but it should not end the investigation.

A useful investigation should look beyond the individual action and examine the conditions that made the error or deviation more likely. For example, where an employee repeatedly fails to use a required step ladder, consider:

- Where is the correct ladder stored and is it readily available?
- Is the equipment suitable for the task and in good condition?
- Is enough time allowed to obtain and use it correctly?
- Do supervisors use or tolerate the same shortcut?
- Has the employee been trained and can the safe method be demonstrated?
- Does the safe working procedure accurately reflect the task as it is performed?
- Have previous deviations been identified during inspections and followed up?
- This does not remove employee responsibility. It makes the investigation more useful. The aim is not only to identify who deviated, but to understand why the safety system allowed the deviation to become normal.

What the Occupational Health and Safety Act requires

Section 8(1) of the Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993 requires every employer, as far as is reasonably practicable, to provide and maintain a working environment that is safe and without risk to the health of employees.

Section 8(2) supports this duty through requirements that include safe systems of work, identification of hazards and precautionary measures, provision of the means to apply those precautions, information, instruction, training and supervision, enforcement of necessary health and safety measures, and suitable supervision.

Section 13 requires employees, as far as is reasonably practicable, to be made conversant with the hazards connected to their work and with the precautions that must be taken. Section 14 requires employees to take reasonable care, cooperate with the employer, obey lawful health and safety requirements and report unsafe or unhealthy situations.

The legal duty therefore extends beyond having a procedure in a file. The employer must ensure that suitable precautions are practical, communicated, supervised and implemented in the workplace.

Procedures can slowly become disconnected from reality

Sometimes the employee has changed the method. Sometimes the workplace has changed around the procedure. Equipment is moved. Production increases. Staffing changes. New machinery is introduced. Maintenance becomes more difficult. A frequently used tool is no longer readily available. A once-practical procedure becomes difficult to follow.

Workers then adapt. The danger is that these adaptations may occur gradually and informally. Nobody formally changes the HIRA, safe working procedure or checklist, yet the way the task is performed moves further away from the documented method.

Instead of asking only, “Do you follow the procedure?”, observe the task and ask: “Show me how this job is normally done.” The difference can be revealing.

Supervisors help define what is “normal”

Employees learn from written procedures, but they also learn from what management and supervisors allow. If a supervisor repeatedly sees a shortcut and says nothing, the workforce may interpret that silence as acceptance.

If production targets are praised while precautions that slow production are quietly ignored, the workplace receives another message. If inspections identify the same deviation repeatedly but corrective action never follows, the deviation gradually gains legitimacy.

Supervision should therefore look beyond whether the job was completed. It should confirm whether the required precautions were actually used and whether those precautions remain practical and effective.

Checklists are particularly vulnerable to routine

Repeated inspections can become habitual. The same person checks the same equipment every day. The same boxes are ticked. The same result appears every week. Everything is marked “OK”.

Consistently good results may be genuine, but identical results month after month should also encourage closer examination. A meaningful checklist requires the person to complete it to actually inspect the condition, recognise a deviation and know what action must follow.

A checklist completed from memory is administration. A checklist completed through meaningful observation is a control.

Look closely at experienced workers not only new employees

Safety programs understandably focus on new employees because unfamiliar work creates obvious risk. Experienced employees require attention for a different reason.

They may know the task extremely well, and that knowledge is valuable when reviewing HIRAs, procedures and controls. At the same time, years of repetition can create strong habits and make individual actions less consciously noticeable.

Use experienced employees as a source of practical information. Ask where work has changed, which steps are routinely difficult, which precautions people find impractical and where the documented procedure differs from reality. Their experience can identify both hidden risk and better solutions.

Interrupt the routine before an incident does

Safety professionals do not need to make every familiar task complicated. The objective is to introduce enough deliberate attention to confirm that important controls have not gradually deteriorated.

A practical review can include:

- observe selected routine tasks without relying only on the written procedure;

- compare the HIRA, safe working procedure and checklist with the way the task is actually performed;
- ask employees which steps are commonly shortened, skipped or changed — and why;
- pay attention to phrases such as “we always do it this way”, “it only takes a second”, “nothing has ever happened” and “everyone does it”;
- review repeated checklist results, recurring findings and informal work-arounds;
- confirm that required tools, PPE and safety equipment are readily available and suitable;
- challenge supervisors to identify deviations that have gradually become accepted;
- use incidents and near misses to examine system weaknesses rather than simply reminding employees to “be careful”;
- review procedures where employees regularly need work-arounds; and
- periodically ask experienced employees to demonstrate critical precautions rather than relying only on previous training records.

Practical workplace examples

Ladder shortcut. The safe working procedure requires a step ladder, but staff regularly stand on chairs because the ladder is kept in another building. The unsafe practice should be stopped, but management should also address access to suitable equipment so that the safe method is the easiest practical option.

Machine pre-use inspection. A daily checklist has shown “OK” for months. A supervisor observes the inspection and notices that the emergency stop is not physically tested. The inspection method, training and checklist are reviewed, and later checks are periodically verified.

Forklift route. Drivers have used the same route for years and pedestrians routinely cross it without formal separation. The absence of previous collisions has created confidence in an uncontrolled arrangement. The traffic HIRA is reviewed and reasonably practicable segregation, access and communication controls are implemented.

Maintenance isolation. An experienced employee has gradually shortened an isolation procedure because the task is considered quick and familiar. The deviation is identified during observation. The organisation stops the unsafe practice, checks whether the procedure is practical, reinforces the critical isolation steps and verifies competence.

Questions for the next safety walkabout

Which familiar task are we least likely to question because “nothing has happened before”?

Where have employees created informal work-arounds?

Which safety checks produce identical results every time?

Which procedure is technically correct but difficult to follow in practice?

What unsafe behaviour has become so familiar that people no longer notice it?

What does management or supervision tolerate that the written procedure prohibits?

Which control depends too heavily on employees remembering to be careful?

When last did we watch an experienced employee perform the task from start to finish?

The key message

Routine is not the enemy of safety. Good routines create consistency. The risk develops when repetition removes attention, shortcuts become accepted, procedures stop reflecting reality and previous success creates false reassurance.

Yesterday’s safe outcome does not guarantee that today’s method is safe. Safety professionals should look beyond obvious hazards and ask whether familiar work is slowly drifting away from the precautions originally intended to control the risk.

Do not wait for an incident to prove that a routine action has become unsafe. Observe the work. Question the familiar. Challenge accepted shortcuts. Make the safe method the practical method.

How Top Compliance can assist

Top Compliance assists organisations with occupational health and safety audits, HIRAs, safe working procedures, workplace inspections, corrective-action guidance, committee support, emergency planning and practical training for health and safety representatives, managers and employees.

Legal references and good-practice sources

Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993, particularly sections 8, 13 and 14. South African Government:
<https://www.gov.za/documents/occupational-health-and-safety-act>

UK Health and Safety Executive, Human factors: Managing human failures. Used as international good-practice guidance on slips, lapses, mistakes and violations; it is not South African legislation.
<https://www.hse.gov.uk/humanfactors/topics/humanfail.htm>

This newsletter provides general occupational health and safety guidance. It is not a substitute for legal advice or a site-specific assessment. It should be applied together with the Occupational Health and Safety Act, applicable regulations and incorporated standards, manufacturer requirements, local requirements and the workplace's site-specific risk assessments and procedures.

For more information, please contact us on info@topcompliance.co.za

Yours in Health and Safety

 A hand holding a magnifying glass over the text 'Safety Auditing'. To the right, a list of terms: SAFETY & HEALTH, BEST PRACTICE, RESPONSIBILITY, AWARENESS, COMPLIANCE, STANDARDS, COMMITTEE. To the left, a list of terms: AUDIT, POLICY, GUIDELINES, REGULATION.		 A red shopping cart icon next to the text 'SHOP ONLINE' with a mouse cursor arrow pointing at it.		
Occupational health and safety auditing and consulting		Online safety shop		
 A green circle containing a white icon of two overlapping documents.	 A blue circle containing a white icon of a stethoscope and a first aid kit.	 A red circle containing a white icon of a downward-pointing arrow.	 A purple circle containing a white icon of a book with a magnifying glass over it.	 A red circle containing a white icon of safety gear: a hard hat, safety glasses, and gloves.
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	R875.00
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
First aid		
Level 1 - US 119567 - Perform basic life support and first aid procedures – THEORY MODULE	R400.00	-

ONLINE ACADEMY - https://academy.topcompliance.co.za/		
Occupational Health and Safety Courses		
Safety representative – Legal Liability		
The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability		
Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment		
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Basic Ladder Safety Course		
Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses		
Fire Marshal - Basic firefighting		
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