



CHALLENGING
TIMES LIKE THESE
ARE TIMES FOR
INNOVATION, NOT
HIBERNATION.

A CALL TO ACTION

Virtual communication can be the savior of safety efforts in a world where distance equates to safety.

As soon as a state of national emergency was declared, many organizations put their safety initiatives on hold. We have known for decades that distractions can cause accidental injuries. A pandemic and government response to it are major distractions. Workers are worried about their jobs, their companies, their families and even about toilet paper. These distractions already are causing an uptick in injury rates in some industries.

For the past several years, new technologies have been developed and older technologies have come down in price and many of these can be utilized to further safety efforts. Many of them are designed to enhance worker performance, but others are designed to facilitate communication between individuals. Safety professionals have been evolving their efforts toward adopting these technologies for several years now. It is time to turn this evolution into a revolution.

With the realities of limited travel, limited meeting size and social distancing, it is time to put these technologies in place to overcome these limitations. Never in the history of the world have we had such powerful and plentiful ways to communicate. Expensive business travel has begun to be replaced by teleconferencing, and teleconferencing has evolved into something less expensive almost anyone with a personal computer can do. While we cannot get 10 people physically together in a location, we can get almost any number of people together online. Even our most threatening diseases have not mutated to where they can be contagious over the Internet.

Many universities have gone partially or entirely to online courses. This movement in education has led to innovations in interactive technologies that lend themselves to training as well as education. Several past clients had me perform classroom training followed by webinars or videos. As technology and projects progressed, we reduced the classroom time and increased the online portions of the training. Now, much of what we do in the United States and almost all of what we do overseas is delivered via the Internet.

Following are some suggestions of how to use technologies to overcome the current situation.

TURN SAFETY MEETINGS VIRTUAL

If every employee has a workstation or office with a computer, this is almost effortless. Sim-



ply join up on a website such as GoToMeeting and take care of business with two-way communication. If this is not the case, consider using smartphones or tablets to connect people without making physical contact. In some cases, sites have personnel who can still meet and are only limiting outside visitors.

Many organizations already have multi-site conference calls or e-meetings to share safety data and best practices. Look at the technologies that allow you to communicate without close proximity.

DELIVER NEEDED SAFETY TRAINING VIRTUALLY

Computer-based training (CBT) already is widely used for OSHA-required refresher training. Microlearning is a platform gaining popularity for safety training that delivers small nuggets of information to workers through personal communication equipment such as smartphones. This type of training has a number of advantages over classroom training or computer-based training in that it is short and memorable and can be used again and again as needed. Many of the microlearning systems can also track use and measure retention.

CONDUCT SAFETY CULTURE ASSESSMENTS VIRTUALLY

Perception surveys can be delivered online using any of several different programs almost cheaper than administering a pencil-and-paper survey and compiling the data. Perception surveys do not measure everything needed for a complete assessment and should be supplemented with interviews with a sample of those

completing the surveys. This historically has been accomplished in focus group interviews, but also can be done via telephone or chat rooms. Focus group interviews often included as many workers as possible but, utilizing good statistics, a smaller group can be interviewed and comprise a statistically significant representative cross-sample of the entire culture.

Additionally, individual phone or Internet interviews are less of an interruption to the workflow of the business or organization. The results of the assessment can then be shared and discussed via the Internet without the need for a formal, in-person meeting.

UTILIZE SAFETY CONSULTANTS AT A DISTANCE

You should utilize safety consultants for their expertise, not their presence. Consulting services include transfer of information, giving specific advice, problem-solving, training and other sharing such as best practices and benchmarking. All of these can be done through virtual communication channels as well as face-to-face.

In years past, most consulting was done in person, but follow-up services began to be delivered via media to minimize travel costs. Over time, even the initial consulting was done more and more via media which simplified contracts and helped to lower the cost of consulting projects.

Support for leaders and safety team members is much more

accessible when it does not have to wait for the next consultant visit. Workshops that were once held at various locations around the world are now delivered as webinars, which has greatly reduced the cost of sending multiple employees to receive training or get information offered at such events.

The advent of Industry 4.0 and safety's response to it have already started us on a journey of adopting new technologies. The current situation has increased the urgency of hastening that journey to meet more pressing challenges than continuous improvement. The changeover to new technologies can be the savior of safety efforts in a world where distance equates to safety.

Many of our greatest achievements have come in times of war and natural disasters. Humans have survived through meeting the challenges of life on our planet and we are a tough and clever bunch. Safety professionals should not take a position of wait-and-see to continue their efforts. Challenging times like these are times for innovation, not hibernation. **EHS**

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