

Is the Term "Accident" Still Acceptable?

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Safety, like all other fields of endeavor, has its own terminology. In science, terminology is critical to ensure that everyone is talking about precisely the same thing. Shared terminology can align thinking and foster common understanding. When trying to solve problems or expand knowledge, defined terminology can provide the same starting place from which progress is made. In short, terminology can get everyone on the same page.

One of the most common terms in safety has been under attack for the past two decades. This is the term "accident." The attackers have suggested that the term implies that the event was inevitable and unstoppable; that accidents are events over which humans have no control. Some also have implied that a true accident is an "act of God" and therefore it is useless to try to place blame or determine causation. Why attempt to control something that is uncontrollable and beyond human manipulation?

The term means none of these things. According to the dictionary, "accident" is defined as "an unfortunate event that occurs unintentionally and usually results in harm, injury, damage or loss." The term "unintentionally" is the heart of the concept behind accidents. If a worker intentionally injures himself or herself, it is not an accident; accidents are things that occur in spite of, and counter to, our intentions. However, this does not mean or imply that such events are beyond our control. It simply points out the weakness in our intentions and our ability to accurately forecast and control the outcomes of our actions. This concept is central to safety efforts. How can we better project and predict the safety implications of our choices and actions?

The most common alternate terms are "incident" and "event." While both are perfectly acceptable terms, neither states nor strongly implies the "unintentional" element the way the term "accident" does. These terms also tend to facilitate blame as one may deliberately, maliciously or negligently cause an incident or event. The terms seem to assume that the perpetrator understood the inevitable or potential outcome of their actions and proceeded anyway.

Accidents, on the other hand, are not necessarily due to negligence or ill intent. They can be caused by well-intentioned individuals who simply miscalculate or fail to identify the potential outcomes of their actions. They also can be caused by honest mistakes, the kind that good workers occasionally make. The term "accident" tends to imply a lack of ill intent and suggests that causal actions may have been misguided rather than malicious. Of course, accidental injuries can result from either deliberate or undeliberate actions, but the term seems to separate these better than alternative terminology. It could be argued that a deliberate malicious act is no accident, whereas a well-intentioned mistake is.

Probability

One factor that divides deliberate from undeliberate actions resulting in accidental injuries is probability. Most rules and procedures are designed to impact high-probability accidents and accidents with high potential severity. This is why many organizations whose traditional safety programs are maturing find their remaining accidents fall into lower-probability categories. It is common for workers to fail to recognize or to underestimate low-probability risks. If a worker has taken that risk many times with no injury, it seems logical to assume that the outcome will remain constant during future occurrences. Analysis of accident data regularly indicates that low-probability risks account for the majority of industrial accidents. So, if a worker is regularly taking a low-probability risk that is not an obvious danger based on past experience and gets injured, is it reasonable to call this event an accident?

Another factor impacting whether risks are deliberate or undeliberate is that of compliance. Safety behaviors that become regulations, rules or procedures no longer are discretionary. Workers must follow these directives as a condition of employment. Failure to do so is no longer a matter of choice, it now is a violation. Even unintentional violations are not acceptable and indicate a degree of carelessness, disregard or disrespect. Not all violations result in injuries, but the ones that do legitimately could be labeled as other than purely accidental.

However, many safety-related behaviors are not addressed by regulations, rules or procedures. Such precautionary measures still are taken or not taken at the discretion of the worker. If a worker is following all the required safety precautions but failing to go above and beyond them, it seems reasonable that injuries they sustain legitimately could be labeled as unintentional or accidental.

Certainly, any intentional, flagrant or repeated risk-taking can be viewed as a choice made by the worker. But inadvertent failure to take unrequired safety measures or foresee risks that have not been identified by the organization and addressed through rules and procedures does not constitute deliberate risk-taking. Just as organizations continue to learn of risks and address conditions based on near misses and behavioral observations, workers expand their knowledge of risks and add to their own safety practices through experience. Careful use of the term "accidental" seems to accurately describe such learning and separates deliberate risk-taking from inadvertent choices based on a lack of individual or organizational knowledge and risk management.

The term "accident" has been in common use for a long time. Like any other term, it can be used or misused. It can and has been used in safety to describe, to blame or to dodge blame. When used well, it seems to add to – rather than detract from – safety-improvement efforts. It separates what we know from what we are still learning. It separates true blame from well-intentioned efforts gone wrong. It helps to determine if we need to punish or share new knowledge.

Ultimately, the choice of terminology belongs to the users. If the term "accident" causes you heartburn, use another term. Just be aware that what you may be gaining in terms of definition, you might be losing in terms of an important implication that could improve performance as well as safety culture.



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