

Incident Reports Improve Safety

The last thing a busy administrator wants is more paperwork but when it comes to safety, a standard incident/accident investigation report might be the most indispensable piece of red tape on a manager's desk. Having a standard form to investigate incidents and accidents can not only help you evaluate the effectiveness of your safety program, it might even lead to its improvement. Quantifying the types of injuries which occur, along with the hazardous conditions, unsafe acts, and contributing factors which caused them will identify the equipment, policy and program changes you need to avoid even more onerous paperwork such as worker's compensation claims and legal statements.

Every safety incident, whether it is a near-miss or an actual injury, is first and foremost a unique occurrence which happened to a unique individual or group of individuals. A good form will first have a section which allows the specific details of the incident to be recorded for future reference when dealing with injury claims. A really good form will be designed for easy "sanitation" – removal of identifying names and identifying features so that the form can be reviewed by your safety committee and others without compromising employee privacy.

After the specifics have been dealt with, the form should start categorizing the incident for later pattern analysis. Injury types, hazardous conditions, unsafe acts and contributing factors can easily be categorized and then quantified over time to identify strengths and weaknesses in a safety program. The form should allow all contributing factors that apply to be selected. In most cases more than one will apply. For example, a person may have been horsing around as well as failing to lock/block their machine, and both actions contributed to the incident. OSHA guidelines and worker's comp codes are often a good place to start when first deciding what categories to put under each heading. Over time you will be able to modify the categories to reflect the types of incidents which occur most frequently in your workplace.

Typical injury types include:

- Soft tissue injuries (sprains, strains, etc.)
- Eye injuries
- Burns
- Vehicle related injuries
- Slips, trips, and falls
- Cuts, bruises and abrasions
- Chemical exposures
- Loss of body parts
- None (incident was a near miss)
- Other (add a space to describe)



Hazardous conditions are dangers which exist in the area surrounding the incident, which were out of the control of the people involved, and which contributed to the incident:

- Defective materials and equipment
- Slippery conditions and poor footing
- Personal protective gear unavailable
- Inadequate clearance
- Inadequate lifting aids
- Electrical hazards
- Natural hazards
- Improper design or construction
- Improper or inadequate clothing
- Inability to secure/warn or lock/block
- Inadequate ventilation
- Hazardous methods or procedures
- Chemical hazards
- Traffic hazards
- Other (add a space to describe)

Unsafe acts are those actions by the employee(s) which contributed to the incident. They differ from hazardous conditions in that they are within the employee(s) control.

- Improper lifting
- Failure to shut-off or unplug equipment
- Improper use of equipment
- Improper use of body parts
- Inattention to footing or surroundings
- Failure to use personal protective equipment
- Horseplay
- Failure to secure/warn or lock/block
- Using hands instead of tools (sub-

category of improper use of body parts but common enough to rate its own category)

- Altering or disabling safety mechanisms
- Unsafe speed
- Unsafe posture
- Unsafe mixing of materials
- Unsafe placement of equipment or materials
- Standing beneath suspended loads
- Driving errors
- Other (add a space to describe)

Other contributing factors are usually programmatic influences under the control of supervisors and managers:

- Lack of policy or procedures
- Lack of hazard identification in the workplace
- Insufficient employee training
- Inadequate supervision
- Unrealistic schedules
- No enforcement of safety rules
- Failure to provide personal protective equipment
- Insufficient supervisor training
- Inadequate workplace inspection
- Poor process design

One area which is often overlooked when reviewing safety incidents is recording the things which were done correctly which mitigated the severity of the incident. Design your form so that it also captures the conditions, actions and contributing factors which were done correctly if you wish to document the strengths of your program as well as its weaknesses.

Document the action you take as a result of this incident. Chances are that someone took immediate action at the time of the incident to prevent further injury. Don't stop there. Identify specific actions you will take to prevent future incidents of this type and then follow through. Once a hazard has been identified the best way to eliminate it is to engineer it out if possible. If not, then policies, procedures, protective equipment, and education are your other options. Use your safety committee to review incidents regularly and make sure that preventative actions you have identified are completed.

Last but not least, remember that you

want to encourage incident reports in order to prevent accidents in the first place. If employees are reluctant or afraid to report near misses, then it will take an injury for you to get any

information about the hazards present in your workplace. Reward people for bringing hazards to your attention. It might mean you do a little bit more paperwork now, but it also might save

you from the really nasty paperwork later.

— Julie Quinn
Minnesota Weights and Measures Division