

Accident/Incident Investigation

The Following information is adapted from
the *National Safety Council* Fact Sheet:
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When do you conduct an investigation?

- All incidents, whether a near miss or an actual injury-related event, should be investigated.
- Near miss reporting and investigation allow you to identify and control hazards before they cause a more serious incident.
- Accident/incident investigations are a tool for uncovering hazards that either were missed earlier or have managed to slip out of the controls planned for them.
- It is useful only when done with the aim of discovering every contributing factor to the accident/incident to "foolproof" the condition and/or activity and prevent future occurrences.
- In other words, your objective is to identify root causes, not to primarily set blame.

Accident/Incident Investigation

DEFINITIONS

ACCIDENT - The National Safety Council defines an accident as an undesired event that results in personal injury or property damage.

INCIDENT - An incident is an unplanned, undesired event that adversely affects completion of a task.

NEAR MISS - Near misses describe incidents where no property was damaged and no personal injury sustained, but where, given a slight shift in time or position, damage and/or injury easily could have occurred.

Accident/Incident Investigation

Who should investigate?

The usual investigator for all incidents is the **supervisor in charge of the involved area and/or activity**. Accident investigations represent a **good way to involve employees** in safety and health. **Employee involvement** will not only give you additional expertise and insight, but in the eyes of the workers, **will lend credibility to the results**. Employee involvement also **benefits the involved employees** by **educating them** on potential hazards, and the experience usually makes them **believers** in the importance of safety, thus **strengthening the safety culture** of the organization. The **safety department** or the person in charge of safety and health **should participate in the investigation or review** the investigative findings and recommendations. Many companies use a team or a subcommittee or the **joint employee-management committee to investigate incidents** involving serious injury or extensive property damage.

Accident/Incident Investigation

Training for incident investigation

- No one should investigate incidents without appropriate accident investigation training.
- Many safety and health consultants and professional organizations provide this type of training.
- Before committing resources to training, you might want to check the course contents against the information found in the National Safety Council's pamphlet, "Accident Investigation ... A New Approach."

Accident/Incident Investigation

- **The investigative report should answer six key questions**

Six key questions should be answered:

- who, what, when, where, why, and how.
- Fact should be distinguished from opinion, and both should be presented carefully and clearly.
- The report should include thorough interviews with everyone with any knowledge of the incident.
- A good investigation is likely to reveal several contributing factors, and it probably will recommend several preventive actions.

Accident/Incident Investigation

Avoid the trap of laying sole blame on the injured employee.

- Even if injured workers openly blame themselves for making a mistake or not following prescribed procedures, the accident investigator must not be satisfied that all contributing causes have been identified.
- The error made by the employee may not be even the most important contributing cause.
- The employee who has not followed prescribed procedures may have been encouraged directly or indirectly by a supervisor or production quotas to "cut corners."
- The prescribed procedures may not be practical, or even safe, in the eyes of the employee (s).
- Sometimes where elaborate and difficult procedures are required, engineering redesign might be a better answer. In such cases, management errors -- not employee error -- may be the most important contributing causes.

Accident/Incident Investigation

- All supervisors and others who investigate incidents should be held accountable for describing causes carefully and clearly.
- When reviewing accident investigation reports, the safety department or in-house safety expert should be on the lookout for catch-phrases, for example, "Employee did not plan job properly."
- While such a statement may suggest an underlying problem with this worker, it is not conducive to identifying all possible causes, preventions, and controls.
- Certainly, it is too late to plan a job when the employee is about to do it. Further, it is unlikely that safe work will always result when each employee is expected to plan procedures alone.

Accident/Incident Investigation

Implications of accident investigations

- Recommended preventive actions should make it very difficult, if not impossible, for the incident to recur.
- The investigative report should list all the ways to "foolproof" the condition or activity.
- Considerations of cost or engineering should not enter at this stage.
- The primary purpose of accident investigations is to prevent future occurrences.
- Beyond this immediate purpose, the information obtained through the investigation should be used to update and revise the inventory of hazards, and/or the program for hazard prevention and control.
- For example, the Job Safety Analysis should be revised and employees retrained to the extent that it fully reflects the recommendations made by an incident report.
- Implications from the root causes of the accident need to be analyzed for their impact on all other operations and procedures.

Accident/Incident Investigation



Accident/Incident Investigation

