

CONNER STRONG & BUCKELEW

UTILITY & TRANSPORTATION CONTRACTORS ASSOCIATION
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RISKINSIGHTS

SAFETY SOLUTIONS FOR YOUR BUSINESS

CONDUCTING WORKPLACE HEALTH AND SAFETY INCIDENT INVESTIGATIONS

When workplace health and safety incidents happen, it's important to respond appropriately—that's where incident investigations can help. Conducting an investigation allows employers to identify potential health and safety failings that led to the incident and make necessary workplace adjustments to help prevent future incidents. Review this guidance for more information on what workplace health and safety incidents are, the incident investigation process and the importance of having an effective investigation policy.

DEFINING WORKPLACE HEALTH AND SAFETY INCIDENTS

Put simply, workplace health and safety incidents are defined by either of the following two scenarios:

- A workplace condition or event resulted in an illness, injury, fatality or property damage to an employee or member of the public.
- A workplace condition or event resulted in a "near miss"—which means that no illness, injury, fatality or property damage took place, but likely could have.

Regardless of severity or circumstance, it's vital to investigate every incident. After all, no matter how small or seemingly minor the incident was, taking the time to investigate what happened and implement workplace health and safety improvements can make all the difference in preventing further (and potentially more severe) incidents down the line.

THE INCIDENT INVESTIGATION PROCESS

Incident investigations should follow a systems approach—meaning that the cause(s) of the incident should be traced back to failures within workplace health and safety programs or procedures rather than the actions or behavior(s) of the employee(s) involved.

In other words, solely attributing the incident to human error or placing all of the blame on the employee(s) involved will prevent your organization from fully understanding the underlying cause(s) of the incident and making necessary workplace adjustments or changes to avoid future incidents.

In terms of who is responsible for carrying out the investigation, this depends on the nature of the incident and unique characteristics of your workplace. However, organizations typically designate immediate supervisors to take on this responsibility because they will most likely have the best understanding of the area, task and any employee(s) involved in the incident. Immediate supervisors will also likely be in charge of enforcing any workplace health and safety adjustments that arise from the incident.

Nevertheless, immediate supervisors should also seek support from any employee(s) involved, senior leadership, safety managers, coordinators, workplace safety committee and the human resources department throughout the investigation process to ensure a well-rounded team effort. In any case, workplace health and safety incident investigations should follow this five-step process:

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Preserve and document the scene.
First, make sure that anyone involved in the incident has received or is currently receiving proper care—especially if a serious injury took place. Then, it's crucial to preserve the scene of the incident as much as possible. This might require halting production or temporarily relocating any employees near the incident area. From there, be sure to document any relevant information regarding the incident—including witnesses (e.g., someone who saw the affected person before the incident, someone who does the same job or tasks as the affected person and the first person on the scene after the incident took place), any workplace equipment involved and the environmental conditions of the scene. Try to take photos of the scene as well.

Collect important information.
Next, you will want to collect the following valuable information:

- Witness accounts of what happened, making sure to gather these accounts as soon as possible to ensure the most accurate, detailed information
- Equipment manuals and maintenance records
- Employee training documentation
- Workplace inspections or other follow-up documentation
- Workplace health and safety policies and procedures
- Any other relevant documents related to the incident

Determine the root cause(s).
By analyzing valuable information regarding the incident, you should be able to identify the root cause(s). Root causes are the underlying issues or failures that lead to workplace incidents. Such causes differ from immediate causes, which are the more direct, obvious factors that result in workplace incidents. Root causes do not focus on human error or employee behaviors, but rather on issues such as management concerns, poor workplace designs or operational failings.

Implement corrective measures.
After analyzing and understanding the root cause(s) of the incident, it's finally time to implement workplace adjustments to help prevent future incidents—also known as corrective measures. These measures should be specific, realistic and clearly communicated, as well as help reduce overall workplace risks. Be sure to consult incident documentation and employees across departments to help determine effective corrective measures.

Conduct routine follow-ups.
Once you have implemented corrective measures, it's important to conduct routine follow-ups with supervisors and employees to evaluate the effectiveness of these measures. Make additional workplace adjustments as needed.

THE IMPORTANCE OF AN INVESTIGATION POLICY

In order to ensure a smooth workplace health and safety incident investigation process, it's important to have an investigation policy in place. Implementing an investigation policy provides your employees with written, easy-to-follow guidelines regarding the investigation process, including:

- How and when to report an incident
- Who to notify regarding the incident
- Who will conduct the investigation and what training is necessary to do so
- The time frame for completing an investigation
- Who is responsible for implementing and enforcing corrective measures following an incident

Your investigation policy should encourage collaboration between employees, management and various departments to identify the root cause of the incident and implement adequate corrective measures in a timely manner. Be sure to routinely review your investigation policy for effectiveness and make updates as needed.

For additional workplace health and safety resources, contact us today.

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