

INVESTIGATING INCIDENTS: WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY AND HOW



Incident Investigation

Incidents happen in the workplace every day for any number of reasons. People miscalculate procedures, equipment fails, supplies are faulty or the environment changes in unexpected ways. These incidents cause injuries and illnesses, property damages, financial loss and sometimes death. In 2009, more than 3 million workplace injuries and illnesses were reported¹, keeping workers off the job for almost 965,000 days² while they recuperated. The most disabling of these injuries and illnesses collectively cost more than one billion dollars a week in workers compensation.³

Even when incidents don't result in injury or property damage, they are disruptive for workers and operations. They may also be indicators of a bigger problem waiting to happen. Protecting employees from seemingly arbitrary incidents should be a top priority. Conducting an incident investigation is one of the most effective ways to do so.

What is Incident Investigation?

Incident investigation is a tool for identifying hazards in the workplace and exploring ways to control them. Investigations are carried out after incidents or near misses occur. They may be conducted to fulfill legal requirements, process workers compensation claims, calculate the financial cost of an incident or determine compliance with safety regulations.⁴

But, the primary reason for conducting an investigation is to learn as much as possible about why the incident occurred, in order to prevent future harm. It's a tool for uncovering every possible contributing factor of an incident, not simply the obvious ones, to zero in on its root cause. The root cause is the base, underlying reason an incident occurred—the source of origin that, if removed, would have prevented the incident. A root cause might be a hazard that was missed in earlier analyses, or a hazard that resulted from failed controls. More than one root cause is possible.

Investigating Incidents: Who, What, When, Where, Why and How

Incident investigations frequently use who, what, when, where, why and how questions to guide the findings. Investigators interview everyone who has knowledge of the incident, and carefully separate fact from opinion. Once hazards are pinpointed, the incident investigation is then used to identify the actions needed to address the problem. A good investigation will present findings clearly and accurately, and will usually include several specific recommendations. The key to a successful incident investigation is to focus on prevention as the primary objective, not assigning blame. Initial reports should list all possible factors without pointing fingers, and list all possible ways to reduce or remove the hazard without regard to cost or engineering.

Why You Need to Conduct Incident Investigations

Conducting a thorough incident investigation can be an effective way to stop incidents and near misses from happening. By identifying and addressing root causes, companies can prevent the same hazards from causing further, possibly fatal, incidents. It also helps maintain a safe workplace. The investigation's findings may be used to strengthen current injury prevention programs and guide future employee training. Bottom line: It helps save lives.

This is true no matter the size or scope of the incident. A recent study found that following up on near miss incidents led to fewer OSHA-recordable injuries.⁵ Giving attention to near misses, as well as incidents both large and small, is a valuable resource for injury prevention and intervention.

Incident investigation provides a good way to involve employees in safety and health. OSHA notes

that workers inject additional expertise and insight to the investigation, as well as lend credibility to the final report. Involving employees in the process educates them about potential workplace hazards, reinforces the importance of safety and gives a boost to a company's safety culture.



However, OSHA warns that no one should investigate incidents or near misses without first receiving appropriate training in incident investigation.⁶ Conducting a proper investigation requires a special skill set. Investigators need to be able to ask questions and examine evidence in ways that will uncover all contributing factors, identify root causes, present their findings clearly and in an unbiased manner, and make recommendations that are specific. Taking the time to train employees in these skills will result in a more successful investigation.

Visit www.training.dupont.com to preview DuPont Sustainable Solutions' *Incident Investigation Training Series* available on DVD or as an interactive online course.

Citations

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