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How to Get Human Resource and Safety Policies Right the First Time

Creating a safe and healthy workplace for employees.

Creating a safe workplace has become one of a company's highest priorities since the COVID-19 pandemic was declared a year ago. Company owners, executives, human resource (HR) professionals, and safety experts have worked together to keep workers safe and production rolling despite uncertain business and staffing concerns. While the pandemic has taught everyone more than they ever thought possible about viral contagion, it has also underscored the importance of linking HR and safety initiatives to

create a cohesive plan for all processes — not just those designed to fight viral spread.

Small and mid-sized manufacturers often find that managers juggle multiple roles within a facility. It is common for a senior staff member to be both the HR manager and the safety director. The upside of having one person in the role is that the integration can be seamless. If, however, a company is fortunate enough to have more than one person covering these positions, they should work together closely to develop processes and policies

that create a safe environment for all. Safety managers' technical expertise and HR managers' policy expertise are perfectly complemented for developing a plan that creates a culture of safety and trust.

Great Communication Still Matters

The first step to creating an integrated HR and safety policy is clear messaging. Make sure the company has written policies to support all the HR/safety initiatives, some of which will be discussed in this article. These policies should appear in the employee handbook and operational manuals where appropriate. If the employee handbook is available through an employee online portal, ensure that a link to the updated policies is emailed or texted to all employees, and that a notice of the changes is posted in a conspicuous location (e.g., the break room bulletin board).

In addition to written policies, face-to-face communication between managers and staff about the new policies will be a key strategy for success. Although pandemic protocols may prohibit all employees from gathering in one place to hear about the initiatives, senior managers can meet with each department if personal distancing requirements can be met. Ideally, company executives, HR and safety managers, and supervisors will emphasize the importance of the new initiatives and explain the reasoning for adopting them. Direct communication will also allow managers to answer questions, which builds trust and encourages buy-in from the staff. Building a safety culture starts with HR and environmental, health, and safety (EHS) professionals, but requires the engagement of all employees for success.

Another overlooked component to creating successful HR/safety policies is including a statement in the company's core values that supports these initiatives. Companies should identify employee health and safety as one of their core values and should also, if applicable,

acknowledge the diversity of their workforces, and that they value the different cultures the employees represent. Clothing, hair, food, and other cultural traditions can be impacted by company policies, and cannot always be preserved due to overriding safety concerns or other restrictions. In these instances, it is helpful for employees to know through both policy and practice that cultural traditions are respected whenever possible.

COVID-19 Protocols

Never before have HR and safety managers worked so closely together to protect the health and safety of their coworkers. Throughout the pandemic, the need to be nimble in what steps must be taken to reduce virus exposure has created a partnership and a synergy for HR and safety policies and procedures. The combined efforts of HR and safety managers to provide screening, face coverings, physical distancing, cleaning, and other protocols have largely protected the workforce in printing and manufacturing.

As the vaccine rollout progresses, HR and safety managers should work together to provide support to employees who want to get the

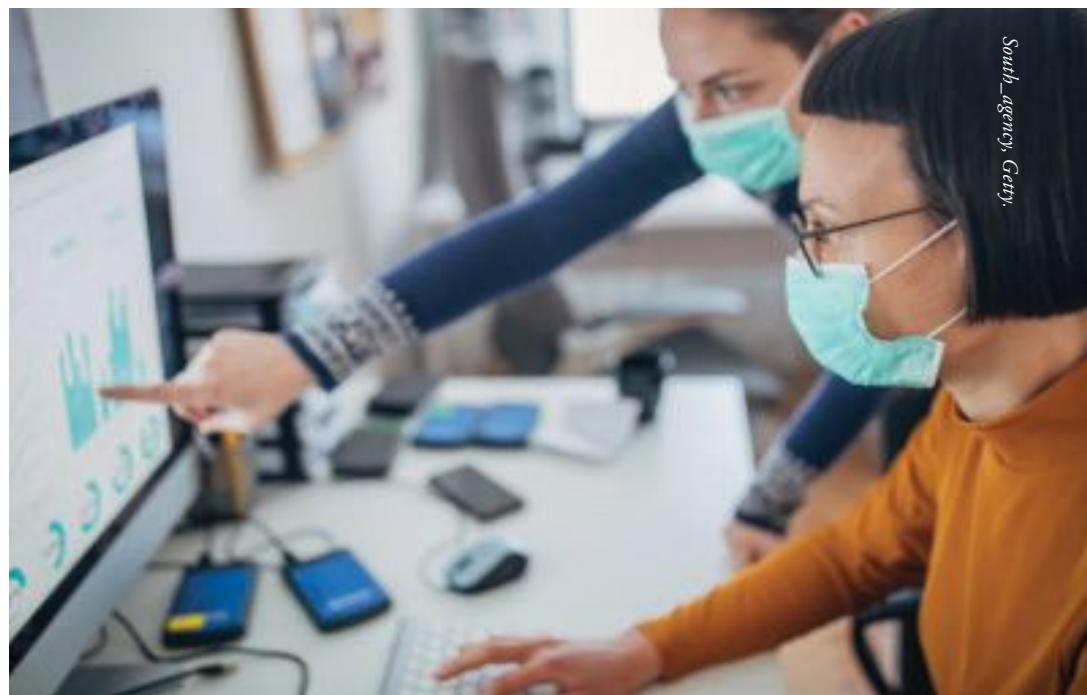
vaccine by making sure they have facts, not conjecture, about vaccination benefits and risks. In addition, finding ways to provide time off to be vaccinated during work hours may make access easier to workers, which may result in more vaccinations and, consequently, reduced risk inside the facility.

Dress Code Policies

From the first day on the job, HR and safety goals overlap for how an employee should be dressed. Personal protective equipment and dress code policies should align to whatever degree possible to keep people safe and to be respectful of culture, even if cultural norms are superseded by safety concerns. For instance, dangling and loose clothing, hair, and jewelry should never be worn around printing equipment.

Nevertheless, those rules may conflict with the typical apparel and traditions in various cultures. Explaining with sensitivity why a sari, for example, won't work near a printing press is better than just telling someone not to wear the sari. Acknowledge and be respectful of cultural norms to avoid discrimination claims while still putting safety requirements first. ▶

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Job Descriptions

Creating job descriptions also requires knowing what standards and qualifications are essential to the position. Tasks like being able to lift heavy objects, see color distinctions, or stand for long periods of time are part of making sure employees are able to do the jobs for which they are hired. HR will need to work with position managers and safety managers to create job descriptions that reflect these essential elements.

Accommodation

Policies that address employee medical conditions — some that rise to the level of a disability — are another area where HR and safety managers both need to be involved. HR is tasked with making sure the company protects employees' rights, and involving safety managers will make sure that accommodation for medical conditions does not compromise safety procedures.

For instance, an employee that is experiencing blurred vision cannot be driving a powered vehicle. So, if that employee drives a lift truck, a properly written job description will make it clear that the driver will need to be replaced, even if only temporarily, to ensure the safety of the employee and all workers. HR will then work with production and safety managers to try to place the employee in a role where he or she can perform a job despite having blurred vision.

Another accommodation that will benefit from a cohesive HR/safety approach is managing prescription drug and medical marijuana use. Even if these drugs are not taken at work, their effects may carry over to work hours and represent potential hazards. An employee that is impaired from prescription or legal drug use cannot be working around machinery or anywhere that could result in serious harm or even death.

If the company has cultivated a culture of safety and trust, employees are more likely to come forward and have a dialogue about a drug they have been prescribed and determine if they can continue working and how to do so safely.

Whether they involve asking an employee to take time away from work, or accommodating employees who are possibly disabled, these solutions require collaboration between HR and EHS departments. Having a policy and process in place before these situations arise makes managing them much easier in the moment.

Ergonomics

As employees age, physical changes may make work more challenging and less safe for them. HR/safety measures may help workers maintain their ability to perform their essential job functions through minor changes in their work environment.

As the vaccine rollout progresses, HR and safety managers should work together to provide support to employees who want to get the vaccine by making sure they have facts, not conjecture, about vaccination benefits and risks.

For instance, aging employees may have decreased visual acuity. This can raise safety concerns, however, a simple change to brighter lighting may reduce risk. Another example is that grip strength often diminishes with age, but switching to power grips instead of pinch grips may be enough to keep people safe and in their jobs.

It is a common requirement in manufacturing facilities that employees stand throughout their shift. Providing cushioned mats or standing stools may help employees with standing challenges. Creating a culture of safety and trust will open the door so that aging employees will talk to HR and safety managers about ways to modify their job environments to keep them safe.

Emergency Action Plans

Writing an emergency action plan (EAP) is another opportunity for HR and EHS integration that can help stabilize production during a crisis. COVID-19 is certainly an example of how HR and safety managers working together can provide a comprehensive approach to protecting employees' health and safety by combining their knowledge of the variables that are unique to their facility. These include:

- location of employees
- location of machinery
- employee access to ingress and egress
- employees that may require assistance in an emergency
- distance from emergency responders
- building ventilation
- structural characteristics

- all aspects of employee training to respond in a crisis

EAPs have a much broader application than COVID-19, of course, and companies use alarm and warning systems for emergencies. HR will be able to work with safety managers to make sure all employees will be alerted by these warning systems. For instance, if a tornado requires employees to take cover, a deaf employee may need a visual signal, rather than an auditory alarm, to be alerted. Or, if an employee who uses a wheelchair cannot take cover in a basement because of the inability to use the stairs, having a plan to help the employee to safety will be an important aspect of the EAP.

Training

Sometimes, the HR and EHS integration usefulness comes down to efficiency. Training schedules are examples of how knowledge of the HR and EHS training requirements can avoid staffing issues and production delays resulting from poor scheduling. For instance, safety training related to powered industrial trucks and lockout and tag-out needs to be coordinated with anti-harassment and anti-discrimination training. By using scheduling software, or simply creating a spreadsheet that includes each type of training and the employees to be trained, departments will be informed through HR's knowledge of employee shift schedules.

Collaboration between HR and EHS to create integrated, comprehensive policies that address HR and EHS issues will help companies

manage risk and should reduce injury, avoid discrimination, and maintain compliance with state and federal regulations.

Safety Incentive Programs

Acknowledging employees who have a record of safety in the workplace is tricky because these programs cannot act as a disincentive for coworkers to report unsafe activities, injuries, or illnesses. So, incentive programs must be paired with a very clear procedure for employees to report work-related accidents, illnesses, and injuries, as well as unsafe conditions. HR and safety managers can work together to develop a straightforward reporting procedure, as well as an incentive program that does not discourage reporting.

Taking a strategic approach to developing a safe workplace requires planning and collaboration between HR and safety managers, with support from senior management. When prepared with careful consideration, well-written policies and procedures, matched with a comprehensive communication plan, will help create a culture of safety within the company. ■

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