

Changing Unsafe Employee Behavior

How one company reduced expenses, accidents and lost workdays using technology to change employee behavior

The Landscape Division of a Fortune 500 company, with over 250 locations and 1,600 employees, is an organization that offers a selection of products and services to professional landscape contractors. The division was built over 30 months through the acquisition of nurseries and landscape supply companies. As small businesses, many of these operations were focused more on operations than safety, and in many locations mandated safety training was sporadic at best. As a result, by mid 2002 employee accidents and lost work days had reached an unacceptable level.

Establishing Program Goals and Objectives

The parent company had practiced a commitment to safety for 160 years, long before mandated safety became a legal requirement. As one of seventeen companies identified in 2002 as the “Safest Companies in America” by Occupational Magazine, it was apparent that the Landscape Division was struggling to meet corporate safety goals and objectives.

Several divisional objectives were identified as essential to change unsafe employee behavior, maintain compliance with corporate and governmental polices, and reduce injuries and lost workdays:

- Management support behind a visible safety program;
- Active participation by all employees;
- Safety training that teaches and reinforces proper behavior;
- Division-wide accountability.

Late in the summer of 2002, a National Fire Protection Association safety program was identified that delivered mandated safety training over the Internet. The obvious benefits of 24-hour training, consistency, Cal-OSHA compliance and low cost were attractive, and warranted a more thorough evaluation. In late July, the division initiated a formal evaluation of the web-based safety program. After a comprehensive evaluation of the training content and a financial review and cost analysis, it was decided to implement this web-based safety training program across the organization effective November 15, 2002.

Program Implementation and Early Results

Adoption was immediate and constant during the initial ninety days. Over 11,000 individual safety training courses were completed during that period at a fairly uniform rate as noted below:

Time Period	Courses Completed	Course/Employee
First 30 days	3,751	2.42
Next 30 days	3,664	2.36
Next 30 days	3,833	2.47
	11,248	7.26

In the first ninety days, every employee of the Landscaping Division had independently completed approximately seven targeted safety courses with little or no disruption to operations.

Each employee was automatically assigned a safety training curriculum that contained 12 to 18 mandated courses and 6 – 12 recommended (optional) courses. Each office manager supervised the local training program and was provided with online tools to monitor course completions and delinquent training situations.

Employee acceptance was monitored closely during the first ninety days to ensure initial success and long-term adoption by the employees. Following each training course, employees were offered an opportunity to quickly and easily complete an online course evaluation. Simple point-and-click tools allowed a rating of “1” to “5” with a “5” rating equal to outstanding. The results did not vary from month to month, and divisional management was pleased with the overall response:

Employee Evaluations
Initial 90 days

Evaluation Question	Rating
Ease of use	4.3*
Overall course rating	4.2*
Employee acceptance	94.4%

** scale of 1 – 5, with 5 = outstanding*

Program Results

At the end of February, the Landscape Division analyzed its injury and accident results against its prior divisional performance as well as its 2003 goals. The results, together with the historical data, are illustrated in the table below (JDL baseline in May 2002 = 100):

OSHA Reported Rates
Landscape Division

	LSD Through May 2002	LSD Through Oct 2002	LSD Through Feb 2003	LSD 2003 Goals
OSHA Frequency Rate	100	83	53	63
OSHA DART Rate	100	100	55	75
OSHA Recordable Rate	100	64	27	48

From May 2002 to February 2003, the Landscape Division had reduced the OSHA frequency rate by 47%, the OSHA DART rate by 45% and the OSHA recordable rate by a substantial 73%.

Each metric was below the 2003 target level established for the division. It was also noted that increased improvements were realized after 75 days of delivering periodic, customized safety training to each employee.

Lessons Learned About Changing Employee Behavior

Perhaps the most important lesson illustrated by the success of the Landscape Division is that unsafe employee behavior can be modified to protect the employees; operational productivity can be increased via reductions in lost workdays; and profitability can be improved through significant reductions in injuries and accidents in the workplace. To accomplish this at Landscape, the following elements were considered essential to realize these results:

Significant and sustained management support for workplace safety

Without management support and leadership, both short-term adoption and long-term compliance would be difficult, if not impossible.

Effective employee training that educates employees on proper behavior

Training is the critical element to change unsafe employee behavior. Training content should not only provide proper instruction, but also shock employees out of their complacency.

Training that employees accept and enjoy

Most safety professionals understand that employee acceptance of training materials is critical to a successful safety program. The content must be engaging and it must maintain the employee's attention throughout the training session.

Tools that allow supervisors and managers to monitor local training

Local managers' commitment and participation are important elements to a successful training program, particularly when employees are dispersed across the country. If these managers are to be accountable, they must be provided with real-time tools to monitor all training activity.

Corporate tools that provide company-wide accountability

Any multi-office organization must have real-time tools to monitor employee, office and regional participation. These tools allow both corporate wide accountability and comprehensive program reporting.

Many organizations today have rejected on the idea of changing unsafe behavior of employees remotely located. With the advent of technology, Internet access and cost effective, high quality web-based safety training, it is time to challenge this philosophy. Until recently, little research has been available on how to use the Internet to create a safety culture and modify unsafe employee behavior. We believe that with proper planning, well thought out implementation, appropriate employee communication and the right Internet tools, a substantial reduction in accidents, and related costs, can be realized in many industries.