



Safety

Danger Ahead: Why Close Calls Hold the Key to Safer Workplaces

James Langford | Jan 11, 2024

No harm, no foul? For workplace incidents and accidents, that's not necessarily true.

The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which considers nearly all workplace injuries and deaths preventable, urges businesses not only to track near misses, near hits and close calls but to investigate them.

Doing so "helps employers look beyond what happened to discover why it happened," the agency says. "The vast majority of harmful workplace events do not 'just happen.'"

Investigating near misses as well as injuries—which OSHA requires companies to record and, in some cases, report to the agency—allows businesses to identify hazards or weaknesses in their risk management programs and correct them to prevent future incidents that might be much worse.

Narrow escapes "often precede loss-producing events but may be overlooked as there was no harm—no injury, damage or loss," the agency says in a case study produced with the National Safety Council. "History has shown repeatedly that most loss-producing events or incidents, both serious and catastrophic, were preceded by warnings or near-miss incidents. Recognizing and reporting near-miss incidents can significantly improve worker safety."

While near misses don't have to be reported to OSHA, agency inspectors may ask about them when investigating worker injuries and deaths, both of which increased last year.

Increasing Workplace Injuries

Fatal work injuries climbed 5.7 percent to 5,486 in 2022, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, with a death occurring every 96 minutes, on average.

The transportation and shipping industry accounted for the highest number, more than 1,600, followed by construction. Deaths in the **production sector**, including manufacturing and machining, climbed 11

percent to 268.

Nonfatal injuries, meanwhile, rose 4.5 percent to 2.3 million, and manufacturers reported a 3 percent jump in injuries and illnesses to **396,800**, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Along with potentially devastating effects on workers and their families, such cases come with billions of dollars in expenses. In 2021, the most recent year for which data was available, workplace injuries cost the U.S. economy \$167 billion, according to the **National Safety Council**.

Wage and productivity losses alone accounted for \$47.4 billion, the organization says.

Among the challenges facing **companies trying to reduce those costs and make workplaces safer** is that policies are often “reactive and not proactive,” according to OSHA and the safety council. “Some organizations wait for losses to occur before taking steps to prevent a recurrence.”

Workers are often reluctant to report close calls, wary of a company culture in which they’ll take the blame, OSHA says. As a result, opportunities to prevent more serious incidents are lost.

At one large transportation company, for example, more than 60 percent of surveyed employees worry about the consequences of reporting an injury, according to a **McKinsey & Co. study** on attitudes that undermine workplace safety.

True Injury vs. ‘Bruise’

“Upon joining field teams, new employees learn from both peers and supervisors the difference between a ‘true injury’ and a ‘bruise’: The former should be reported and the latter should not,” the report says. “The message is clear—regardless of what these employees learned in their training sessions, it is best not to report too many incidents.”

There are a number of steps that businesses can take to change such attitudes, however—simultaneously protecting their workforces more effectively and buoying productivity, according to OSHA and the National Safety Council. They include:

- Setting policies that make near-miss reporting non-punitive and ensuring that employees understand them
- Teaching employees why near-miss reporting is necessary, the key role that they play and the process for reporting
- Ensuring that the near-miss reporting system is easy to understand and use
- Including training on near-miss reporting in orientation for new employees
- Considering incentives that encourage reporting, but avoiding those that might have the opposite effect
 - An example of a good incentive is one that recognizes the participation of workers in recognizing and reporting hazards.
 - An incentive that recognizes management performance in lowering OSHA-reportable incident rates, on the other hand, might have the unintended effects of suppressing reporting and prompting punitive actions.

“It is important that all companies have some type of near-miss reporting system,” the Center for Chemical Process Safety, a group formed by the American Institute of Chemical Engineers to help prevent catastrophic chemical accidents, says in a **report**.

Many companies have discovered that an increase in reports of near misses, at least for the first several months after a policy is established, signals a stronger safety culture, the center says.

As a result, the group adds, “it is quite possible that the number and count of more significant incidents

decrease as the number of near misses reported increases.”

Near-Miss Incident Report Form

A near-miss is a potential hazard or incident in which no property was damaged and no personal injury was sustained, but where, given a slight shift in time or position, damage or injury easily could have occurred. Near misses also may be referred to as close calls, near accidents, or injury-free events. For the sake of a safe work environment, the company asks that all employees report and correct any of these potential hazards immediately.

Please use this form to report near-misses and assist us in preventing future incidents and making the Company a safer workplace.

| | |
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| Department: | Building/Work Area: |
| Date and Time of Incident: | |
| Witnesses (optional): | |
| Type of Near Miss: <input type="checkbox"/> Near-Miss <input type="checkbox"/> Safety Concern <input type="checkbox"/> Safety Idea/Suggestion <input type="checkbox"/> Other (describe): | Type of Concern: <input type="checkbox"/> Unsafe Act <input type="checkbox"/> Unsafe Condition of Area <input type="checkbox"/> Unsafe Condition of Equipment <input type="checkbox"/> Unsafe Use of Equipment <input type="checkbox"/> Safety Policy Violation <input type="checkbox"/> Other (describe): |
| Describe the potential incident/hazard/concern and possible outcome (be detailed): | |
| Were safety procedures violated? (describe): | |
| Incident site inspection – Why was an unsafe act committed, or why was the unsafe condition present?: | |
| Recommendations/steps to take to prevent a similar incident: | |
| Name (optional): | Date Reported: |
| Supervisor or Office Signature: | Date: |

Please submit this form to the main office or your supervisor. For questions or cases deemed immediately dangerous, call the main office at 555-555-5555.

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OSHA, which provides the sample form above on its website, says internal investigations of near misses should include the following questions:

- If a procedure or safety rule was not followed, why was the procedure or rule not followed?

- Did production pressures play a role, and, if so, why were production pressures permitted to jeopardize safety?
- Was the procedure out of date or safety training inadequate?
- If so, why had the problem not been previously identified, or, if it had been identified, why had it not been addressed?