

COMMON SENSE & WORKPLACE SAFETY

Almost everyone in the world has heard the term “common sense.” Common sense, as it applies to workplace safety, is something that a lot of people do not understand and take for granted. When an accident or incident occurs in a workplace, one of the first things one hears are statements that references having “common sense” or “knowing better”. Some people agree that common sense applications exist in workplace safety. Others disagree, believing that the idea of applying common sense to safety is a dangerous thing to do. In this article, we address the subject of using common sense in the workplace.

What is Common Sense?

Common sense is defined as the basic level of practical knowledge and judgment that we all need to help us live reasonably and safely. We are not born with common sense; we acquire it throughout life. Common sense is actually common experience – we learn about life from others’ experiences as well as our own. Awareness of your environment, self-preservation, and concern for your fellow workers are all factors in good common sense. Common sense is supposed to be a fundamental ability which is shared by (“common to”) nearly all people and can be reasonably expected of almost all people.

What is the Problem with This?

Common sense cannot be relied on as a means of accident/injury prevention. The problem starts when we assume someone who does the same type of work we do or have done, that they have the same level of knowledge or common sense that we have. This is never true. The fact is that people learn to do their job in many ways.

Two of the most frequent ways people learn is through training and experience – your own experiences and the experiences of others. As the saying goes, good judgment comes from experience, and most of that comes from bad judgment. What’s usually referred to as common sense is the compilation of knowledge gained by an individual through his or her life experiences and education, and how that individual uses that knowledge to make decisions.

Common sense is frequently identified as a causal factor when an employee injury occurs. It is often indicated that common sense should have been used (or was not used) as explanation for an injury.

Maximizing the Common Sense Factor

So how can we integrate and enhance the elements of one’s level of common sense? Effective and frequent training is the key to a heightened level of common sense use and a move away from taking for granted that all employees possess this learned quality. Job-specific training is the key. If employees are not diligently trained about the specific hazards they face, injuries can be expected to continue to occur. Safety activities, safety committees, safety observations, and safety inspections are all positive efforts toward an increase in the common sense element.

What Should the Employer Do?

Employers should ensure that:

- Adequate job-specific safety is done and understood by employees
- Supervision is not allowing poor judgment
- The work environment is one that does not allow shortcuts
- Employees are held accountable or challenged when they take chances that almost result in injuries

Some Common Sense “Smarts” to Use While Working:

- Don't take safety shortcuts on the job
- Remember and use your job-specific safety training
- Treat safety as an essential part of your job
- Keep your full attention on what you are doing
- Know and follow the company safety policies and procedures
- Use the required protective equipment
- Remind your coworkers about safety procedures and equipment
- Pay attention to safety training programs and meetings
- Know what to do in case of an emergency
- Ask questions when you don't understand
- Don't fool around, horseplay, or show off on the job
- Don't let anger, frustration, or personal problems interfere with your work
- Don't ignore a safety hazard
- Don't become overconfident with jobs you've done many times
- Don't use equipment in ways they were not intended
- Don't get pressured by others into ignoring safety procedures
- Don't assume safety is someone else's job

Ask the Following Questions Before You Begin to Work:

- Are conditions safe to do the work?
- Are the methods we are going to use safe?
- Does everyone know what to do?
- Does everyone know how to do it?

In Conclusion

Common sense is not the end-all answer to repeat injuries nor is it the sole answer to preventing injuries in the workplace. Proper job-specific safety training, employee accountability, and good management support contribute to the common sense factor an employee possesses. When properly given and applied, all these elements can go a long way to preventing injuries and illnesses in the workplace.

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