



Safety Scene

Small Crews Need Safety Too

by Molly E. Butz

Considering the good and bad of a pared down workforce

Less work to do usually means less people to do it; a scenario far too many of you have had to face as a result of our struggling economy. Along the way, you've likely been reminded that operating a component manufacturing business with a small crew can impact multiple facets of your organization, from tight deadlines right down to your bottom line. Safety should always be at the core of your day-to-day operations, but when uncertainty abounds, it can be unfortunately easy to let it take a back seat. However, fewer employees, irregular scheduling and fear about job security mean that, more than ever, it's crucial for safety to stay in focus. If you've found yourself working with a skeleton crew, or are being asked to shift work around in the shop, it's important to take a step back and examine all of the ways these situations can affect the safety culture in your facility.

The Upside of a Downturn

On the plus side, fewer workers can mean fewer accidents. For instance, if your company has seen a good deal of turnover, an economic downturn can result in maintaining a smaller group of dedicated, competent employees that have already been through your safety training. In addition, they know each other well and will, conceivably, watch out for each other, pointing out potentially hazardous situations and behaviors. These committed, long-term folks limit the amount of time and money you would have spent training new people and also produce lower injury and illness rates which, in turn, translate to lower workers' compensation rates. Moreover, when business picks back up you'll have a solid core of staff available to mentor your new hires.

Fatigue More Likely With Fewer Workers

On the flip side, there are a number of reasons to be cautious and a necessity to keep your safety training up to date and at the heart of your daily operations. Cutbacks often mean safety ends up on a back burner because less workers makes it easy to rationalize that there simply isn't enough time for regular safety training sessions. Likewise, with fewer people on the shop floor there is potential for long or double shifts, fatigued crews that are at higher risk for causing an accident, and fewer people keeping an eye out for safety concerns.

It's also fairly likely that you'll be asking your staff to wear multiple hats, which means that on occasion they'll be performing tasks they are unfamiliar with. Employees that are concerned about job security may be hesitant to ask for help or training for fear they will be seen as less knowledgeable and therefore more disposable. Worse yet, a worker may be inclined to forgo reporting a legitimate work-related injury because he thinks it could cost him his job.

The good news? The solutions are rather simple. Keep your safety culture alive and well by holding regular safety meetings, performing ample cross-training and keeping safety at the heart of your daily work practices. Remind your crew to report all safety and health concerns immediately and be constantly aware of their environment. When business picks back up, you'll already have a solid safety program in place. Move forward by ensuring all new employees are introduced to your safety program immediately and provide refresher training if you re-hire folks you had to lay off during the slump. Communicate, collaborate and always put... safety first! **SBC**

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at a glance

- ☐ A downturn can leave you with a group of long-term, dedicated employees who are already trained in safety.
- ☐ Worker fatigue due to smaller crews and longer hours are safety hazards during a downturn.
- ☐ Holding regular safety meetings and encouraging workers to report all incidents is a way to maintain a culture of safety.



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