IRC Study Says Small Businesses Take Job Safety Measures, But . . .

Workers are Key to Safer Workplaces

Though concerned about on-the-job safety, nearly half (46 percent) of the small-business owners surveyed by the Insurance Research Council believe workplace accident rates are determined more by employee behavior than by any actions taken by management. Another 46 percent say the responsibility is shared equally by employees and managers.

“Motivating Safety in the Workplace,” the IRC study released in August 1995, also found that most of the businesses surveyed had taken at least five different actions to enhance workplace safety in the last five years. These actions were spurred primarily by the cost of workers’ compensation insurance, followed by the belief that improving safety was “the right thing to do.”

The study was conducted in cooperation with the NFIB Education Foundation, the research and education affiliate of the National Federation of Independent Business.

Researchers surveyed 3,200 of NFIB’s 600,000 members. The study surveyed businesses of all sizes and industrial categories, paying special attention to larger small firms (those with more than 100 employees) and those in the manufacturing sector. The survey was designed to study small-business owners’ attitudes and approaches toward workplace safety to help develop more effective safety programs.

“With some 3 million U.S. workers injured annually in job-related accidents, workplace safety is a pressing concern among all employers due to the obvious human and financial costs,” said Terrie Troxel, executive director of the IRC.

Survey respondents were split over how large a problem workplace safety poses to management: 45 percent termed it serious, while 54 percent termed it a minor concern. The degree of concern varied according to both the type and size of business surveyed.

Firms in industries with a higher risk of injury tended to view safety as a greater problem. For example, construction firms were more than twice as likely (70 percent) to rate safety as a serious problem as either retail/trade or service firms (34 percent each). Similarly, the likelihood of safety being rated as a serious concern increased with the number of employees.

Nearly four of every five firms surveyed (79 percent) reported having adopted written safety rules over the last five years. Among industries with a higher
risk of injury, such as manufacturing and construction, the share adopting written safety rules ranged from 85 percent to 94 percent.

Among other safety measures, the most commonly employed were providing personal safety equipment (79 percent), giving safety training other than for drivers (60 percent), installing of safety controls or devices on equipment (58 percent), conducting in-depth hazard inspections (55 percent) and purchasing safer equipment (52 percent).

Nearly three-fourths of the respondents (73 percent) believed their employees have a strong or somewhat strong commitment to on-the-job safety. And 60 percent said they designated at least one employee to work on jobsite safety issues.

Many employers used both incentives and punishments to reinforce safe employee behavior. However, punishments were used more frequently: 57 percent of respondents had disciplined one or more employees for safety violations over the past five years, with almost one in five indicating at least one employee had been fired for that reason. Thirty percent had offered incentives for safe work practices, ranging from bonuses to awards to special recognition.

The study also found that government safety regulations serve as both a floor and a ceiling for implementing safety measures in small firms. While regulations offer employers an incentive to maintain a safe workplace, they serve as a disincentive to go beyond required actions. When asked why further safety measures were not taken, nearly one-third of the respondents (31 percent) said it was because they were already complying with the rules.

About the Author
The Insurance Research Council is a nonprofit organization founded by the property-casualty insurance industry that aims to provide timely and reliable...
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The National Federation for Independent Business is the
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sents privately held firms that typically have five to seven
employees and that gross about $250,000 annually.