



Safety investments offer a competitive advantage

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Dramatic job site accidents, including two crane collapses in Manhattan a few months ago, have increased attention to the dangers inherent in certain industries. These frightening events should remind companies doing potentially hazardous activities that, while keeping workers and the public safe is always their highest priority, avoiding accidents is a vital business issue.

The ramifications of a serious workplace accident are numerous: civil penalties, license suspensions, court awards and insurance woes are just some of the impacts. Criminal prosecution, as occurred recently in the tragic case of a day laborer in Brooklyn who suffocated after the trench he was working in collapsed, is also a real possibility.

But, a business's competitive position can also be seriously compromised. Imagine you're a company that had a job site fatality or a poor safety record trying to convince potential customers that your operation is safe and they can trust you with their project, and their reputation. In a competitive bidding environment for major jobs, having a solid safety program, let alone track record, is essential.

Anticipating, evaluating and controlling health and safety hazards in the workplace is extremely complex and, as we see in many accidents, there often is a chain of events that is unanticipated. Some industry leaders, including WRS Environmental Services, have taken the unusual step of hiring a specialist called a certified industrial hygienist (CIH). The on-staff CIH's role includes examining the workplace for hazards and potential dangers, making recommendations on improving safety for workers and the community and drafting procedures to control potentially dangerous situations.

For companies operating in a highly regulated environment, the CIH has an especially important role in ensuring that workers adhere to health and safety procedures and that federal, state, and local laws and regulations are followed. The CIH also plays a role in developing health and safety plans, both for the company overall and for specific projects, documenting potential hazards, existing safety controls, prevention steps, and emergency responses. In many instances, these plans are required to fulfill contract performance.

Government often moves quickly after an accident to increase inspections, tighten regulations or replace underperforming bureaucrats. By that time, of course, it's "too little, too late." The sad reality is that conditions that can lead to a serious accident are widespread and too often regulators only catch the most obvious and egregious violations.

Businesses that treat safety measures as an added cost are making a huge mistake. In fact, safety is a wise investment and putting measures in place that prevent accidents, or respond in ways that control impacts, is good business. Today's companies must be proactive in developing programs designed to raise safety awareness and prevention among employees.

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