

Production is our #1 Priority-not safety

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Introduction

As I visit mines within Queensland I pass signs that proudly declare “Safety is our number one priority” and this message is routinely delivered to new workers.

The problem is the statement is a falsehood. If safety was our number one priority on a mine site we would close the gates because by doing this nobody would ever get hurt or killed.

But we don't close the gates and why is that?

Money!

Companies operate mines to make money and if they don't they shut them down. Workers work at mines because they get paid and if they didn't they wouldn't turn up.

Nobody gets up in the morning and says to themselves I better go to work today so I can come home this afternoon. They say I better go to work today because I need the money.

As individuals the greatest risk at the forefront of our mind is financial not safety.

Since getting the okay to speak here I have spoken to 50 workers across 24 sites and asked them this question.

“What is the priority for your company-Production or Safety?”

Plenty of workers answered that they are happy with safety at their mine. At those mines this is what workers say.

“If the job is not safe to do we stop and find a safer way.”

So in other words they don't not do the job, they just look at another way to do it that is safer than the original way. Which begs the question as to why they don't do it that way all the time?

The answer is simple; the first way is quicker, easier and more efficient than the second so if they can use it they will. And that is fine, that makes perfect business sense and workers understand that and agree with it because they make those decisions at home.

We don't get an electrician to come and test our extension leads, drills, and electrical appliances every six months. Why-because we don't believe it is worth the money.

We don't do pre-starts on our own car every morning before we drive it. Why-because we don't believe it is worth the time taken out of our life to do it.

Would the controls make it safer for our families in both of these examples –yes.

Looking at a mine overall our objective is not to keep everyone safe our objective is to make a profit. The cost of safety affects that profit. Which means when we look at a safety initiative we look at the costs benefit of it.

A control may make a job that safe that no one will ever cut their finger but the control will cost you a million dollars to implement. Any manager is going to look at the likelihood of someone cutting their finger before they agree to implement the control.

If the likelihood is that we will have one person cut their finger every 1000 times the job is done and the job is done 1000 times in a year no manager in the world is going to spend that money.

What I am saying is that we need to change the statement from “*safety is our number one priority*” to “*safety is our number one consideration when it comes to production.*”

After all the first thing we fill out on a risk assessment is the task because that is our objective. Then we decide how to do it which is when we consider safety.

Of those 50 workers I asked “*What is the priority for your company-Production or Safety?*” 50 out of 50 said production. 100%.

So if you stand up and tell your workers that safety is your number one priority then know that they don't believe you.

Part of the brief for this conference was recognizing and managing health issues such as substance use, fatigue, the impacts of FIFO, common societal health and disease concerns.

So using some of those issues let's look at why workers believe that safety is a consideration rather than a mine's number one priority.

Fatigue

In the late 18th century, when companies started to maximize the output of their factories to make things more efficient, people had to work more. 10-16 hour days were the norm.

These incredibly long work days weren't sustainable and soon a brave man called Robert Owen started a campaign to have people work no more than 8 hours per day.

His slogan was “*Eight hours labour, eight hours recreation, eight hours rest.*”

It wasn't until the early 20th Century that things changed.

One of the first businesses to implement 8 hour shifts was the Ford Motor Company, in 1914.

Not only did they cut the standard work day to eight hours, but they also doubled their worker's pay in the process.

To the shock of many industries, this resulted in Ford's productivity -from the same workers, with fewer hours, actually increasing significantly.

Ford's profit margins doubled within two years which naturally encouraged other companies to adopt the shorter, eight hour work day as a standard for their employees.

Our industry's varying operational and personnel requirements has resulted in the need for fewer people performing at high levels of efficiency so 12 hour shifts are here to stay.

There is no way in hell any mine is going back on 8 hours shifts instead of 12.

Why?

Because it makes them inefficient due to the increase in wages, HR requirements and so forth.

There is also no way that workers are going to go back to 8 hour shifts.

Why?

Because it will mean a drop in pay and also less time off.

Yet every year I come here and listen to the same old debate about fatigue.

We all know the answer but nobody is going to implement it.

So let's acknowledge that fact so that we can get serious about looking for suitable controls.

At present we control fatigue by training and awareness programs to workers about the effects of fatigue. So in other words we rely on the worker to implement the control.

The person on our mine site who has the least authority is given the responsibility to stop production if they are tired. The person with the most to lose by stopping.

Research undertaken by the US Navy concluded that workers themselves are often poor judges of fatigue levels.

In 2011 A central Queensland coroner made 24 recommendations to address fatigue on roads and in the mining industry in relation to two separate road crashes in central Queensland involving coal miners driving home from work.

She called for possible laws to make driver fatigue an offence or for police officers to be empowered to order motorists to have a rest. In other words to take the decision away from them.

All our controls are from the lowest rung of hierarchy of controls. They are subjective and left up to the workers judgement.

At the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics Swiss Marathon runner Gabriela Andersen provided possibly the most dramatic vision ever at an Olympic Games and one that caused controversy because she was allowed to finish.

Workers get involved in a job and human nature takes over. We are designed to solve problems and the further we get into the solving of the problem the narrower our vision

becomes. Things that aren't applicable to the completion of the task are not considered because our energy and focus is directed at completing the task.

The further we get into the job the more focused we become and less important considerations are jettisoned.

The medical people went to attend Gabriela Andersen and she moved away. Her focus was to finish the race which was the task she was assigned. Her subconscious knew if anybody touched her she would be disqualified and that would mean she would not complete the task.

So why do we leave it up to the subjectiveness of the worker. Because to do so is quick and easy. The disadvantage is that workers can cheat and they are not as accurate as objective measures.

Why would they cheat? Why do people not believe management when they say it is okay to stop? Because of pressure, whether it is real or perceived the answer is pressure.

No worker ever does the wrong thing when the Manager is there so why does it happen when they are not there? Because the decision is being made in the confines of an individual's brain and you can feed that individual's brain information until it is coming out of their ears but unless you are there you can't influence the decision being made inside there.

There focus becomes finishing the task so either you have to be there to stop them or provide an objective measure that will stop them by taking the decision out of their hands.

An example of an objective measure is a camera to monitor operators eyes. But there are problems such as wearing sunglasses for one.

There is a new technology out though where eye movement is being used to control electrical devices by a handicapped child. This technology captures the movement of the eyes via electrodes attached to the head and face.

We know that brain activity changes as fatigue increases and one of the symptoms is micro sleeps and rolling eye movements. So this technology will help so what is the disadvantage. It's not cheap.

What is the priority Production or Safety.

The second conclusion reached by the US Navy's Research into fatigue was that decisions of duty duration should be made at the task planning stage.

So why aren't we arranging our time performing task at the start of the day instead of playing it by ear. How often have you heard on the radio "my machine's down and the fitters on the way." Answered by "Righto, take you crib now then."

The National Heavy Vehicle Regulator (NHVR) is Australia's independent regulator for all vehicles over 4.5 tonnes gross vehicle mass. They recommend taking the choice out of the hands of the workers by initiating a plan of when rest breaks will be taken.

They even have a planner a driver can refer to before they start work.

The planner indicates that if you start work at 6:00am you must take at least a 15 minute break before 12:15 and at least another 15 minute break before 3:00 and at least another 30 minute break before 6:00.

Most truck drivers on mines I visit have a one hour break during their shift. A mine I visited recently has 2x25 minute breaks per shift. No mine I am aware of meets the Standard hours – work and rest hours requirements set by the National Heavy Vehicle Authority.

Section 8 sub section 2C of the MQSHR talks about risks and that controls the SSE uses to reduce risk must be appropriate and have regard to other reasonably available information and data from other industries.

All it requires is planning and resources to ensure transport of workers to and from the job site to a rest area.

So why aren't we doing it. What is the priority Production or Safety.

Fitness for work

We come to this conference and we talk about obesity. Some mines even dismiss people because they're too fat and so unable to do their job. So what contributes to obesity?

A few things but let's look at food and diet.

Eatforhealth.gov.au is an arm of the Federal Government's National Health Department. They recommend 6 meals a day-breakfast, morning break, lunch, afternoon break, dinner, evening snack.

So workers are on 12 hour shifts. They have breakfast before they start their shift and then they have dinner afterwards as well as washing, training and ringing home. Maybe an evening snack in their room because the kitchen is shut.

So that leaves lunch and two snacks in the day-which fits in perfectly with the Road authority's recommendation of when to stop and for how long. So why then do we ask workers to be fit for work and then when they come to work we place barriers in their way at work to prevent them from maintaining fitness for work.

So now not only fatigue could be lessened by changing break times but also obesity and an improvement in both would increase the workers alertness which means greater efficiency.

So why isn't done. What is the priority Production or Safety.

Mental Health

The last thing I want to mention is mental health. Depression is a major issue in the mining industry especially with fly in fly out operations.

How do we address it? Well most mines put a poster on the wall or hand out cards that tell people a number to ring if they are in trouble. Again we put the responsibility to take action onto the lowest rung of the chain of command.

Yet we know our culture looks upon people who seek help as being weak. According to statistics 1 in 5 Australians will experience mental illness this year. So if you have a workforce of 100 then 20 of them are or will suffer from a mental health issue this year.

We provide inductions to make people aware of hazards and train people to ensure they are competent to do their job. These inductions and training are mandatory as are physical health checks.

If the safety and health of our workforce is so important then why is it not mandatory to check the mental health of workers? Despite the good work in promoting mental health and that it is okay to seek help the vast majority do not. So why do we not have a psychologist fly in at specific intervals and make mandatory appointments for our workers.

The second part of this question is what about serious accidents and fatalities. The Australian Military and other military forces across the Western World have recognised that Post Traumatic Stress is a major problem following situations involving life threatening situations.

Speaking with workers involved in serious accidents, high potentials and fatalities in my role I have one question for industry. Why is not mandatory for those involved to attend counselling sessions rather than, again, relying on them to take the initiative.

By making it mandatory it takes away any shame or fear workers have of seeking help.

Conclusion

So will changing the words change what happens on a Mine site.

What it does straight away is remove a barrier.

My goal first and foremost is to finish the marathon. If my goal is the health of my body I wouldn't do the marathon I would sit at home and watch others do it.

Once I decide it is my goal I set about planning to ensure that when I attempt the task I will come out the other end with the task completed in the most efficient manner I can complete it.

Training, dehydration, toilet considerations and the correct equipment are all components that have to be planned to ensure an efficient and successful result.

Training- I set up a training program with length and type of runs that will ensure I can make the distance on the day I perform the task.

Dehydration- When I train I prepare drinks beforehand to take. On the day I make up my own drinks and put them at drinks stations to ensure I don't get dehydrated. I carry gels on me or at drinks stations to keep my energy up.

Toilet consideration- I eat toast with a bit of jam three hours before the race so that my bowels are empty before I race. Very important for your comfort when running long distances.

Correct Equipment- I ensure the shoes I wear are comfortable and worn in and I make sure I know that the shorts and singlet I wear won't chafe. To be sure I may place Vaseline or band aids at appropriate locations.

By planning those things I know I will give myself the best chance of completing the marathon successfully and with a minimum of additional pain.

So when we complete a task we identify hazards and put controls in place to ensure we are safe but what controls do we put in place for our health.

Or do we just play it by ear.

Both these runners achieved their goal – Which one is your worker?