

PPE Tips for Encouraging Wearer Compliance

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- By Mark Saner

You painstakingly identified all the hazards in your workplace. You consulted each of the relevant safety standards and OSHA regulations. You implemented a comprehensive personal protective equipment (PPE) program and made sure every employee was supplied with the necessary gear and trained on how to use it properly. Everything went great for about a week. And then employees started wearing their PPE incorrectly, or even skipping it altogether.

What went wrong?

Why Compliance is Essential

When employees wear their PPE incorrectly or forgo it entirely, they put themselves at risk. There are countless devastating headlines to remind us of the tragedies that can occur in the workplace if safety hazards are not addressed responsibly. And even something as simple as rolling up the sleeves of a flame-resistant (FR) shirt and leaving the arms unprotected can have serious consequences.

Beyond the tragedy of human injury and loss, workplace accidents can be incredibly costly financially. For example, a single burn injury can cost a company millions of dollars in OSHA fines, hospital fees, legal costs, increased insurance premiums, reputation damage, and lost productivity. While some of these costs may not apply if the injury is truly a result of noncompliance and the employer is not at fault, there are no guarantees.

The best way to prevent costly injuries is to promote safe work practices, provide the necessary PPE, and do everything possible to encourage wearer compliance.

Barriers to Compliance

There are numerous reasons employees may not wear their PPE compliantly. One of the most obvious reasons is that the PPE is uncomfortable. When PPE doesn't fit well, isn't appropriate for the weather conditions, or is made from materials that cause irritation, employees are much more likely to skip wearing it, or at least make unsafe modifications to it in an attempt to alleviate discomfort.

In addition to discomfort, forgetfulness can contribute to noncompliance. And the more PPE items an employee has to wear to achieve adequate protection, the more likely it is that one of those items will slip his or her mind. For example, if an employee working in a laboratory has to remember to put on a separate chemical-barrier apron over the lab coat he is already wearing before performing certain tasks, he may get caught up in his work and neglect to put on the additional layer of protective gear.

Of course, even if employees do remember all of the layers of protective equipment they need, the inconvenience of having to put on and take off multiple items may deter them from wearing all of the necessary PPE.

As employees begin to regularly neglect PPE, regardless of the reasons for their initial noncompliance, it can lead to normalization of deviance—the tendency for behaviors that were once considered unacceptable to become commonplace and seemingly permissible. Normalization of deviance is a result of complacency. Employees may recognize a hazard exists, but because they've performed a given task many times without an accident, it becomes tempting for them to skip putting on the necessary protection. To make matters worse, newer workers may see veterans forgo PPE and think they can do the same. Pretty soon, noncompliance becomes the new workplace culture.

Fortunately, strategic PPE selection can go a long way toward encouraging compliance. And there are a few basic considerations that can help you make more effective PPE choices.

Comfort Inspires Compliance

One of the best ways to motivate employees to wear their PPE consistently and correctly is to ensure it is as comfortable as possible. However, selecting comfortable PPE is not always as straightforward as it may seem. Comfort is largely subjective, and the best way to find PPE that addresses wearers' preferences is to work with a manufacturer to conduct a wear trial. Through a wear trial, employees can try various PPE options on the job to determine which items work best for them.

If you are unable to conduct a wear trial or want to narrow the selection down before reaching out to a manufacturer, there are a few fairly consistent factors that can help you identify products that are likely to be the most comfortable.

One of the primary factors that contribute to comfort is fit. PPE that is too loose or too tight is likely to be uncomfortable and, in some cases, even can endanger the wearer by failing to provide effective protection. To ensure the best fit possible, consider the individual needs of the various employees who will be using the PPE. When choosing products for female workers, look for styles developed specifically for women. And if employees do not fit into stock sizes, work with a manufacturer that offers customization options.

The materials PPE is made from also have a major influence on comfort. For example, stiff materials that restrict the wearer's movement will negatively impact comfort, as will materials that feel itchy or rough. Additionally, moisture management can affect comfort. As workers perspire, their workwear can become damp, causing it to grow heavy, change shape, and stick to their skin—all of which cause discomfort. Look for PPE products that wick moisture and dry quickly to help combat this problem. Closely related to moisture management is breathability. Breathable materials help to regulate temperature by allowing air and moisture to pass through them more easily. In cold weather conditions, breathable PPE keeps the skin dry, helping to prevent wearers from getting chilled. In warm weather conditions, breathable PPE allows body heat to escape, helping to prevent overheating.

As you work to identify the most comfortable PPE for your work environment, be sure to consider the types of work being performed, the environment the work is performed in, and, of course, the hazards that may be present.

Convenience Is Key

Even if PPE is relatively comfortable, employees may still choose to forgo protection in favor of convenience. If putting on the appropriate PPE is time consuming and cumbersome, the temptation to skip it becomes much stronger.

Let's go back to the example of employees working in a laboratory where a separate chemical-barrier apron must be worn over their lab coats. If, in addition to the challenge of remembering to put on the aprons, the employees also had to walk into a different room to get them, the combined discomfort of the stiff aprons and inconvenience of wearing them would be a recipe for noncompliance.

Fortunately, in this particular scenario, as well as many others, resolving the issue is as simple as taking advantage of new product innovations. New lab coats offering chemical-splash protection (CP) are now available, eliminating the need to put on two separate protective garments. Furthermore, these lightweight, breathable lab coats are significantly more comfortable than chemical-barrier aprons and disposable protective lab coats.

Whether it is accomplished by implementing new products or other changes, the best way to maximize convenience and, therefore, compliance, is to make sure that the necessary PPE is accessible and easy to use. Whenever possible, it is also a good idea to try to reduce the number of separate PPE items necessary for proper protection.

Multi-Hazard Makes a Difference

One way to reduce the quantity of PPE components that employees will need is to choose products that offer multi-hazard protection. According to Frost and Sullivan's North American Industrial Protective Clothing Market Forecast to 2020, apparel with multiple protective functionalities is

becoming increasingly popular. This isn't surprising, considering that many occupations involve more than one hazard.

Consider an environment that faces both chemical-splash hazards and thermal hazards, such as arc flash and flash fire. This exact scenario can be found in many laboratories, chemical-processing plants, pharmaceutical companies, and manufacturing facilities where paints, cleaners, coatings, batteries, agricultural chemicals, or LEDs are used. Until recently, workers in these environments would have needed both an FR garment and a garment that protects against chemical splash. But now, protection against these two hazards can be found in lab coats and coveralls that offer FR properties combined with chemical-splash protection (CP). Not only do these FR/CP products provide multi-hazard protection, but they are also comfortable and designed to be worn as all-day attire—all of which supports increased wearer compliance.

Multi-hazard protection extends beyond FR/CP products, as well. For example, some products offer simultaneous protection against flash fire, arc flash, and molten metal splatter. Other products combine high visibility with FR protection. When evaluating your multi-hazard protection options, be sure to consult all of the safety standards that apply to your industry to ensure the items you choose offer the necessary level of protection.

Inspiring wearer compliance is far from an exact science, but optimizing comfort and convenience can go a long way toward encouraging proper PPE use. And with recent innovations, such as multi-hazard protection products, finding PPE that employees will want to wear is easier than ever.