

Preventing **complacency** on the job

Strategies for keeping workers alert to the hazards and risks of construction work.

I promise to say something when I see something unsafe.

There is a common—but hard to detect—factor in many worker injuries and fatalities: complacency.

In construction health and safety, complacency is a mindset that develops when someone underestimates the hazards on the jobsite and the risk of an incident. It leads to them being less aware of their surroundings and less vigilant about following health and safety policies and procedures.

“We get used to doing the same thing in the same way for so long that we don’t identify new hazards that are introduced into the work or the work area,” says Jennifer McKenzie, IHSA’s Director of Stakeholder and Client Engagement. “We get complacent and forget that jobsites change from day to day, as does construction overall.”

Anyone can become complacent. However, McKenzie says it’s more likely to affect workers who have done the same work for a long time.

“We’ve got people who have worked in the industry for more than 20 years. The legislation has changed in that time. However, they continue to operate in the same way they did 20 years ago because that’s how they were taught or feel comfortable,” McKenzie says. “Or they don’t feel they need to make the change.”

Those who perform the same work in different locations are also an at-risk group. They may assume that the hazards are the same in each environment, rather than assessing the unique hazards of each jobsite.

Understanding the impact

While complacency is hard to see and measure, recent coroner’s inquests have issued verdicts and recommendations identifying complacency as a contributing factor to worker fatalities in Ontario’s construction industry.

“People who are generally very safety-minded have been fatally or critically injured because something changed in their work environment that day. And they didn’t take that change into account,” McKenzie says.

In one case, a worker donned their harness and began to work without doing a hazard assessment. Although they prepared for work in the same way that they usually did, changes to the work area had created new, unaddressed hazards. These hazards led to an incident that resulted in the worker’s death.

Traumatic incidents can have an impact on workers for life, whether they were directly involved in the incident, witnessed what happened, or simply knew the person or people involved.

In fact, the entire workplace is often negatively affected. Workplace incidents can lower productivity and quality of work, strain workplace culture, damage the reputation of the impacted constructor or subcontractor, and cause that company’s WSIB insurance premiums to increase.

Identifying the causes

Many factors can contribute to complacency, including:

- **Lack of supervision:** Without appropriate oversight, workers may feel less accountable for following health and safety policies and procedures.
- **Insufficient training:** Workers whose training is inadequate or outdated may not know enough to identify hazards and determine the safest way of completing a task.
- **Familiarity and routine:** Workers who complete the same task every day may underestimate the associated risks because they have been able to do the work without incident in the past.
- **Culture:** At workplaces where talking about health and safety is uncommon (or even actively discouraged), workers who are employed by different subcontractors or involved in different trades may not feel responsible for each other. As a result, they may be less likely to share knowledge about hazards.
- **Pressure:** Tight project timelines can lead workers to deprioritize health and safety in order to complete the task quickly.

- **Mental and physical health:** Psychological stressors from outside of work—such as those related to finances, housing, or relationships—can distract workers while performing work. Physical pain and the use of pain management medication can also cause workers to be less aware of their surroundings.

Taking action

“Employers need to take complacency as seriously as they would take a physical hazard that they can see,” McKenzie says. “We can’t see complacency, but we know it’s there. We need to implement measures and controls to combat it.”

Preventing complacency on jobsites requires considering factors such as:

- **Leadership commitment:** Senior management sets the tone for how the entire workplace treats health and safety. Talk about expectations, establish procedures for regular safety audits and inspections, and discuss the risks of complacency.
- **Training and education:** Workers should be trained and educated to perform their tasks safely, address hazards, and understand the risks of the work.
- **Communication:** Put in place systems that enable workers to feel comfortable about sharing health and safety concerns with supervisors and management. Leadership can also share positive examples of workers contributing to health and safety changes on their jobsites.
- **Incentive programs:** Reward workers who prioritize health and safety. This can motivate everyone to be safety-minded.
- **Focus on wellness:** Managers, supervisors, and workers should make a point of checking in with themselves and each other. For a self check-in, ask: Am I in a good place? Is there anything I need to do to make myself more aware of the job and the hazards? Checking in with a co-worker can be as simple as asking them how they’re doing. The risk of complacency is higher when a worker is not in the right frame of mind to focus on the task.

“Everybody on the jobsite needs to be present. We need to see each other. We need to identify when somebody is having an off day, doesn’t understand, or needs more training,” McKenzie says.

Learning from the industry

Workplaces can use these prevention strategies to build a proactive safety culture. For example, Kiewit, a construction and engineering organization that operates across North America, has a program called Craft Voice in Safety (CVIS), which uses a number of strategies to empower workers to take care of each other, in partnership with management.

CVIS members correct unsafe conditions and behaviours at a peer-to-peer level. They also anonymously share worker concerns and challenges with leadership. This system allows workers to participate in health and safety without fear of discipline or judgement.

“It’s a creative culture where everybody has a voice,” says Michael Dauncey, Safety Manager at Kiewit and an IHSA Board Member. “CVIS members are not safety cops or enforcers.”

Frequent training and safety sessions, daily toolbox talks, and quarterly safety reviews are also part of CVIS’s portfolio. At the reviews, workers hear from a range of safety-related speakers, including representatives from Threads of Life who share stories about the impact of workplace incidents.

Additionally, a CVIS incentive program rewards workers who go over and above the call of duty, which motivates all employees to think critically about health and safety and get involved in improving processes—which, Dauncey says, can benefit workplace efficiency and productivity.

“Combatting complacency is also important for quality and customer satisfaction,” he says. “That’s always important to us. We want to make sure we strive for excellence and take pride in the quality of our work.”

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LEARN more about the different hazards that new, young, and experienced workers may face on the job: ihsa.ca/new_experienced_workers