

# How to conduct workplace inspections and investigations

A look at two important measures for preventing injuries, illnesses, and costly work stoppages.



Workplace inspections and investigations are, in a way, two sides of the same coin. They are both required by law. They both involve identifying hazards and recommending controls or corrective action to prevent incidents and injuries. But they also have some key differences.

The purpose of workplace inspections is to identify hazards or deficiencies that could cause an incident in the future. They involve visually and physically assessing workplace conditions as well as the specific equipment and materials being used on site. Investigations take place after an incident (or near miss) occurs—to determine why an incident happened and prevent its recurrence.

“Inspections are an example of being proactive about safety,” says Lisa Roberts, an IHSA Health and Safety Consultant. “Investigations are reactive safety, where something has gone wrong or nearly gone wrong.”

All organizations should have written policies on roles and responsibilities, frequency, and record keeping for both processes. While the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHSA) and its regulations set the minimum requirements, most workplaces in the industries IHSA serves need to conduct inspections far more often than the legal minimum.

## Who performs workplace inspections and investigations?

Inspections must be done by a competent worker or supervisor, who is qualified based on their knowledge, training, and experience. “They have to know any and all potential or actual hazards in the workplace,” Roberts says. “They don’t just have to understand what they observe, they have to look for things that could potentially go wrong.”

In smaller workplaces, the work is typically performed by the health and safety representative and must be done at least once a month. A joint health and safety committee (JHSC)—whose members perform monthly inspections—is required for larger companies, generally those with 20 or more regular employees.

Of course, in some industries, workplace conditions change frequently: frontline supervisors must perform inspections at least once a week—and more often, if necessary to ensure safety. For example, a supervisor at a construction jobsite or transportation company truck yard might need to do housekeeping inspections constantly throughout a shift to eliminate slip, trip, and fall hazards. (Workers, too, given the appropriate training, should always inspect their equipment and materials before using them.)

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Health and safety representatives, JHSC members, and competent supervisors can also conduct workplace investigations in various cases, such as when a near-miss is reported. However, investigators from the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training, and Skills Development (MLITSD) are charged with investigating incidents where anyone at a workplace is seriously injured or killed.

## What inspections are necessary?

Practically speaking, the kinds of inspections a company carries out depends on its industry, the work being performed, and the types of hazards that are present at the workplace. Most workplace checklists will have common elements that need to be inspected or watched for, such as:

- Housekeeping hazards
- Equipment (both for proper function and whether it poses a hazard)
- Ergonomic hazards
- Occupational illnesses
- Personal protective equipment
- Documentation (e.g., inspection reports, maintenance schedules)

However, every company's inspection procedures should be tailored to the work environment. What's suitable for a corporate office is insufficient for a truck yard or electrical utilities jobsite.

Pre-use inspections of vehicles, tools, and equipment also play a major role in reducing hazards and preventing incidents. Different types of tools and equipment are inspected on different schedules. For example, equipment rated over 10 horsepower, such as backhoes, have to be inspected thoroughly before their first use at a jobsite and again at least annually—or more often, if recommended by the manufacturer.

"The manufacturer's operating instructions give a checklist of which items or elements of the tool or equipment need to be inspected and how often," Roberts says.

In general, a good rule of thumb is for workers to inspect their immediate work area for hazards—and their tools and equipment for signs of damage or deterioration—before starting their shift.

## What happens during an investigation?

Workplace investigations should be about "fact finding," not "fault finding." Numerous factors, including the work environment, job constraints, and supervisor and worker experience can play a part when an incident occurs. What matters is identifying these root causes so they can be controlled in the future.

An investigation should begin as soon as possible following an incident—that is, after any injured parties have received proper care—or reported near miss. At this stage, an investigator works to secure the scene to ensure it accurately reflects conditions at the time of the incident. They also identify and interview witnesses who can help piece together what happened, including events leading up to and in the immediate aftermath of the incident.

A comprehensive survey sees the investigator use a variety of tools (e.g., measuring tape, camera, sketches) to document evidence and create a detailed record of the scene. Evidence can be physical items such as equipment and materials, as well as testimony from witnesses.

Many investigators find it useful to create a matrix to track details before, during, and after the incident, categorized using the PEMEP acronym and related questions:

- **People** (workers and management): Who was involved and what did they do?
- **Equipment:** What was in use and was it used properly? Was it damaged or defective?
- **Materials:** Was a load too heavy or awkward?
- **Environment:** What were the physical workplace conditions?
- **Process:** Were best practices followed?

These details can then be analyzed to determine both the immediate cause and the underlying reasons why an unsafe act or workplace condition existed.

## What happens after an investigation?

To fulfill its purpose of preventing future incidents, an investigation must result in a final report that describes what happened, the incident's immediate cause, as well as any underlying causes (e.g., based on the PEMEP analysis). All information should be cross-checked with witness accounts.

Equally important are the report's recommendations to help the company learn from what happened and improve its health and safety practices. These should specify controls at the source, along the path, or at the worker, along with necessary corrective actions and the persons responsible for implementing them.

Ultimately, the report's findings must be shared with everyone at the workplace—not only so management can act but also to uphold workers' right to know about hazards and how they'll be controlled to prevent future incidents. ■



## Improve your workplace inspections and investigations



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