



GEAR UP FOR SAFETY

The importance of PPE for cleaning, environmental personnel

by *David L. Smith*

Cleaning may not be perceived as a high-risk occupation but statistics tell another story. Cleaning workers frequently experience cuts, bruises, burns, slip and fall incidences, lifting injuries, physical, chemical and biological hazards, and often high levels of workplace stress, according to the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety. The U.S. Department of Labor cites similar statistics and identifies cleaning workers as having a higher rate of injury and illness than the national average.

Despite the fact that cleaning and environmental staff are required to use chemicals and a wide range of cleaning tools and equipment, often there are

few measures taken to ensure the right personal protective equipment (PPE) is being worn consistently on the job. There is little or no in-field follow-up, and no specific accountability. So, although the required protocols are often in place, employees who were trained when they were hired simply fall out of the habit of wearing PPE. It may be because they fail to see its importance, find it cumbersome or inconvenient, believe it takes additional time that they just don't have, or find it uncomfortable or unattractive.

Too often, it takes a life-altering injury to act as a wake-up call to cleaning professionals and their employers. To avoid that sad reality, creating a culture of safety is vital.

GET WITH THE PROGRAM

Planning, developing and implementing a PPE program is the foundation for a safety-focused business. A good PPE program includes several components, including a workplace safety audit, appropriate product selection, personal fitting, implementation, management and supervisory support, program maintenance, ongoing communication, and periodic program review and update.

To begin, engage a qualified safety consultant from a reputable PPE supplier to conduct a thorough safety audit. This will include a review of cleaning processes, physical and chemical agents routinely encountered during cleaning tasks, cleaning

activities carried out in each work area and control measures in the work environment. It will also involve a review of relevant Safety Data Sheets (SDSs) to ensure all hazards associated with specific cleaning products are identified and accounted for.

Product types will be recommended based on safety regulations associated with each type of hazardous substance or condition workers may be exposed to. In Canada, two of the best-known standards that apply to personal protection in the workplace are CSA Group and Bureau de Normalisation du Québec (BNQ) standards. They outline the types of PPE recommended for particular work hazards, classify protection according to the hazard and establish PPE categories to aid in selecting the products best-suited to the risks of a specific job.

PPE requirements for relatively low-risk environments may be limited to basic hand, eye and ear protection. However, if certain types of chemicals, biohazards and airborne pollutants are present, specialized

equipment such as aprons, face shields, gowns, suits, boots and shoe covers may also be required. Some hazards will require multiple PPE solutions. For example, working with chlorine requires both eye and respiratory protection because the chemical is irritating to both the eyes and respiratory tract.

Once the types of PPE have been specified, request different models for employee testing and feedback. Involve cleaning and environmental staff members in the selection process to ensure proper fit, comfort and acceptability, particularly when multiple forms of PPE must be worn together. If PPE is heavy, poorly fitted, unattractive or uncomfortable, compliance is likely to be poor. Where possible, offer flexibility in the choice of PPE (while still meeting required legislation and standards) to encourage compliance.

After the PPE program has been developed, it is important to clearly document it in the facility or company's health and safety policy. Develop a training manual

to help employees understand the nature of the risks they encounter in the course of their work, how their PPE will function to protect them, how it should fit when worn correctly, the specific tasks for which it is required, and what to do in the event PPE is damaged or not available.

TIME TO GET DRESSED

A well-planned implementation process, which includes an employee communication program, is key to success. The facility or company's PPE provider should conduct training sessions with all cleaning staff. Cleaning hazards specific to the environment should be explained, along with the function of the various pieces of PPE. The proper fit and use of each product should be demonstrated. Workers should also be educated on the degree to which risk increases when PPE is removed, even if only for short periods of time. For example, if safety glasses are worn halfway down the nose, protection from flying particles is significantly reduced or may even be eliminated altogether.





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Request individual fitting sessions by the PPE provider's safety consultant. Each employee should be personally fitted for their own PPE and shown how to properly wear and maintain it. Employees should be given a period of time to become accustomed to wearing their new PPE (unless, of course, there is exposure to hazardous atmospheres, or a significant and immediate risk of serious injury in the absence of PPE).

SET AN EXAMPLE

Management and supervisory staff must be committed to making safety a part of every employee's day. Lead by example by wearing PPE, ask employees about their PPE, praise attention to safety and highlight its importance at every opportunity. Appoint an employee representative as a program coordinator with the responsibility to ensure each of the elements of the program is in place and operational. This has been shown to dramatically increase PPE program success.

DON'T FORGET TO TAKE CARE

Without proper maintenance, the effectiveness of PPE is uncertain. Maintenance should include care, cleaning, repair and proper storage. The most important part of maintenance is continuous inspections to identify damaged or improperly functioning equipment before it is used. PPE that is not performing up to manufacturers' specifications (such as safety glasses with scratched lenses, which compromise their ability to withstand impact) must be discarded.

Establish procedures to enable workers to obtain replacements or replacement parts for damaged PPE, and to keep it clean. Respiratory protection devices, for example, require a regular program of repair, cleaning, storage, filter replacement and periodic testing.

PROGRESS IMPOSSIBLE WITHOUT CHANGE

Once the PPE program has been implemented, set targets for compliance and injury reduction, and frequently communicate through the facility or company's management team. People are creatures of habit, so post reminders in areas where hazardous materials are routinely accessed and hold education programs regularly.

The most common reason for lack of PPE program compliance is the inability to overcome objections to wearing it. Listen to employee feedback and act on it. Address specific problems individually and make broader changes to address issues that affect a high percentage of employees. This demonstrates commitment to the program and responsiveness to employee concerns. Recognize consistent program compliance, and communicate and celebrate successful reductions in cleaning and environmental staff injuries.

The effectiveness of the PPE program should be monitored by auditing procedures and reporting on results. Compare safety performance before and after program implementation. Conduct a survey among cleaning staff members to obtain feedback on their use of PPE. Determine how successful the program has been and look for opportunities to improve. /

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