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Creating a Safer, More Productive Environment

Safety is key in any modern manufacturing environment. You don't just owe it to your workers; you also have to consider various rules and regulations, set forth by OSHA and other agencies, that govern the way you run your daily operations.
Chances are you already know that. After all, safety has become an increasingly commonplace daily check for most plant managers and process engineers. If you oversee safety at your facility, it's not even a question

That's why this article is not about the importance of safety in your job. Instead, it's about making sure that you don't fall into the false choice between safety and productivity.

Too often, the two concepts are seen as being at odds. To be safe, you must slow down operations. To increase efficiency, safety becomes less of a priority. In fact, that's far from the case. Instead, consider these 10 ways to increase safety in your facility without sacrificing productivity.

1. Rearrange Your Warehouse to Increase Efficiency

One of the core tenets of lean six sigma is the importance of removing waste in daily operations. Longer paths and unnecessary walks from one workstation to the other don't just slow workers down but increase safety hazards.

Imagine cutting down the times your employees must walk under heavy machinery or next to live operations. Each time they reduce that walk, they can spend more time on their job - but they're also less likely to get injured. That's why rearranging your warehouse according to lean six sigma principles can improve your workplace safety while maintaining and even optimizing productivity.

2. Decrease the Needs for Maintenance/Repairs at Heights

It's a simple equation: the higher in the air your teams must work, the higher their injury risk becomes. That becomes a problem when heavy machinery is arranged so that it's above the factory floor. Anytime it needs maintenance or repairs to function at optimal capacity, you expose your teams on the job to additional risks.

In these situations, basic fall prevention measures are already in place or should be implemented. But that doesn't mean you can't solve the problem on a more fundamental level, as well. Consider moving equipment that needs regular maintenance or repairs to lower heights. That might require some facility layout planning but will ultimately increase safety without having to completely relocate the machinery.

3. Improve Your Equipment Quality

Better equipment tends to lead to higher safety. Occupational hazard studies have found that greater dangers are directly correlated to the age of the equipment. The older your machinery gets, the more likely your workers will get injured. Improving machinery quality tends to be a significant capital investment, but safety is not the only reason you should consider updating equipment. Updating your equipment also helps to improve productivity through better operability, lower training needs, and faster turnaround times.

4. Automate Dangerous Tasks

Even the best equipment and most cautious practices will leave room for occupational hazards. Fortunately, recent technological advancements have reduced worker exposure to these dangers as tasks have become more automated. According to Safety + Health Magazine,

Robots can help prevent injuries or adverse health effects resulting from working in hazardous conditions. Some examples are musculoskeletal disorders due to repetitive or awkward motions, or traumatic injuries (for example, in poultry processing, where cuts are common). They can also prevent multiple hazards in emergency response situations such as chemical spills.

Machine learning further aids that process, helping facilities to 'train' robots to complete more complex tasks. Reducing the human involvement in dangerous conditions both increases safety, and improves productivity.

5. Offer Safety Trainings at all Levels

Training is key to successful safety measures, and when carefully planned, it also ensures productivity in the process. According to OSHA, regular safety trainings allow your workers to better prevent workplace hazards, accidents, and injuries. For long-term success, it makes sense to implement comprehensive learning courses related to this specific topic.

The key here is not limiting your training to those on the factory or warehouse floor. Everyone involved in the process, from shift supervisors to facility managers, should be able and expected to learn more about creating a better and safer work environment. Regularly scheduled training that is focused on individual job tasks ensures that you don't lose productivity even as you take time away from everyday responsibilities.

6. Optimize for Leading Indicators

Too many organizations still focus their safety evaluations on what happened in the past. You've seen. and are maybe even the keeper of, your facility's 'days accident free' log. While that's certainly admirable, it can't be the only way you track your efforts to improve safety.

Instead, and especially if you want to minimize potential productivity issues, focus on leading instead of lagging indicators. That means focusing on progress toward a given safety goal, rather than simply counting past injuries. The [Harvard Business Review cites](#) major manufacturers Allergan and Dow Chemical as companies who focus on metrics such as 'good observations' rather than past accidents.

This type of forward-looking approach also helps you understand how safety informs your productivity rates. Rather than adding it on as an additional task, you're moving it to be front of the queue and making it a precondition for all activities. Baked into the process, it becomes less of an impediment and more a simple standard of work.

7. Remove Unneeded Tools and Materials

The process of [removing unneeded tools and materials](#) from your facility is a well-established productivity step. It takes the 'lean' process quite literally, removing clutter that hinders employees from performing the necessary daily tasks. You might not realize it, but the same type of streamlining can also improve your safety metrics.
The same unneeded tools and materials also happen to be a safety hazard. At heights, they can fall. Workers carrying anything heavy can run into them. Or they can be confused about the actual tools needed. Either way, removing them is a simple step that increases your teams' safety.

8. Incorporate Safety in the Hiring Process

Don't wait until a supervisor or new employee of any kind arrives on the facility floor. Safety should be an organizational, not a department-level, concern. You can build towards that goal by incorporating the topic into the hiring process.

An increasing number of factories and warehouses build basic safety measures into their daily lives. That means anyone you hire with some experience in these facilities should know something about safety. Ask them to elaborate, from describing specific scenarios to talking about their past safety training. This helps ensure that new employees follow best practices from the start.

9. Create Safety/Productivity Rewards

Most supervisors are familiar with performance rewards as employee recognition tools. The same types of efforts can also help in your safety practices. Simply recognizing teams and individual employees who embrace, and practice daily safety measures, can go miles towards establishing a larger culture focused on the topic.

These rewards may come in the form of public callouts, trophies, or even tangible awards like paid days off. It may make sense to include a peer recognition component in it; teams may want to vote for the person on their team most mindful of safety in each time period. Either way, the mere existence of these types of rewards can help your teams embrace safety and begin to live it daily.

10. Improve Safety Accountability Throughout the Hierarchy

Finally, make sure that the responsibility for safe operations doesn't stop at the operational level. The entire company structure, from the C-Suite on down, should recognize just how important this topic is to the organization's long-term success and survival. Each decision maker should be as responsible for any safety successes or failures as an operator of a specific piece of machinery.

This type of comprehensive accountability takes the onus away from the worker, and thus lessens their need to sacrifice productivity for safety reasons. Rather than constantly second-guessing whether the right protocols are followed, they can be assured knowing that the protocols and practice will be safe. The result is smoother, and ultimately more productive, operations.

Does Productivity Trump Safety Needs?
Without a doubt, safety must be a significant concern within your company's operations. Naturally, productivity is also a top concern. But should you focus on one area over the other?

The short answer is no. Both matter, and productivity certainly doesn't trump the need for safety. The most efficient operations cannot lead to successful business if they come

with frequent hazards and injuries. In fact, these hazards can lead to reduced productivity, further emphasizing the need for a safety focus.

Addressing the topic, Occupational Health & Safety lists low-level access lifts as a perfect example of why one doesn't have to trump the other. You can be safe, even as you make your operations more effective. As shown through the examples above, the former tends to lead to the latter when implemented correctly.

It's impossible to run a successful business today without making some safety considerations. At the same time, it makes sense to focus on those areas that don't hamper your productivity in the process. The above tips can help you get started on the way to a safer, more productive environment.