

Improving employee comprehension of safety signs

Today's workforce is becoming increasingly diverse with workers coming from a wide variety of ethnic, social and educational backgrounds. This increased diversity can pose a challenge to safety managers who need to communicate safety hazard information to employees who may have limited English language skills.

Recent fatal work injury statistics demonstrate the need for better communications among multi-ethnic workforces. For example, the U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics reports that in 2001, the fatality rate for Hispanic construction workers was 62.5% higher than for their non-Hispanic counterparts.

A primary way that safety managers communicate safety information is through safety signs posted throughout the worksite. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) states that "the wording of any sign should be easily read and concise. The sign should contain sufficient information to be easily understood."

To reduce accidents in the workplace, employers should strive to make safety information available to all employees. CTSI suggests including more pictures and symbols in safety signs, printing safety signs in multiple languages, and training employees to understand safety signs.

Pictures and Symbols

Pictures and symbols are an excellent way to communicate safety information quickly and efficiently. Employees with little or no English reading comprehension can often understand symbols or pictures more easily than words.

The American National Standards Institute (ANSI) recognizes the importance of incorporating symbols in safety signs. In their published standards, ANSI states that "safety symbols can promote greater and more rapid communication of the safety message" over words-only signs. The standards point out that using effective safety symbols is especially important when workers have "a multiplicity of social and educational backgrounds with different reading skills and word comprehension."

To help employers select appropriate safety symbols for their signs, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) has developed a series of standardized safety symbols widely used throughout the world.

Foreign Languages

To improve comprehension of safety messages, employers should also consider posting safety signs in multiple languages. Although OSHA requires that safety signs be printed in English, it does not prohibit employers from printing signs in multiple languages. If portions of your workforce primarily speak languages other than English, consider posting signs in both English and those other languages.

Training

Employers can boost their employees' comprehension of safety signs by training them to understand what the different colors, symbols and words mean. For example, all employees should be instructed that the red, black and white danger signs are used to indicate immediate danger and special precautions are necessary. The yellow and black caution signs are used only to warn against potential hazards or to caution against unsafe practices.

For more information, contact CTSI at 303-861-0507.

County Technical Services, Inc.

800 Grant St., Suite 400
Denver CO 80203

303.861.0507
FAX: 303.861.2832

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