

COVID19: Think about Human Factors

Risk Management 101 teaches us to focus first on the area of highest risk. The global pandemic of COVID-19 requires all levels of society to focus on doing their part in managing this crisis. The World Health Organization is supporting governments and health organizations around the world with information, coordination, guidance and resources. National governments are mobilizing massive financial and human resources to help their citizens and contribute to the global response. Local governments and services are serving the communities under their mandate. Companies and their employees are continuing essential operations like transportation of food and manufacturing protective equipment for the health care sector. Individuals, we hope, are staying home to avoid both transmitting and receiving the virus. There's a lot going on and a lot of emotions running high.

Companies that continue to operate are doing so in stressful times, and it is very important to remember that it is people who make up a company. Employees and contractors are operating the machinery, dealing with other emotional people, and caring for those at home or in the community. People will be doing this work while they are worrying about their loved ones, fearful of being infected by the virus, wondering if the company will stay open or have to shut down, and possibly covering the work of someone who is unable to work due to self isolation, illness or care of someone else. It's a lot to think about.

We are Human Version 1 and we are fallible. Time, training, practice, equipment, and other resources all contribute to good decision making and mitigations to reduce the risk of carrying out our particular activity. People do not go to work intent on making errors, nor do they intend to get injured, but nevertheless it is shown that greater than 80% of injuries and accidents are the result of errors made - or put in terms of causal analysis: attributed to Human Factors.

Human Factors can be described as:

*"...the interrelationship between humans,
the tools and equipment they use in the workplace,
and the environment in which they work".*

(World Health Organization)

That's not to say that we humans are to "blame" for the events, it is just a simple fact that in most situations a human was involved and contributed in some way to the result. Human Factors influence our behaviour at work in a way that can affect health and safety.

Omission: Errors of omission occur when a worker fails to carry out a required task.

Commission: Errors of commission occur when a worker carries out a task incorrectly or does something that is not required.

Errors of omission are often due to someone simply forgetting to do something they're supposed to. It also happens in rushing to get a job done, cutting corners to save time or money, or even deciding a step or task is not needed. Omission can happen when we work from memory rather than a written procedure or checklist, or the procedure is not appropriate to the work being carried out. For whatever reason a worker misses/skips a step, 9 times out of 10 there is little harm done. The error either isn't 'caught', or a poor result isn't 'that big a deal'. Now consider how many more omissions may occur when workers are worried about their partner who hasn't been feeling well, their teenager who is alone at home, or their parent who has not yet made it home from the cruise ship they are on. Given the probability of errors, the likelihood of a serious incident increases.

Commission. Why would a worker add a step or just do things wrong? A case of a worker not fully trained on the task or is rushing often falls in this category. In normal circumstances, with added supervision, more checks, or extra mentoring the effects of a new worker or someone taking on a new task could be mitigated. What happens when this person is distracted, fatigued, covering for their co-worker and doesn't have a supervisor available to double-check their work? What if the way a worker is coping with the stress of the pandemic is by consuming drugs or alcohol? Is someone to blame or do they just need more support and awareness of the state they are in and how it may affect their safety?

There is little doubt in a safety professional's mind that under stressful situations there will be more near misses and safety events, and a higher potential for more severe consequences. For the Health and Safety Department in a high-risk industry, collecting and analyzing information is key. With good information they will have the ability to improve decision-making and manage the changes that are inevitable in such a climate. Business

leaders and safety professionals can be proactive in communicating risk and provide greater oversight to ensure that effective actions are planned and completed to reduce or eliminate risk and the potential for recurrence.

Safety Observations, Inspections, Audits: Proactively looking for something that *could* happen

Event Reporting: Reactively investigating something that *did* happen

Corrective and Preventative Actions: Monitoring the mitigations put in place to prevent recurrence or reduce the consequence of error

There are a number of investigative tools to use in understanding the cause of Human Factors related incidents, and two that are often referred to are:

Human Factors Analysis and Classification System - HFACS (Shappell and Wiegmann) was designed for aviation and is often used in Health Care.

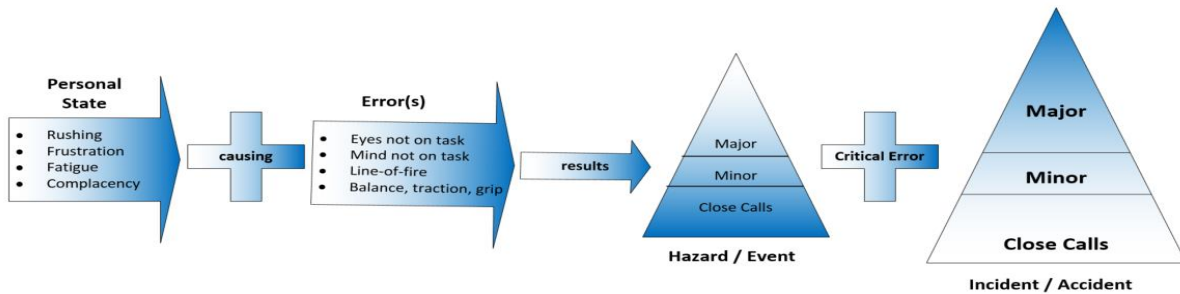
The *SafeStart®* Program (Larry Wilson) is popular in industries, such as construction, and provides a method to put Human Factors into a simple context. In this system, there are four 'reasons' for error:

- **Rushing:** a worker, for whatever reason, is compelled to do the work faster than advisable
- **Frustration:** noise, quiet, many people, slow business, an argument with a colleague
- **Fatigue:** lack of or poor quality sleep, task saturated, long hours or weeks
- **Complacency:** the "good enough" attitude, not asking for help when needed, poor quality of work

And similarly, there are four ways to avoid those errors:

- [keep your] **Eyes on Task:** looking away when you shouldn't – with the threat of COVID-19, a sneeze in the same room would do it.
- [keep your] **Mind on Task:** our minds wander, especially in emotional times.
- [keep out of the] **Line of Fire:** simply not being situationally aware of moving objects.
- [keep your] **Balance, traction, grip:** the slips, trips and falls; with a higher risk of consequences while working at heights

One slip or error may not cause an incident, however the problem occurs when the stars align. As mentioned earlier, 9 times out of 10 mistakes only cause an 'oops', however we humans rarely work in a vacuum. Right now there are many influences on all of us – all the time. To borrow again from SafeStart® this is how accidents happen:



To help us avoid an incident, we need to be aware of our own personal state. The organization needs to support its workers, and individuals must take responsibility as well, realize you are rushing and slow down; know when you are frustrated and take a deep breath and a short walk; be aware you are fatigued or just don't care any more - stop work. Most importantly speak up when things aren't right and you need help. Support for our workers at all levels is so much more important than attempting to lay blame. Worry, fatigue, fear, rushing, grief, family, noise, friends, quiet, work, home, culture; there's a lot for us to think about – take care of ourselves and others, and above all - stay safe.



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