



# STUDENT HIRES

*Are they more accident prone?*



It is the time of year when many municipalities hire students for summer employment. These young, enthusiastic, and oftentimes obliging short-term employees can provide a tremendous boost to the morale and productivity of the full-time team. However, special care needs to be taken when selecting, onboarding, and

supervising these employees. According to the 2016 Live Safe Work Smart survey, adolescents and young adults are twice as likely to sustain a work injury as adults.<sup>1</sup> Worse still, new and young workers in Ontario are four times more likely to be injured during the first month of employment than at any other time.<sup>2</sup> Given that the average tenure of “summer student hires” is two to four months, the risk to these employees is considerable.

If we look at the challenge from a strictly objective, dollars and cents perspective, the cost to an organization can quickly add up. A U.S.-based

workplace insurance provider studied the costs of accidents and found that for every dollar of direct accident costs (hospital bills, legal costs, etc.) there are three dollars of indirect accident costs – including time lost from work by injured employees, efficiency loss from the break-up of a crew, cost of training a new worker, damage to tools, equipment, and other property,

1 Live Safe Work Smart (2016), Young worker health and safety: Fast facts from the institute for work and health <[www.livesafeworksmart.net/english/fast\\_facts/index.htm](http://www.livesafeworksmart.net/english/fast_facts/index.htm)>.

2 Infrastructure Health and Safety Association, New and experienced workers <[www.ihsa.ca/new\\_experienced\\_workers/new\\_young\\_workers.aspx#](http://www.ihsa.ca/new_experienced_workers/new_young_workers.aspx#)>.

**STEPHEN FLOWER** is a Managing Principal with Predictive Success, a consultancy that leverages people analytics to help organizations optimize the performance of their employees. He can be reached at <[sflower@predictivesuccess.com](mailto:sflower@predictivesuccess.com)>.

etc.<sup>3</sup> As such, the information in Figure 1 from the U.K. Health and Safety Executive, defining the true cost of accidents, start to make perfect sense.

Sadly, there were 17 young worker fatalities (15 to 24 years old) from 2010 to 2015 in Ontario. Thankfully, this grim tally is relatively low compared with other jurisdictions. However, according to the Ontario Ministry of Labour, every year more than 6,000 young workers across the province are injured seriously enough to need time off work; that's equivalent to nearly 17 Ontario youth a day.<sup>4</sup> Simply tackling the "minor" stuff will have a tremendous impact on the wellbeing of your staff and on the bottom line. So, where do you start? A proactive approach with a focus on leading indicators is a good place to begin.

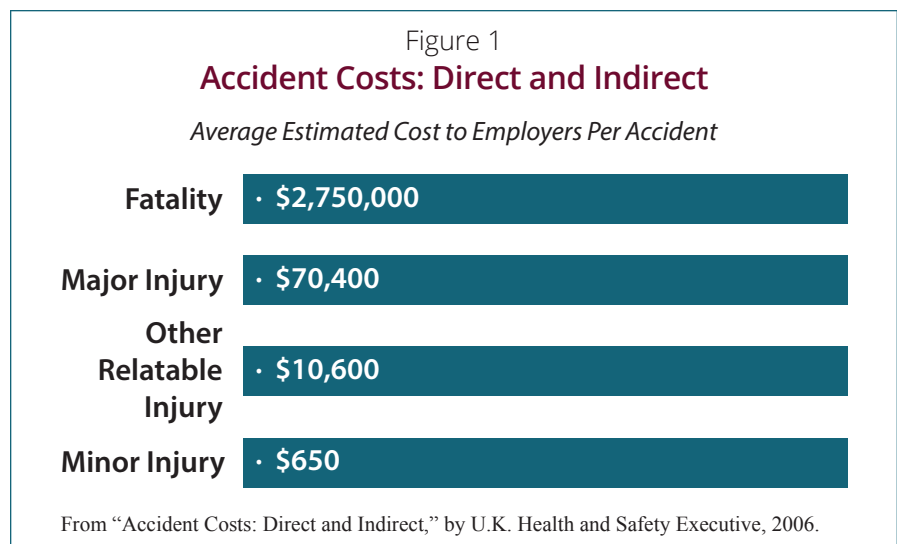
If you are not familiar with the concept of leading indicators, they can be defined simply as proactive safety initiatives or reported activities, with the aim of preventing negative occurrences before they happen. They can be contrasted with lagging indicators, which are reactive in nature. Lagging indicators measure the effectiveness of a safety program after the fact. Typical lagging indicators include the number of incidents, injuries, days away from work (DAFW), etc. If the true goal is to prevent accidents and injuries before they happen, then an increased focus on procedures, practices, and behaviours that can contribute to adverse events is advised. Ideally, the leading indicators you choose should be similar to those of your industry peers, as there is a strong likelihood they would apply to your organization as well. The previous statement may be a bit too broad to be applied simply, so the following list of the

3 Workers Compensation Fund (2017), Hidden Costs of Accidents. WCF Insurance Safety Department <[www.wcf.com/hidden-costs-accidents](http://www.wcf.com/hidden-costs-accidents)>.

4 Ministry of Labour (2016), Ontario taking action to protect young workers: Province launches initiatives focusing on enforcement and prevention <<https://news.ontario.ca/mol/en/2016/05/ontario-taking-action-to-protect-young-workers.html>>.

5 EHS Today (2015), "Top Leading Indicators," <[http://ehstoday.com/safety/2015-national-safety-survey-photo-gallery#slide-2-field\\_images-42091](http://ehstoday.com/safety/2015-national-safety-survey-photo-gallery#slide-2-field_images-42091)>.

6 Bernd Freibott (2012), Sustainable Safety Management: Incident Management as a Cornerstone for a Successful Safety Culture <[www.asse.org/assets/1/7/BerndFreibottArticle.pdf](http://www.asse.org/assets/1/7/BerndFreibottArticle.pdf)>.



most commonly tracked leading indicators<sup>5</sup> may help:

- training – classroom or one-on-one mentoring (86.5%)
- employee audits and observations (81.5%)
- near misses (78.8%)
- safety meetings (78.6%)
- facility housekeeping (59.2%)
- participation in safety committees (59.2%)
- overall employee engagement in safety (54.5%)
- equipment/machinery maintenance (50.2%)

Many of the aforementioned fall in the realm of simple best practices and may already be in place within your organization. The areas that are typically overlooked are often the easiest places to drive positive results. In the context of young workers and helping to keep them safe, a focus on near misses, employee observation, and the employee's behaviour is advisable.

### Safety Triangle

Near misses or close calls (as they are often described) are events where the possibility of injury or an accident was present, but, was avoided merely by chance or circumstance. In these cases, it is easy to write the incident off as a one-time thing, or just something that occurs in the course of a normal work day. Minimizing the significance of the event is a terrible oversight, as a near miss is a key leading indicator that can help you prevent injuries down the road. In 1969, a study of industrial accidents was undertaken by Frank E. Bird,

Jr. He devised what became known as the Safety Triangle (See Figure 2).

The Safety Triangle remains relevant to this day. Bird's exhaustive study of industrial accidents found that for every reported major injury (resulting in fatality, disability, lost time, or medical treatment), there were 9.8 reported minor injuries (requiring only first aid). Further analysis indicated that 30.2 property damage accidents were reported for each major injury. Confidential interviews by trained supervisors on the occurrence of incidents, which under slightly different circumstances could have resulted in injury or property damage, revealed that there were 600 near miss incidents for every reported injury.<sup>6</sup> Thus the 600-30-10-1 ratio cited in the Safety Triangle.

### How to Promote Change for the Better

When you think back to your days as a "young worker," you may be able to recall some of your own near misses. You may have had close to 600 close calls yourself! If you are in that camp, the reasons why are all too common. You didn't know what you were doing, you were eager to please your supervisor, and your natural characteristics may have lent themselves to unsafe behaviour. So, how do you help your employees avoid situations you may have found yourself in? Obviously, training employees on the correct and safe way to do their jobs is essential. Even more important is fostering a mentoring environment among more experienced staff and supervisors with the young employees with whom they work. Once you create an

Figure 2  
**Safety Triangle**



environment where best practice is shared freely and readily, and employees have the confidence to relate near misses that occur, you have taken a big step toward lowering the frequency of otherwise unreported safety occurrences and ultimately serious injuries. Having an accurate measure of

your employees behavioural traits can also be a leading indicator.

When studying the behavioural profiles of employees relative to their safety records, some startling trends emerge. People with qualities that can be described as impatient, impulsive, hurrying, carefree, unworried, autonomous, unyielding, self-reliant, etc. quite naturally carry themselves in a fashion that may be counter to “safe” conduct.

If your instincts are telling you to do it faster, take some chances, and be

bold, you may be inadvertently placing yourself at risk. People who are naturally calm, deliberate, steady, precise, careful, conservative, compliant, collaborative, etc. have fewer accidents.<sup>7</sup> Employees with these qualities conduct themselves in a more calculated fashion, follow the rules, and do things the “right way.” The correlation between this approach and safety is very strong. Being made aware of “blind spots” is sometimes all that is necessary to help employees that are not naturally deliberate and cautious in their approach. Better still is when messaging around the “safe” way to do things is consistently communicated throughout the organization.

### Mitigating Risk for Summer Students

As you start to think about hiring summer students, pause and reflect on the environment in which you are going to place them. Is a structure in place that will ensure an adequate amount of training is provided? Is there ongoing mentoring and supervision? Is a near miss reporting protocol in place? And finally, do you have an accurate measure of a candidate’s behavioural tendencies and is that information used to help in the hiring, onboarding, and ongoing management of the employee?

Instinctively, you may want to answer yes to all of these questions, but you need to be honest with this assessment. Any efforts made in these areas will go a long way in helping mitigate the risk for new employees. Drilling these practices into the culture of your organization will provide dramatic improvements in your safety records and ensure these student hires head back to school in September in one piece. **MW**

7 Douglas F. Cellar, Zachary C. Nelson, Candice M. Yorke, and Cara Bauer (2009), “The five-factor model and safety in the workplace: Investigating the relationships between personality and accident involvement,” *Journal of Prevention and Intervention in the Community*, Volume 22, pp. 43-52 <<http://tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10852350109511210>>.

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