HEALTH & SAFETY

Behavioural analytics help boost safety

SaskPower sees results through safety profiles, communication, metrics

By Eric Irwin

In the power utility industry, power-line technicians work in and around potentially dangerous situations every day. A lack of proper supervision and a strict adherence to standard operating procedures (SOPs) can mean unsafe practices and lead to a significant number of accidents and injuries.

Accidents, beyond the human suffering component, increase liability insurance costs, drive up Workplace Safety Insurance Board (WSIB) premiums, and result in more frequent government inspections or mandated closures. This translates into a substantial impact on a company's bottom line.

So, it makes sense that organizations such as SaskPower are working to reduce the number of workplace accidents by making safety a matter of corporate culture.

And one way it's doing that is through behavioural analytics. Behavioural analytics tools offer managers a scientific method for identifying employees whose natural behaviour makes them predisposed to safety.

As an example, safe employees in the mining and trucking industries tend to be thorough, methodical, risk-averse and diligent — but not aggressive, according to research by Predictive Success.

So by focusing their attention on employees who exhibit these traits, employers can place safety-conscious workers in the appropriate roles.

Executive teams should also analyze how these employees are man-

aged. A connection between the behaviours of employees and their supervisors has been a common thread throughout Predictive Success' safety studies.

In fact, truck drivers at a copper mine who fit the established profile, and were managed by supervisors with a safety-first focus, had zero preventable accidents.

Similar findings were found through a study of 383 drivers at a major national trucking firm. In this case, safety success resulted in fewer regulatory issues with the government.

In looking at the obstacles to safety in the utilities industry, there is a direct link between certain behavioural traits and workplace safety. These traits were also seen in the mining and trucking studies.

And there are three common workplace management themes that influence employee safety behaviours: a pressure to get things done, clear communication and safety metrics.

Pressure to get things done

The pressure to "get things done now" can negatively influence employees to take risky shortcuts. This pressure can come from many places, such as an employee's own family, her supervisors, or other work groups.

At utility companies such as SaskPower, the pressure to get the lights back on falls on a number of work groups but, in most instances, it's the power-line technicians. And initial analysis showed power technicians with the right safety profiles

were similar to workers in the mining and trucking industries.

A full picture emerges when examining the statistics from the behaviour profiles of SaskPower's supervisors. Those with the right safe behaviour profile were detail-oriented, concerned about their employees, protective and focused on getting the job done according to proven systems and procedures.

Clear communication

The safest employees have natural behaviours that motivate them to be very detailed-oriented and work "by the book." Consequently, any form of ambiguous communication from their superiors could create doubt and stress over proper procedures. In turn, this could lead to unsafe decisions.

SaskPower conducted a safety workshop to help supervisors understand the measurable relationship between behaviour and safety. Supervisors were taught how to read the behaviour profiles of their power-line technicians and identify areas of conflict with their own behaviour profile.

With further coaching, the supervisors were able to adjust their communications with the technicians to avoid unintended pressure that could lead to ignoring SOPs and negatively impact safety.

"For a safety-first attitude to permeate throughout the organization, it has to start with the senior leadership," says Brian Ketcheson, vice-president of human resources at SaskPower in Regina.

"In fact, we've created a motto that everyone throughout the orga-

nization knows: 'We may work in a dangerous industry, but we don't do dangerous work.'"

Safety metrics critical

Does management know who the best employees are when it comes to safety? Do they promote and celebrate their safety successes internally?

Metrics and rewards systems that answer these questions are critical to creating a safety culture at any organization.

SaskPower's executive team are firm believers in measurement. The organization has systems in place to measure productivity, customer service and response time. Now, they have a measure for safety that identifies the safest employees so they can be celebrated as examples throughout the organization.

Across industries that require a focus on safety, the only sure way to mitigate risk is to eliminate unsafe acts by employees. Behavioural analytics tools are a proven way to identify engaged, detail-oriented and attentive employees. And employees can reduce accidents significantly.

The example set by these employees also improves the safety of other employees throughout the organization.

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