

Project Safety Data May Indicate Perception and Training Gaps



DURING THE PAST 18 MONTHS, BASED ON 800,000 FIELD OBSERVATIONS FROM 1,000 PROJECTS INVOLVING 3,000 GENERAL AND SUBCONTRACTORS, PATTERNS OF BEHAVIORS AND CONDITIONS ARE EMERGING THAT WERE, UNTIL NOW, INVISIBLE. THE BAD NEWS IS THAT WE DON'T SEEM TO BE AS WE THOUGHT WE WERE... THE GOOD NEWS: THE DATA SAFETYNET IS COLLECTING IS POINTING US TO POTENTIAL PROBLEMS BEFORE THEY HAPPEN.



By Barry Nelson
President of DBO2

For contactors, owners, and insurance companies, job site safety is an enormous issue that, if not managed very carefully, can lead to worker injuries, costly litigation, skyrocketing insurance and workers' compensation premiums, missed project deadlines and OSHA and other regulatory violations and fines.

It may be premature to declare for certain, but if early indicators mean anything, the \$3.2 trillion construction industry appears on the verge of taking the job site safety issue to a whole new level. During the past 18 months, based on 800,000 field observations from 1,000 projects involving 3,000 general and subcontractors, patterns of



behaviors and conditions are emerging that were, until now, invisible. Utilizing a relatively new service from DBO2, called SafetyNet, about 60 large contractors spread across the United States are starting to piece together and linking the enormous amount of data from job site safety observations routinely collected today but typically buried uselessly in file cabinets.

As can be expected, there is both good and bad news. The bad news is that we don't seem to be as we

thought we were. For example, contractors with few if any recordable incidents on a project often have hundreds – sometimes thousands – of observed, recorded and fixed unsafe conditions and behaviors. The good news: the data SafetyNet is collecting is pointing us to potential problems before they happen. This means builders can anticipate safety issues, have more time to act, and prevent people from getting hurt. It's a bit like weather forecasting. We can't

control when it is going to rain, but we are getting better at predicting what days to pack an umbrella.

Since the inception of OSHA in the 1970s, good contractors have been making steady progress toward lowering overall job site accidents and incidents. The average OSHA incident rate is down over 33% over the past 10 years. Contractors who really see the value in creating a safety culture have made even more progress during the same period. In fact, many builders go months and sometimes years without a single lost-time incident. That's certainly good news. The bad news? This progress has these builders asking themselves: "If I am not having accidents then we must be safe? My programs must be in place and people must be deploying them consistently." But are they?

Unfortunately, the data being collected indicates there is much work to be done. What we are learning is that best practices are often not deployed consistently, field supervision needs additional training and there is a big gap between what management thinks is happening in the field and what the field is actually doing. And while incident rates may be low, major preventable injuries and deaths still happen. Without the safety "weather report," contractors don't know where or when to focus to avoid injuries. Without the means to show carriers how they will be safe, insurance renewal pricing is often unfairly generic.

Let me provide some examples of what participating contractors are learning from the data:

1. Management perceives that more inspections are being done in the field than are really being done. While there are often legitimate short-term reasons for the difference, our informal survey of 25 company executives found few thought that their expectations and the field's expectations were aligned.
2. Field operations teams believe that there is a more consistent understanding of safe and unsafe conditions than the evidence reveals. While more research is required, we see huge knowledge gaps



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between field supervisors from one job to another. This manifests itself in the number of both safe and unsafe observations collected across multiple safety categories, including electrical, personal protective equipment and fall protection. Field supervisors see on average 50% fewer unsafe conditions on a job site than their safety professionals. The delta is even higher when observations are made from independent audits. Keep in mind these are observations of very "safe" contractors with low incident and accident rates.

3. There is a link between incidents and the frequency of observations and management's involvement. We see anecdotal examples in the field of what many people believe is happening at a macro level. People do what you measure them on and what they believe the boss thinks is important. On some projects, we observe a direct correlation between the number of incidents and the number of inspections. When an incident did occur and resources are re-allocated, incidents from where the resources were shifted increased. Coincidence? Perhaps, but probably not.


As mentioned, the data is being collected with DBO2's SafetyNet. This system involves job site inspections by a person—usually safety inspectors or field personnel—using a handheld PDA to record observations in up to 19 specific safety and risk areas. The inspector then uploads the collected information from the PDA to a centralized server via a phone line or Internet connection. This data is reviewed against safety and risk parameters, organized, prioritized and forwarded to the construction firm's management for action, including intervention and additional employee training. The more observations recorded, the more patterns and trends will emerge.

Naturally, we are eager to gather more information and to continue connecting leading indicators, such as the number of workers not wearing

gloves, to lagging indicators, such as the number of hand injuries.

Importantly, more and more companies are getting involved to share their information. We hope to incorporate data from OSHA and the Texas Workers' Compensation Fund with our National Construction Safety Benchmark and data collected from our underwriter and broker partners. Information alone is not the answer, though. The Doppler radar system can't stop a hurricane. However,

whenever we see that big cloud off the coast of Africa it might be a good idea to start thinking about where to find some plywood for the windows. As I mentioned earlier, we are early in the process and we have much to learn, but there seems to be something on the radar and it's too big to be a bird.

If you would like to learn more about our findings or help us in preventing job site accidents and incidents, please feel free to contact DBO2 or Quoin. 

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