

business issues

BRINGING SANITY TO THE WORKPLACE

BY BARRY NATHAN, Ph.D.

Applying a bit of psychology
can help address the root cause
of unsafe behavior.

IF IT SEEMS that some employees seem to be more accident prone, or have more workers' compensation claims than others, you're right: Personality matters when it comes to safety.

A growing body of research is proving that personality plays a big part in how safely or unsafely someone will work. As a result, companies are turning to safety-based personality assessments to identify potential and current employees who are more likely to take risks and experience accidents and injuries.

A 2008 study by the Liberty Mutual Research Institute for Safety found that injured employees cost organizations nearly \$1 billion per week in direct and indirect costs, despite engineering and environmental interventions, and policies and procedures specifically designed to increase workplace safety. Clearly, safety training is not enough. One safety consultant noted that if an organization doesn't have insight into how employee personalities contribute to the safety climate, even the most extensive safety program will have limited success.

Predicting Unsafe Employees

Tulsa, Okla.-based Hogan Assessment Systems is one of the leading workplace personality assessment firms in the world. The firm is best known for its leadership assessments, but also has conducted extensive research on safety. Going back over 30 years, Hogan has identified six safety-based personality attributes that predict a range of safety-related outcomes, including workers' compensation claims, accidents and injuries:

- **Compliant:** An inclination to adhere to rules and policies.
- **Strong:** Able to effectively manage stress under pressure.
- **Cheerful:** Able to maintain control over one's emotions and not lose one's temper.
- **Vigilant:** Remaining focused when performing routine or mundane tasks, not becoming distracted.
- **Cautious:** Not being inclined to take risks.
- **Trainable:** Willingness to accept new ways of doing things.

Hogan's research results are impressive. One West Coast transportation firm found that individuals with a high-safety/low-risk profile had 22% fewer accidents, 40% fewer rule violations and 25% fewer workers' compensation claims.

In a Midwest manufacturing firm, 63% of individuals with below average safety scores filed workers' compensation claims, compared to only 28% of those workers with above average safety scores. That is a 40% difference in workers' compensation claims.

Among employees in a national postal and parcel delivery organization performing jobs that involved receiving, transporting, and delivering packages, employees with above average safety scores had 25% fewer citations for "unsafe work behaviors" compared to those with below average safety scores. By hiring only individuals with above average safety scores, the company could have reduced its number of citations by 13%.

Improving Safety Among Current Employees

While some employers are turning to personality assessment to avoid hiring potentially unsafe employees, others are using personality assessment as a preemptive way to address current employees' unsafe tendencies *before* accidents happen. Using personality assessments can be an effective way for supervisors to coach their employees about safety concerns.

Once trained in how to interpret the assessment results and how to use this information to coach, supervisors review each subordinate's results and develop personalized Safety Improvement Plans with each employee based on their assessment-determined tendencies. Coaching helps employees recognize personal tendencies and anticipate problems before they occur. Coaching based on personality assessment makes employees aware of their blind spots and helps them develop personalized strategies for how to deal with them.



Barry Nathan, Ph.D., is an industrial-organizational psychologist and president of Pittsburgh-based Leader Business Coaching. He can be reached at Barry.nathan@LeaderBusinessCoaching.com.

Employers have found an additional benefit from training supervisors to become personality-based safety coaches: Supervisors become better coaches in general. Typically, coaching focuses on performance issues; too often it occurs after an incident has occurred. Often supervisors are reluctant or uncomfortable confronting employees about performance problems, and employees often become defensive. In these situations, the coaching experience is often distasteful, not always effective, and occasionally dysfunctional.

In contrast, when the focus of coaching is on safety assessment results rather than an incident, the discussions tend to be more strategy focused. There is less reason to be defensive, and more reason to be collaborative. Coaching becomes an opportunity to drive safety commitment, rather than a discussion about safety compliance.

Hogan's SafeSystem Assessments are delivered online. The coaching program for supervisors is provided by a Hogan-certified

trainer, but the safety improvement materials and personalized lessons for employees are provided as online modules. The SafeSystem assessments and safety reports have been translated into 22 languages and dialects.

Personality assessment provides a pre-emptive way of addressing unsafe tendencies *before* accidents happen.

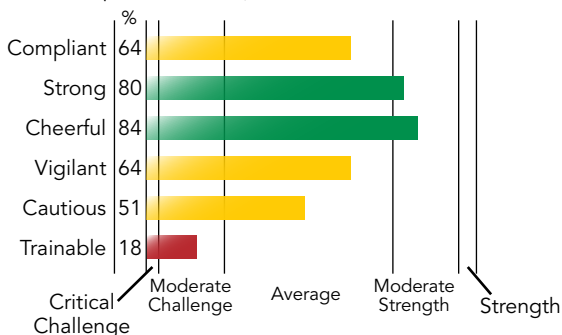
Not Just for Technical Employees

Most companies are using SafeSystem in technical and transportation divisions, but at the 2011 NASCC: The Steel Conference in Pittsburgh, the program piqued the interest of a one firm's vice president of sales. "I have a great sales staff," he said, "but they're

risk-takers, nonconformers, easily distracted, and in some cases, a bit arrogant; everything you say makes for an unsafe employee. They'd jump on a moving girder if it meant making a big sale! I love their commitment, but sometimes their enthusiasm scares me to death. This would be a great onboarding program!" I told him that I couldn't agree more.

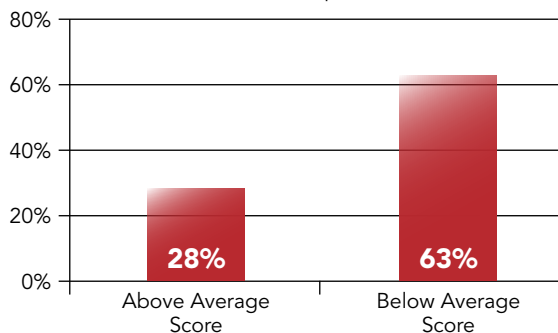
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Graphical Summary of Assessment Results



▲ Graphical representation of the assessment results show an individual's areas of strength in green while areas that could be improved are in yellow or red.

Assessment Scores Compared to Claims



▲ Portion of one firm's workers who filed workers' compensation claims, based on whether they scored above or below average on the personality assessment.