

Hazard communication

Reality-based recipe for hazcom reform

POSTED: 01/01/2005

Not long after the 1984 federal regulations were developed to streamline hazard communication in the workplace via material safety data sheets, widespread criticism over the effectiveness of these sheets began to surface among industry stakeholders. With two decades of frustration among those responsible for safety in the workplace, to what can the sudden spike in interest over federal hazcom reform be attributed? The answer lies in a seemingly random recipe for blending several foreign countries together with a few forward-thinking Congressmen, one stubborn OSHA administrator, and the millions of individuals with asthma.

The world takes off

The first ingredient in our recipe for rationale is the slate of countries that developed the Globally Harmonized System for the Classification and Labeling of Chemicals (GHS). The United Nations formally adopted the GHS in 2002, and countries have adopted it into their national regulatory requirements. But the United States is not among them. We have chosen to step out of the way and let the rest of the world run ahead of us. As long as we hide from international opportunities to promote harmony, our problems will not go away. This dissonance should be a wake-up call.

Congress takes an interest

The second ingredient in the recipe is a small group of U.S. Congressmen who have taken public stands in defense of accountability. On the heels of the Enron saga, Senator Paul Sarbanes and Representative Michael Oxley authored a bill that called for improved corporate governance. This new law, which went into effect in 2002, has a profound impact on companies in the health and safety industries, as it now requires officers to directly face and address issues of environmental accountability that had seemingly been overlooked in previous years. Lastly, the efforts of Senator Mike Enzi in 2004 cannot be overlooked. Senator Enzi presided over an historic Senate hearing that resulted in his recommendations to make the federal hazcom regulations more accountable.

OSHA disinterest

The third ingredient in the recipe is the low level of interest that John Henshaw has demonstrated in suggesting a legislative and regulatory fix to current hazcom problems. Henshaw, who resigned as OSHA administrator on December 31, 2004, claims that the evidence relating to the inaccuracies in MSDSs is largely "anecdotal." Mr. Henshaw's platform has graduated from just plain stubborn to downright dangerous. By pretending that the problem isn't real, he is putting the lives of workers at risk.

A red flag

The last ingredient in our recipe for rationale is the growing number of individuals with asthma. Nearly 50 percent of asthmatics who visit an occupational safety and health clinic had been exposed to hazardous chemicals. This is no coincidence. Breathing problems are a direct effect of chemical exposure, be it in the workplace or through exposure to everyday products such as insect repellents, hairsprays, and cleaning agents. Without a system to better educate those who come into contact with chemicals, the incidents of asthma and other chronic diseases will continue to escalate.

Going into action

Recent activity in the hazcom arena has triggered safety professionals, government, and the health and safety industry to action. Scenarios supporting that action have stretched all the way from international shores to America's kitchens. Thankfully, there have been pioneering efforts in the private sector to directly respond.

One in particular is Arizona-based MC Technologies. This company has received widespread acclaim from industry stakeholders for its MAXCOM system, a proprietary hazardous chemical management system that assigns workplace chemicals into one of several categories and three hazard levels.

Despite the obstacles which have impeded progress in hazcom, and the time required to enact new legislation, this should provide a high level of comfort and confidence among industrial hygienists that they can be overcome. And that is a recipe for success.



Copyright © 2005 by [BNP Media](#)