

PEOPLE-CENTRIC HEALTH & SAFETY TRAINING

If we were to rewind to 125 years ago, a vastly different picture of labour safety would emerge. What was then largely an agricultural economy, was moving swiftly into the industrial age, and more significantly, South Africa was experiencing the gold mining boom. The machinery aiding a new era of economic growth and productivity was bigger, faster and more dangerous.

As a result, employees were getting injured or losing their lives in ever increasing numbers and companies were compelled to take remedial action. Legislation, safety guidelines and policies were implemented that significantly altered the way in which workplace safety was approached.

Fast-forward to 2017. While it is true to say the gains in health and safety in the workplace have been vast, it still seems not enough is being done. Many organisations continue to report the same injuries: back and eye injuries as well as fractures due to slips, trips and falls. It is estimated that these injuries result in an average of 11 days away from work.

“It appears that of all safety measures, training and continued awareness are the most challenging to instil in employees because they rely heavily on the staff members’ ability to learn, understand and comprehend safety measures. It also requires the employee to buy into the safety culture of a company,” says Anton Zwanepoel, Business Unit Manager at Innovative PPE Solutions.

It seems apparent that the delivery of training is only a part of the answer. *How* the training is delivered is of equal importance. It is here that significant strides are being made, in this, the age of the Internet of Things.

The first advance is termed “bite-sized learning” and is defined as the process of developing information on a single topic and delivering it in a short, simple and memorable way. This methodology avoids information overload and ensures an employee retains more pertinent information. Breaking down key points to small “bite-sized” chunks, anywhere from one to five minutes helps keep the employee engaged and interested, and most importantly, aids in the retention of material imparted.

A further development in safety training is closely linked to the rapid growth of technology. The concept of gamification applies game mechanics to the design of learning to improve employee engagement and information recall. This can take the form of video games, games of chance or team challenges. With the widespread use of mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets, this allows the employee to learn anywhere, anytime. This naturally has the knock-on effect of employees not having to be in long, drawn-out training sessions resulting in unproductive downtime.

A third development, which is upending the realm of safety training, is that of Artificial Intelligence. A leading consumer electronics organisation in South Africa, in identifying the skills-gap in South Africa, has commenced on-the-job training for would-be air-conditioning technicians by equipping them with virtual reality headgear. When arriving on site, the trainee technician “tunes into” the control room – manned by an experienced manager – and is guided through the process in real time and additionally is steered clear of any possible workplace injury. This immense stride in training has displayed multiple benefits: that of ensuring the all-important transfer of skills, avoiding injury and costly, unproductive time spent behind a desk in training sessions.

“Technology is changing the face of personal protective equipment (PPE). Wearable technologies such as radio frequency identification are the way of the future for the PPE sector. These hands-free wearables can monitor vitals along with exposure thresholds to hazardous

chemicals to help measure a worker's proximity to danger zones. These technologies will assist in improving safety in a variety of workplaces."

"In addition, we're seeing manufacturers developing advanced new materials that are not only improving PPE overall, but also reducing costs. By utilising these textiles, PPE manufacturers can significantly reduce the costs of materials and pass those savings on to customers, which is key in this price-sensitive market," concludes Zwanepoel.

It is this advanced thinking that is behind the success of the Innovative Protective Personal Equipment business. The organisation constantly seeks new and original ideas to improve on the tried and tested in order to deliver tangible bottom line benefits to their clients' businesses.