

USING ONLINE TOOLS TO IMPROVE SAFETY: THE CASE FOR BRITISH SUGAR



Companies are increasingly recognizing the financial and social benefits of improved safety within the workplace, and, as a result, are augmenting their safety programmes by creating an improved culture of safety. Inherent in this process is the initiation of continuous dialogue amongst employees. However, this often proves challenging, requiring an inventive approach. British Sugar, in creating an online platform that facilitates confidential discussions between employees and managers, has developed a sustainable means to initiate dialogue about safety. This programme has not only led to reduced injuries and incidences in the workplace, but has also earned British Sugar a DuPont Safety Award in 2009.

British Sugar is the leading supplier of sugar in the United Kingdom, extracting the sugar from locally-grown sugar beet. The company operates four sugar factories in the UK, producing over 1.2 million tonnes of sugar per annum – more than half the country’s sugar requirements. Aside from typical hazards found in sugar factories - large quantities of hot fluids, on-site carbon dioxide manufacture, work at heights and potential for gas and dust explosions – continuous safety dialogue is also necessitated by the largely seasonal workforce, as well as an increasing number of contractors.

Although health and safety has long been a strategic business priority for British Sugar, a company fatality in 2003 led to a renewed focus on safety. According to the company, there had been a procedural framework and significant capital investment, but this was “not winning hearts and minds.” British Sugar thus decided to work with DuPont to improve its safety management system.

In 2006, building on the DuPont approach to safety management, the company introduced the Safety Performance Discussions (SPD) programme. The programme uses software to facilitate confidential, two-way conversations about safety between a line manager and his/her employee. The manager and employee use this platform on a biannual basis to discuss a number of pre-determined safety topics based on British Sugar safety standards. During the discussion, the manager and employee agree upon a personal safety action plan for the employee, while also identifying specific actions for the manager. This process fosters a strong sense of mutual accountability.

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This programme utilizes software designed and developed by British Sugar employees at low cost to the company. The e-learning approach was chosen over traditional paper-based methodologies, as “line managers felt that if the initiative was to be successful, it must be paperless.”

Employees embraced the new e-learning approach. Trainings were provided for those lacking familiarity with computers, and the confidential nature of the discussion built a level of trust between the managers and the employees. Employees have developed a strong sense of ownership for their own safety, as well as the safety of others, as they define their personal safety objectives, as well as those of their manager.

Implementation of the SPD programme has led to a marked reduction in injuries and incidences. During the 2005-06 season, the lost time injury frequency rate per million hours worked dropped from 5.2 in 2005/06 to 3 in 2008/09, a drop of over 40%. One of the themes the company targeted in SPD was near-miss reporting to help identify unsafe behaviours before they lead to accidents. This has had a powerful effect: in the two years from 2006-07 to 2008-09, near-miss reporting increased by 346%. Over the same period, the ratio of reporting unsafe acts or unsafe conditions to injury reports rose from 4:1 to 20:1. As stated by British Sugar management, “Safety Performance Discussions play a crucial part in this journey by providing a paperless process for feedback on our standards of behaviour. They have reduced our injuries by providing an open and honest forum for improvement.” The company has stated its intentions to use the programme in the long-term. “It is very cost-effective, costing us nothing in terms of software licensing or maintenance. Management teams and employees fully support the process and actively contribute to its ongoing development.”



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In 2009, British Sugar was awarded the prestigious DuPont Safety Award in recognition of their innovative approach to safety management. As stated by Koen van Neyghen, President, DuPont Safety Resources, Europe, Middle East and Africa, “The worldwide demand for protecting lives and the environment is one of the four key megatrends DuPont will intensively focus on with innovation and products in the future. British Sugar, as a winner of the 2009 DuPont Safety Award for its Safety Performance Discussions initiative, “recognizes that a growth-oriented company must not take its focus off safety or SHE matters – a testament that safety is a business value and catalyst for growth.”

