

Communicating Safety: A Digital Ethnography Investigating Social Media Use for Workplace Safety

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Abstract : Social media is a powerful instrument of communication, enabling the presentation of information in multiple forms and modes, amplifying the interactions between people, organisations, and stakeholders, and increasing the range of communication channels available. Younger generations are highly engaged with social media and more likely to use this channel than any other to seek information. Given this, it may appear extraordinary that occupational safety and health professionals have yet to seriously engage with social media for communicating safety messages to younger audiences who, in many industries, might be statistically more likely to encounter more workplace harm or injury. Millennials, defined as those born between 1981-2000, have distinctive characteristics that also impact their interaction patterns rendering many traditional occupational safety and health communication channels sub-optimal or near obsolete. Used to immediate responses, 280-character communication, shares, likes, and visual imagery, millennials struggle to take seriously the low-tech, top-down communication channels such as safety noticeboards, toolbox meetings, and passive tick-box online inductions favoured by traditional OSH professionals. This paper draws upon well-established communication findings, which argue that it is important to know a target audience and reach them using their preferred communication pathways, particularly if the aim is to impact attitudes and behaviours. Health practitioners have adopted social media as a communication channel with great success, yet safety practitioners have failed to follow this lead. Using a digital ethnography approach, this paper examines seven organisations' Facebook posts from two one-month periods one year apart, one in 2018 and one in 2019. Each of the years informs organisation-based case studies. Comparing, contrasting, and drawing upon these case studies, the paper discusses and evaluates the (non) use of social media communication of safety information in terms of user engagement, shareability, and overall appeal. The success of health practitioners' use of social media provides a compelling template for the implementation of social media into organisations' safety communication strategies. Highly visible content such as that found on social media allows an organization to become more responsive and engage in two-way conversations with their audience, creating more engaged and participatory conversations around safety. Further, using social media to address younger audiences with a range of tonal qualities (for example, the use of humour) can achieve cut through in a way that grim statistics fail to do. On the basis of 18 months of interviews, field work, and data analysis, the paper concludes with recommendations for communicating safety information via social media. It proposes exploration of the social media communication formula that, when utilised by safety practitioners, may create an effective social media presence. It is anticipated that such social media use will increase engagement, expand the number of followers and reduce the likelihood and severity of safety-related incidents. The tools offered may provide a path for safety practitioners to reach a disengaged generation of workers to build a cohesive and inclusive conversation around ways to keep people safe at work.

Keywords : social media, workplace safety, communication strategies, young workers

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