

The Role and Effects of Communication on Occupational Safety: A Review

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Abstract : The interest in improving occupational safety started almost simultaneously with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Yet, it was not until the late 1970's before the role of communication was considered in scientific research regarding occupational safety. In recent years the importance of communication as a means to improve occupational safety has increased. Not only as communication might have a direct effect on safety performance and safety outcomes, but also as it can be viewed as a major component of other important safety-related elements (e.g., training, safety meetings, leadership). And while safety communication is an increasingly important topic in research, its operationalization is often vague and differs among studies. This is not only problematic when comparing results, but also in applying these results to practice and the work floor. By means of an in-depth analysis—building on an existing dataset—this review aims to overcome these problems. The initial database search yielded 25.527 articles, which was reduced to a research corpus of 176 articles. Focusing on the 37 articles of this corpus that addressed communication (related to safety outcomes and safety performance), the current study will provide a comprehensive overview of the role and effects of safety communication and outlines the conditions under which communication contributes to a safer work environment. The study shows that in literature a distinction is commonly made between safety communication (i.e., the exchange or dissemination of safety-related information) and feedback (i.e. a reactive form of communication). And although there is a consensus among researchers that both communication and feedback positively affect safety performance, there is a debate about the directness of this relationship. Whereas some researchers assume a direct relationship between safety communication and safety performance, others state that this relationship is mediated by safety climate. One of the key findings is that despite the strongly present view that safety communication is a formal and top-down safety management tool, researchers stress the importance of open communication that encourages and allows employees to express their worries, experiences, views, and share information. This raises questions with regard to other directions (e.g., bottom-up, horizontal) and forms of communication (e.g., informal). The current review proposes a framework to overcome the often vague and different operationalizations of safety communication. The proposed framework can be used to characterize safety communication in terms of stakeholders, direction, and characteristics of communication (e.g., medium usage).

Keywords : communication, feedback, occupational safety, review

Conference Title : ICOHS 2017 : International Conference on Occupational Health and Safety

Conference Location : Miami, United States

Conference Dates : March 09-10, 2017