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The Value of a Safety-Conscious Builder

by Jerry Kingwill

In these economically precarious times, it is more important than ever to hire a builder with an extensive health and safety program.

Some business owners shy away from the expense of new safety programs, but the reality is that hiring a builder that is not cognizant of safety standards and regulations can be extremely costly (and potentially devastating). Hiring a builder with such a program in place will limit the risk of an injury occurring during a project while decreasing liability exposure both to contractor and owner.

A construction company that has invested in a health and safety program demonstrates that it is invested in the performance and overall well-being of its employees. Even more important, it clearly understands that these programs can be implemented for a fraction of the cost of injuries caused by unsafe working environments. A study by the American Society of Safety Engineers found that for every one dollar spent on a quality safety and health program, businesses saved eight dollars.

Resources abound for builders

Builders have many resources for information about health and safety programs in the construction industry. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), part of the U.S. Department of Labor, focuses on preventing work-related injuries, illnesses, and deaths by issuing and enforcing standards for workplace safety and health. Many construction companies develop partnerships with OSHA to ensure proper standards for their employees. According to the OSHA website, an estimated 1.6 million Americans are employed in the construction industry, half of whom work in residential construction. Each year, roughly 38,000 construction injuries are reported, with approximately 21,000 associated days of lost work. Many OSHA standards apply to residential construction for the prevention of possible fatalities.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) is a research agency focused on preventing work related illnesses and injuries. Part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, NIOSH moderates a *WorkLife Initiative* that focuses on worker wellness. According to its website, "The initiative creates an opportunity for both the occupational safety and health community and the health promotion community to develop and implement workplace programs collaboratively that prevent workplace illness and injury, promote health, and optimize the health of the U.S. workforce."

And the National Safety Council is a nonprofit, nongovernmental public service organization focused on protecting life and promoting health. Its website offers a vast library of fact sheets, stats, tips, and suggestions for safety both in and out of the workplace. The library features more than 80 topics to answer nearly any question a construction professional, home owner, or business executive may have.

Long-term maintenance is key

Although these organizations offer companies excellent suggestions and partnerships, the greatest challenge to the success of these programs is long-term maintenance. Many companies hire a professional safety expert to engage and motivate employees in safety programs. Safety efforts cannot succeed without the continued enthusiasm and support of management.

Some builders promote participation in safety programs by establishing incentive systems. Such incentives may include a system of earning points exchangeable for gifts, redeemable "safety cards" signed by management for safety compliance, safety games and promotions, tracking use of proper safety precautions by department, and providing company-wide incentives for days without safety violations. The cost of such incentives is insignificant compared to the potentially crippling expense of an unsafe workplace.

Worker wellness is another aspect of a safer workforce, since a healthier workforce promotes higher quality work. Construction companies may promote a healthy workforce by aiding employees in stop-smoking initiatives, discounted gym memberships, or offering first-aid training classes. These programs can improve worker morale and ultimately cut down on sick time, disability, and medical leave. Hiring a builder who treats its employees this well can ultimately benefit the outcome of any project.

Facilities managers who are embarking on new construction projects should consider looking for a builder who follows carefully thought-out safety regulations and standards. The creation and continued support of an efficient and motivating safety program is a vital component in achieving a happy, productive, and safe workplace—making sure that a project gets completed on time and within budget.

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