

Putting Workplace Safety First

Employees place workplace safety as their most important labor issue -- more than family leave, minimum wage, overtime pay or paid-sick days. Under pressure from their employers to be more productive, workers may be opting to bypass safety mechanisms that are in place. HR leaders may want to revisit safety incentives and training programs.

By David Shadovitz

Family leave, paid-sick days and overtime pay may be important to workers. But these issues are easily trumped by workplace safety in the minds of many.

So suggests a just released study by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, which found that more than eight in 10 workers (85 percent) ranked workplace safety as their most important labor issue.

The findings were in line with the results of a 2008 study, which found nearly nine in 10 workers (89 percent) listed workplace safety as their greatest labor concern.

Family and maternity leave was cited as the second most important issue (78 percent), followed by minimum wage (70 percent). Paid-sick days and time-and-a-half overtime pay were both cited by 69 percent of the respondents.

The findings come as fatal and non-fatal injuries on the job have been declining for years. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the 4,340 fatal workplace injuries in 2009 is the lowest number ever, since statistics first began being kept in 1992.

In addition, the number of nonfatal injuries and illnesses -- at the rate of 3.9 per 100 full-time workers -- has been trending down since 2003 -- when it was 5 per 100 full-time workers. (Because of a change in definitions, earlier numbers are not available.)

The NORC study pulled from dozens of surveys and polls by the National Opinion Research Center, think tanks and public-opinion research firms.

At first glance, experts say, the findings are somewhat surprising, especially when you factor in the political energy that goes into other issues such as wage-and-hour practices. But when you consider that workplace safety can be a life-and-death issue, while the other issues are not, the findings aren't really surprising, they say.

"While overtime pay is important, it's not too surprising that death might trump it," says Tom W. Smith, a director with National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago and author of the study.

Despite safety being a high priority, Smith says, NORC's research found that the human toll of workplace accidents is often overlooked by the media.

In the case of the BP disaster in the Gulf, he says, the media coverage focused on the environmental impact of the disaster and overlooked the worker-safety aspects. "If optimal safety had been maintained, not only would the lives of the 11 workers been saved, but the whole environmental disaster would have been averted."

Some experts point to the economy as a factor behind safety concerns.

"Especially in a down economy, employees may be feeling increased pressures from employers to be more productive and bypass safety mechanisms in place," says Somer V. Jefferiss, an attorney and labor consultant with Datamatics Management Services in Alexandria, Va.

At the same time, Jefferiss adds, the decline of unions has propelled workers to look to the government for greater safety protection.

For the most part, says Smith, studies have shown that satisfaction levels for workplace safety have improved in the past 10 years.

But one major exception, he says, has been levels of stress.

"Most people are not in a situation that involves high danger, such as working with dangerous machinery," he says. "But they are in occupations with high levels of stress that can affect safety and health."

Smith notes that employee opinions are typically shaped by employees' own workplace experiences.

Experts note that employers need to be more proactive when it comes to addressing safety concerns and changing the mind-set of employees.

"Labor unions will regularly bring up safety issues as they try to organize," says Mitch Allen, an employment attorney with Bryan Cave in Atlanta. "If they want to attract new members, all they need to do is show employers aren't paying enough attention to this issue."

Allen notes that he frequently hears employees complain that employers don't care about safety -- that "they simply just want to make their numbers look good."

Even government agencies, such as the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, seem to be preoccupied with numbers, he says.

In response, Allen suggests, companies might want to consider replacing incentives that reward employees for not having accidents with rewards that recognize suggestions they've made to improve safety.

At the same time, he says, employers would be wise to revisit their training programs to ensure they're relevant and effective.

"Companies often go through the motion of training employees about safety, but how good is that training?" Allen asks.

Far too often, he says, companies will show employees a safety-training video that has nothing to do with the business they're in.

September 14, 2010

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