

Personal Protective Equipment influencing productivity

Costs of workplace injuries and illness

Recent statistics from the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work have revealed that work-related ill health and injury costs the European Union €476 billion a year^[1]. Alarmingly, this figure represents 3.3% of the European Union's GDP^[1]. Worldwide, work-related injury and illness results in the loss of 3.9% of GDP, at an estimated annual cost of €2,680 billion.^[2]

On a regional level, British workplace statistics from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) based on 2014/15 – 2016/17 annual averages indicate there were 614,000 workplace injuries.^[3] This goes alongside the 521,000 new cases of work-related ill health annually in workers over the same period.^[3] In both cases over 35% of these injuries or illnesses resulted in 7 or more days off work.^[3]

As a result of these figures, the HSE estimate that workplace injuries and ill health in Great Britain cost around £14.9bn^[3]. The HSE estimate of this total £4.9bn can be attributed directly to the financial costs associated with productivity^[3].

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A link between health and safety and productivity

Peter McGettrick, director of Safety, Health, Environment and Quality (SHEQ) at Turner and Townsend, in a recent interview with Irwin & Colton, outlined there was a "huge link between good workplace safety and good levels of productivity."^[4]

"Benefits of good workplace health and safety includes low levels of accidents, incidents, absenteeism and improved staff morale. So the benefits of better workplace health and safety can really have a big impact on improving productivity, reducing product delays and improving profits for the company", he added.^[4]

Peter also remarked that businesses often assume that a by-product of improving productivity is the sacrifice of other elements, such as safety. However, the opposite is true as "evidence suggests that good businesses that have a good health and safety culture and are well run are also very well performing economically as well".^[4]

"For every pound you spend [on health and safety], you get £10 back, whether that's through reduced costs or getting more out of people. It's a no brainer. Businesses should be investing in health and safety, because it has a huge business benefit and should not be seen as a cost that can be cut when the bottom line needs to be improved."^[4]

Can PPE aid with workplace productivity?

Of course, the aforementioned figures will be as a result of a number of different circumstances, but personal protective equipment (PPE) transgressions and non-compliance will have played a factor in workplace injuries and ill health. In 2006 the HSE estimated that there were around 9,000 PPE related accidents reported each year.^[5]

The protection of workers is of paramount importance for employers. When faced with an industrial hazard, employers should look to reduce risks to the lowest practicable levels. Typically, they will consider and employ the hierarchy of controls: elimination, substitution, engineering, administration and finally PPE.

PPE should always be seen as the last line of defence and that's why it's imperative to make sure that the protection provided is appropriate and adequate.

While the primary purpose of PPE is to protect workers, the extra functionality integrated into PPE can help to improve workplace productivity while maintaining fundamental protection for wearers. Throughout the rest of this paper we'll illustrate how working environments can benefit from productivity gains afforded to them from PPE.

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1) PPE improving workplace productivity – case studies

1.1) Communication devices

Communicating in high noise

As well as being a potential hazard to health, high levels of noise can also threaten productivity in the workplace. As site supervisors will know only too well, the ability to communicate regularly on site is essential within many industries.

Take for instance workers in construction and rail industries. Communication is essential in these environments which are often dominated by high noise. All too often non-compliance can be seen with workers removing their ear protection to talk to colleagues. Alternatively, workers may withdraw themselves from noisy areas every time they want to have a conversation. Over the course of a big project, you can imagine how much time can be lost.

Equally, if speech can't be heard over the high noise levels of an automated production line and a halt to manufacturing is required, operators may not be able to stop the line before it's too late. In certain industries such as food and pharmaceutical manufacturing this can potentially lead to loss of products, along with production downtime while machinery is fixed.

The use of two-way radios is common across a range of industries. While these devices offer remote communication in noisy environments, they don't offer any hearing protection to the user – meaning that workers are often exposed to damaging noise levels. One solution which overcomes this problem is a two-way radio communication headset which also provides hearing protection.

This functionality is provided in a range of 3M™ PELTOR™ Communication Headsets for use in hazardous and high noise environments. The devices have radio communication as standard and can offer further features such as Bluetooth® connectivity, depending on customer needs.

