



HELPING WORKERS HELP THEMSELVES WITH PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE)

Worker compliance is a major obstacle for PPE use.

One of the most frequent comments heard by safety practitioners recommending or dispensing workplace PPE is the groan, “Do I have to wear this?”

Whether required by regulation, or voluntarily distributed to avoid lawsuits and protect against injury, worker compliance is a major barrier to PPE use.

Workforce reductions can add to the problem. Fewer employees usually mean fewer resources allocated to safety personnel. Supervisors are “multi-tasked” to the point where they have no time to coach, mentor, supervise & train workers. Training in the selection, use & care of PPE and explanations about why it is needed may be neglected.

Employees kept on in a downswing may be the most experienced, but they are often the ones who balk most at the introduction of new equipment, especially if it’s perceived as uncomfortable or unattractive. Long-term accident-free workers may become complacent about equipment they’ve used for years.

The irony of PPE compliance is that even employees who recognize its value may, over time, become less attentive about using it, precisely because it is doing its job; protecting them from injury.

Resistance occurs for many reasons and there are many practical ways to approach the problem. Here are some suggestions that may help.

If it doesn’t fit, they just won’t wear it

PPE has one simple rule; *fit means function*. If equipment is too big or too small, it probably won’t do its job. If workers find their PPE uncomfortable, they’ll either “forget” to put it on, wear it incorrectly, or be irritable and inefficient while wearing it.

Stocking a full range of sample sizes may seem like an unnecessary expense, but everybody is different. Employees able to try on various sizes are more likely to end up with the right size. Returning items to suppliers and waiting for replacements ends up costing more than initial expenditure for samples.



Some PPE manufacturers produce only popular styles. Companies in the PPE business for the long term are more likely to offer a range of sizes or be able to adjust products to fit difficult sizes.

Unhelpful suppliers who state, "It's not in our catalogue, so they don't make it", need to be removed from your purchasing register and new sources found.

Contact companies that make the product you're after, even if their information doesn't mention the size you need. Sizing problems may not be in the product itself, but in strap length, location of closures, or in how or where it is worn.

Don't forget PPE manufacturers have to make products that match either international or Australian Standards, so they are better qualified to offer solutions that won't compromise the product's effectiveness.

"It's so uncomfortable, I can't work correctly"

The features that allow PPE to provide protection can often make it bulky, restrictive, hot and uncomfortable. Even if it fits, it can be annoying to wear. A lot of protective gear designed to keep substances out will also keep the wearer's body heat and moisture in.

Investing in hot and cold weather gear or extra linings and cooling pads can quickly add up. Money saved because workers wear PPE and stay safe never hits the bottom line. Healthcare and compensation costs need to always be factored into budgeting so that additional money ensures PPE is as wearable as possible.

Simple alterations in the workplace can make compliance more palatable. Accessible temperature controls, fans, "step-out" areas, convenient shelves, lockers and clothing hooks can make finding and getting in and out of equipment, as well as wearing it, faster and therefore easier.

PPE which workers must regularly remove and replace when briefly passing through controlled or hazardous areas must be immediately and constantly available, because it's easier to go without it than to go get it.

Safety rules, OK! No exceptions

Enforcement must be firm and consistent. If the sign says "Hard Hat Area" or "Eye Protection Required", everyone moving through or working in the area must use the correct equipment. No exceptions.

Using an area as a shortcut, stepping around the corner to answer a phone, or allowing visitors' access without the required equipment undercuts the importance of PPE & sends the wrong message to everyone else.



Why not let employees make the final decision?

Choosing two or three approved equipment styles and letting workers vote on which to use may seem like a democratic solution, but if the vote splits down the middle, almost 50% of workers will feel they “lost” and ended up with PPE they don’t like.

Instead, consider offering employees a choice of two or three styles. This requires only a minimum of extra paperwork and little or no extra storage space. Choices can be simple; even different fabrics, colours or storage cases can make employees more receptive to equipment. Selecting their own PPE gives workers personal investment in and responsibility for their equipment, if only because they chose it for themselves.

Labeling PPE with the user’s name can also increase their stake in the product.

Nothing’s wrong with me, it’s just my PPE

“It’s ugly and I look terrible wearing my safety equipment.” This might sound childish or petty and yet appearance is often the main reason people resist PPE.

Most of us aren’t too concerned about fashion when surrounded by workplace hazards, but we wouldn’t want to spend our days looking like a weirdo in clumsily designed PPE if we had a choice. No one looks their best in a respirator, goggles and earmuffs, and post PPE wasn’t made with appearance in mind.

PPE styles are changing and continue to improve. Ergonomic design and safety can’t be sacrificed for fashion and yet styles are being made more attractive & comfortable. Safety eyewear and shoe suppliers are introducing more stylish selections and other PPE makers are following the lead.

Let employees know you care about their safety

Connecting employee awards to overall safety and then with themes such as PPE, reinforces the idea that the equipment is part of a uniform. Pins, stickers, embroidered patches, key rings and tags can be purchased with simple, universal messages or custom made with company logos and phrases.

Small items handed out at anniversaries, pinned to, stuck on or wrapped around the recipient’s PPE creates a portable display or experience. This won’t suit all types of equipment and must never interfere with its function. However, the idea is to reinforce “this is my equipment, this is my job, and I’m good at it”.



Allowing wearers to make some decisions about their equipment, and ensuring it is as comfortable, familiar and personal as possible is preferable to cornering recalcitrant employees and demanding they wear PPE or face disciplinary action. Proper training and demonstrations of equipment, combined with a realistic understanding of attitudes, can help defuse many objections to a necessary requirement.

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