

SAFETY MOMENT

April 2023 – Situational Awareness

No matter where you are or what you're doing, it pays to be vigilant. The benefit of situational awareness is to be more likely to spot hazards and address them.

- Walking in a busy parking lot? Be alert for drivers backing out of spots without looking.
- Making dinner in the kitchen? Remember which burners are hot so you don't hurt yourself.
- Navigating a crowded airport? Hold on to your valuables and be wary of pickpockets.

Chances are you already employ this skill set on a regular basis—often subconsciously because, as humans, we are naturally wary of our surroundings. These practices are uniquely important in the workplace due to occupational, industry-specific, and locational hazards. Preparing situational awareness skills is integral to safety management and fulfilling your duty of care, to protect workers from harm.

What is situational awareness in the workplace?

Situational awareness is the practice of actively monitoring your surroundings in the workplace so you can identify threats before they occur and have time to react.

The types of problems you might come across in your daily life are likely to differ from the ones that could occur at work, so it's important that you remain in the appropriate mindset depending on your location and present occupation.

Examples of workplace hazards

The specific hazards that your workforce faces may be unique from those of other organizations. But we can look at some of the most common workplace risks to consider:

- **Fire** — Fires result in hundreds of billions of dollars of damage to businesses every year, and their causes are often commonplace and preventable. Situational awareness in the workplace can help you spot factors that increase the risk of fire, such as faulty wiring or poorly maintained kitchen appliances, so you can address the risk before it's too late.
- **Slips, trips, and falls** — Whether at the workshop, a grocery store, or an office building, there are a multitude of ways someone can fall and injure themselves. Be it wet floors, working at heights without PPE, or tripping hazards in work areas—workers need to be always aware of fall risks and work to prevent accidents.
- **Chemical exposure** — Many situations require workers to be near various hazardous substances, such as supplies involved in cleaning, maintenance, and manufacturing. Without proper precautions and workplace situational awareness, employees are liable to suffer skin damage, eye damage, or even poisoning.
- **Workplace violence** — It's a sad truth that threats of violence and aggression are a risk every business should consider. These attacks often have precursors, such as speaking about violence. Situational awareness may help to prevent potential threats through early intervention.

- **Cyber danger** — Cybersecurity risks involve all information technology and equipment used by companies. Hackers—can infect entire networks with malware and ransomware. The good and bad news is that cyber threats often rely on employee choices.

How to Improve Situational Awareness

Situational awareness is a skill—and as with any skill, it improves with practice. During training exercises, introduce unexpected, unfamiliar circumstances to test attention and adaptability. Review examples of previous incidents—discussing steps that could have prevented or mitigated harm—or near misses that were averted thanks to an employee’s sharp situational awareness skills. Desktop exercises are great ways to familiarise employees with their role in safety and risk management in specific workplace situations.

- **Avoid multitasking.** It has been scientifically proven that most people are simply incapable of multitasking. The truth is that humans are not built to focus on more than one thing at a time. Multitasking can have serious consequences for decision-making and situational awareness in the workplace.
- **Limit distractions.** Similar to how multitasking can undermine situational awareness, distractions can too. Distractions in the workplace are stimuli that detract from an employee’s ability to do their job. These can include loud or irritating noises, harsh or flashing lights, other workers, and other burdens on their attention.
- **See something, say something.** You’ve probably noticed signage with slogans to the effect of, “see something, say something.” These reminders are encouraging situational awareness among us all and gives us the confidence to call attention to behaviour they find unsafe.
- **Allow for proper rest.** According to many studies, adults need at least 7 hours of sleep per night. If they receive less, their cognitive functions decline; and if they continuously get too little, a sleep deficit can accumulate, further damaging an employee’s ability to think and act safely.

In Summary

Situational awareness in the workplace is a wide-reaching skill that can be taught. Not only will it keep us all safe, it will make us all more effective in our jobs as we will be able to identify irregularities that could cause potential incidents.