

Bridge Communication Gaps to Cut Costs and Enhance Employee Safety and Health

By Dr. Ronald J. Lott, PA, MSed, MPH, Ph.D

Communication gaps are a challenge for any organization—and society in general. Many problems can be traced to missing or inaccurate data, a misunderstanding, or a failure to convey important information in a timely fashion. Bridging these gaps is critical for occupational safety and health professionals. That includes improving communication between supervisors and employees, or between safety professionals and executives; formalizing training programs at multiple facilities; building a culture that keeps safety top of mind; and more. But here we'll focus on the communication gaps between safety professionals and the medical community concerning the care and evaluation of workers. Such gaps impact both safety and your organization's bottom line.

Safety professionals typically share the same fundamental challenge as the general population in communicating with medical professionals—namely, a limited understanding of medical terminology, practices and philosophy. Medical issues can be intimidating—and safety professionals, like many individual patients, may view medical professionals as “the only ones who know” beyond the hallowed doors of a medical facility.

This challenge flows in both directions. Medical professionals are often as uncertain on your terrain as you are on theirs. The safety community communicates important, specialized knowledge in one language, while the medical community communicates its specialized knowledge in another.

Ensuring employee safety and health, rehabilitating those who are injured or ill, and managing related costs require both sets of specialized knowledge—and clear communication between the professions. Unfortunately, medical personnel often make decisions about the treatment and disposition of a worker without an optimal knowledge of the conditions the worker is coming from—and returning to. And safety personnel often accept medical decisions at face value without understanding the decision-making criteria, which also means they don't feel confident questioning such decisions or asserting case-specific concerns.

The solution must go beyond simply adding a job description to employee medical records or having medical professionals do a 30-minute walk-through of your facility. Bridging communication gaps requires an ongoing, case by case effort. Ideally, that effort would be shared equally by all involved, but in practice it will more likely depend on the commitment of safety professionals. It is ultimately your responsibility to protect the health and welfare of the worker. Medical personnel, whether third-party or in-house, are essentially service providers in the equation. It is therefore imperative that you proactively communicate relevant information concerning workplace hazards or stressors to medical personnel. Similarly, safety managers should strive to become more knowledgeable about medical terminology and practices in order to better understand and communicate with medical personnel.

Interestingly, a factor that has traditionally been part of the communication gap between safety and medical professionals—technology—is fast becoming one of the most effective bridges. The use of automated, enterprise-wide (and multi-enterprise) software systems like PureSafety's comprehensive suite of solutions can greatly improve the accumulation, sharing and correlation of critical safety, health and medical information. Having everyone responsible for occupational safety, health and medical management working from the same solution set promotes a more holistic (and effective) approach to employee safety, health and medical care. Such solutions serve as a “common denominator” when discussing specific cases and issues. Leveraging the power of technology also improves data consistency and accuracy, ensures timely information-sharing with features like automatic email notifications, and enhances analysis, benchmarking and reporting. Ultimately, this leads not only to a safer, healthier workforce, but also to more efficient processes, streamlined workflow and related cost savings.

Dr. Ronald J. Lott, PA, MSed, MPH, Ph.D., was a general medical practice and specialty trained Occupational Medicine Physician Assistant (MPH) for 14 years. Subsequently he has practiced occupational health and safety as a graduate trained Industrial Hygienist and Safety Engineer for the past 21 years. He holds a Ph.D. in Occupational Health & Safety.