

Scott Fowler

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Hello, everyone, and welcome to the Case for Safety Podcast. I'm your host, Scott Fowler. Glad to have you with us today, where we're going to be talking about how you can ensure you have the right safety staff on your job site. So we're going to be taking a look at the current landscape, you know, talk about some do's and don'ts and you know what you need to know. And here to guide us through that, I'm very happy to welcome to the show Ethan Fight.

Ethan is Executive Director of Operations at Medcor Safety. Ethan, welcome. Thank you so much for being here.

Ethan Fight

Hey, thanks Scott. Thanks for having me.

Scott Fowler

Appreciate you coming on. Really, really interesting topic. Excited to dive into the conversation. you know, we we hear a lot, you know, in the news about, you know, the the current job market, you know, challenges and opportunities, things like that. So I thought that might kind of be a good place to start our conversation and you know, if you could kinda, you know, paint a picture of where s things stand today, you know, for safety staffing on construction sites.

Ethan Fight

Yeah, of course. I mean, we're like every other industry. you know, demand has has far outpaced supply. you know, of course making this a great market. If you're a safety professional, you've seen over the last few years leaps and bounds in in pay, job you know, job selection, you've got more locations, you you can work to get closer to home, you can find jobs with more hours or less hours, you know, kinda of get the the job that you desire, which is which is awesome.

I mean it's a great great place to be if you're a safety professional in today's market. you know multiple sectors of construction are booming. This is not news, but I mean of course data centers but even you know manufacturing and energy and industrial projects we're we're seeing a a lot of work booming in in all those areas.

You know, I think expectations surrounding the service have evolved a little bit and obviously we'll we'll get into that a bit, but you know, the the role we're no longer looking for just basic OSHA compliance on on job sites. you know, we're we're looking for safety

professionals that can fully integrate into you know the site operations. They they have the ability to influence and and manage multiple layers of, you know, owner, GC, you know, subcont subcontractor, sorry, you know, and all the way down.

And so, I think that's probably where the shortage comes in. it's not a shortage of safety professionals, but probably a shortage of of capable safety professionals. which of course, like I said, we'll we'll get into a little deeper. So I think the problems evolved from, you know, how do we find a safety professional to how do we find you know or match the right resources with the right experience at the right time. And so I think this is where the relationship between a contractor and a staffing partner can can really thrive.

Scott Fowler

Sure. You touched on it a little bit there, but you know, the as you noted there's, you know, a shortage, you know, as we're we're seeing in a in a lot of industries. In your mind, you know, what is, you know, driving driving that? Is it, you know, the labor market pressure, project project complexity, you know, a a lot of different factors, you know, what what do you feel is behind that?

Ethan Fight

Definitely a lot of things, all at once. So you know, number one, I'll try to rattle these off. Number one, there's an experience gap. don't get me wrong, certifications matter, there's a place for but experience is is very valuable. And it's difficult to get early in your your career as a safety professional.

You know, we especially in our world, most clients that reach out, they're needing somebody on the minimum side that already has three years experience. A lot of times it's five, ten plus. so it can be a difficult, you know, difficult industry to get into. If, you know, and unfortunately like some of the some of the people that would be very good in this, personality wise, they're the the they have little experience, but there's just not enough opportunity for them to actually get into this this world. so that that's one thing.

Two, obviously, you know, you touched on it, project complexity. You know, safety is safety. I I'm one of those guys. I I think I think safety is safety as far as mindset and methodologies, but you know, project complexity can require specific industry experience. so there's a difference in like just I need a safety professional versus you know, I need a safety professional that has experience on this type of project, overseeing multiple subcontractors, can communicate clearly at all levels.

So that that kind of leads into my next one, you know, number three. You know, we're asking safety professionals to do more than we used to. And more and more companies actually embrace the position. So they're they're looking for somebody that can coach, that can work with leadership, you know, help manage subcontractors, use technology. I mean, that was, you know, a lot of our projects years ago. It was all pen, pen, pen and paper. and so a lot more of that. There's a lot more integration to the site team.

Which again I love. It it allows us to take more pride in the work that we do, and the work that our folks do in the field. And then lastly, you know, competition. You know, there's there's just an abundance of options if you're a safety professional to find employment now. you can direct hire with a contractor, you know, to a specific to a site or, you know, regional roles or or corporate roles.

You have W-2 staffing partners, it's kinda like our model, but you know, you come on as a W-2 employee, you're covered by you know their you can get health insurance, you can get you know, you're covered by their professional and general liability, workers comp, all that coverage you know, by the company you're working for. There's also staffing companies that do 1099 contracts where you know you have to carry your own. But some people prefer that. So you've got, you know, all of those.

There's also been an increase in safety staffing providers. Feel I see a new one pop up two or three times a week. Relatively easy to get into in theory. But to do it successfully, it definitely takes takes a lot of work. And then we're also seeing multiple a a lot of companies or contractors using multiple staffing firms to try to fill the same project. We had a job earlier this year down in South Carolina. You know had our intake call with the client started recruiting

I had four people that I talked to that by the time I talked to or either shortly after I talked to they'd been contacted by two other companies about the same project with the same client. And it you know, so there there's a lot I mean, unfortunately it's kind of redundant work, but I also get it from the contractor's perspective. Like it's no different than getting a bid on on work done at your house. You wanna, you know, see get get the best price and and get try to get the best person. So I I wouldn't really call it a labor shortage. I think that kinda misses the bigger picture.

I definitely call it more of a capability shortage. I mean, there's definitely plenty of people interested in safety. But, I think lacking the the right combination of experience, technical knowledge, and a lot of the soft skills that it takes to be effective on day one. And unfortunately when clients call us, that's that that's what they need somebody they can hit the ground run when they get there.

Scott Fowler

Glad you mentioned soft skills and we're gonna get into that in a little bit. But that's thank you for that. That's you know, good good foundation, you know, how how, you know, those relationships has changed, how the landscape has changed. When you think about how the work has changed over the last, you know, five, ten years, you know what you're seeing on job sites, you know, compared to five, ten years ago, how has that impacted the demands on safety staffing?

Ethan Fight

Well, I mean, really you the fundamentals of safety haven't really changed. I mean construction's still construction activities are are relatively the same. I mean some standards have evolved, of course, but you know, the environment is really what's changed. you have a lot larger, you know, more complex sites with hundreds or thousands of workers. I mean that seems to be the norm now. that used to be kind of an outlier.

I've already touched on a little bit, but like some subcontractor coordination, use of technology. So safety professionals now have to have like a deeper understanding of construction operations and kind of how the whole picture comes together in order for them to be successful you know, on the on the job. So I don't think we're we're not necessarily asking them to know more. we're asking them just to to operate at a higher level.

In fact, some of the best safety professionals we've had working for us, they weren't the ones that could quote every regulation. They were just the ones that had the the the the soft skills, obviously the technical skills to come along with it, but they had the soft skills to really operate in that environment.

So all of that, you know, kind of funnels down to again the the candidate pool getting a little bit smaller. So all all this kind of leads to, you know, the the finding the right safety professional has become more difficult. Not because the role itself has changed, but mainly because the the value of a safety professional that can operate at that level is being more recognized and appreciated, you know, by clients and contractors.

Scott Fowler

When you think, you touched on it a little bit earlier, but when you'd think about the relationship between contractors and the safety staffing partners, you know, how has that relationship changed? Have expectations changed, you know, looking for, you know, something beyond just having somebody, you know, on your construction site?

Ethan Fight

Yeah, and I think I think that's an important distinction. Absolutely. Overall, you know, contractors are expecting more out of us. And we're being held to a higher standard. You know, I'm gonna list off a couple of things, but you know, and all these have always been important, but given the the environment, the the more complex projects, and quite frankly more competition, you know, it's it's pushing safety staffing firms to to really raise the bar in these areas.

So you know, number one, expecting, you know, expectations to produce better candidates. You know, staffing firms have to look beyond just technical qualifications and where they've been. They they've got to evaluate personality and all those soft skills like we've kind of already touched on and and they gotta have people ready to deploy.

You know, second would be responsiveness to issues. We have intake calls with with can clients when we're first looking to set up with them and one of the questions we ask is if they've ever outsourced before. And if they have, what that experience was like, what worked, what didn't work, try to get an idea of of of where they're coming from.

And the number one complaint that we hear is a lack of responsiveness to issues. Like, hey, we were having an issue out of somebody. It was three days or five days before we ever even got a an email back, let alone a a call to to actually work through the issue.

So safety staffing partners really have to, you know, take ownership of of issues when they arise and and not be afraid to get in there and and assist with working through the issues because a lot of times it it can be a minor technical issue, could be a communication issue, could be a a lack of understanding of like a certain expectation. And if if these things can be solved quickly, you know, most of the time the the the situation can be salvaged. But the longer you let it fester, just the the the worse it gets.

And then third, you know, contractors are definitely seeking you know, safety staffing partners for for market intelligence. You know, we're deeply entrenched in in the safety world. we're talking to hundreds of safety professionals a week, you know, to to learn, you know, what's driving their decision making, their their compensation requirements, you know, what geographical areas might be hotter than others right now and and more difficult to find people in.

And so, we might have to work with the client to get a little more creative on on how we're gonna find a solution for their their project, you know, based on that information. So really a

contractor needs a partner who can kind of bring all these things to the table to to be successful.

Scott Fowler

I mentioned at the at the top some you know, do's and don'ts that to keep in mind through this process. Let's let's talk a little bit about that for you know, for the safety directors out there, you know, looking at a potential staffing partner, you know, what are some things they should keep in mind?

Ethan Fight

Yeah. And I of course I mean there there's more than just one, but I'll start with probably the biggest one. and and I think it's not taking the time or or only taking the time to to interview the company and kind of take their words at face value and not interview their processes. So you could see a lot of marketing content, you know, hey, we've got ten thousand resumes, rapid deployment, all all these other kind of buzzwords and and catchphrases and, don't get me wrong, we use those too, and all those things are true.

But a safety director who who's evaluating somebody they actually want to partner with, they need to be looking a little deeper, kind of look under the hood. You know, what what do your interviews look like? What types of questions are you asking? How do you evaluate your candidates? You know, do you evaluate their soft skills, how they communicate, you know, what kind of leadership qualities do they have?

How do you evaluate their technical knowledge? And based on my scope of work, how do you match, you know, the the technical skills to to what I'm actually going to have on on my job site? So how how do you match those up? You know, secondly, you know, remember what kind of when you're doing an interview, you know, the interviewee is also kind of interviewing the interviewer in a way. And a lot of times that's based on the questions that the interviewer asks. So I'd say same thing, flip it on its head.

You know, evaluate a safety staffing company based on the information they seek from you. So, don't look for like if if they're just saying you know, how many people and when do you need. This is very surface level, and kind of signals that that the company might just be a seat filler, and we'll kinda get into that in a little bit too. But you want somebody who's who's asking deeper questions. You know, what's your specific scope of work? What's your estimated manpower?

You know, what top three, you know, hazard areas do you you know foresee over the course of your project? What's the project management team look like on site? What's the support

that this safety professional's gonna have? Is there a a lead on site? Is there a regional safety professional they can reach out to you know for support and assistance?

And so really like two projects side by side can look the same, you know, on paper, but getting a deeper understanding of your specific needs and and site is really gonna lead to better outcomes. And so that that's a big one. And then number three, I I think not providing enough support to the safety professional once they're on site. And so there are a lot of companies that they just kind of put somebody out there. you know do they help when issues arise?

Is there any of that, because and eventually somebody's not gonna work out. Like it's just gonna get to that point. What do you do when that happens? You know, ask that, see what kind of process they have in place, and kind of evaluate, you know, that as well. So again, I think I think it's important to evaluate the engine that runs the company, not just kind of the marketing content that that's posted online or maybe in their you know, in in their proposals.

I used to be in the endurance sports world. One of the one of the big phrases there was, hey, it's better better to be consistently good rather than occasionally great. You want a company with repeatable processes to produce consistently good outcomes. I mean it's no different here. You don't want the company that's just hoping that they get lucky and and find a good person for your project one time.

Scott Fowler

So talking about some more of those do's and don'ts, you know, what are some, you know, common mistakes that you see safety directors make throughout this process, you know, that they they should avoid as they're as they're looking to staff?

Ethan Fight

Yeah, I mean there there's of course there's a few, but I'll I'll start with this one. I think a a big one is is treating the service like a commodity. You know, and I I get it, especially when you're dealing with a project manager. It normally comes down to one of two things, cost and timing. And I get it, everybody's busy. You know, these things are important, but this isn't like an equipment rental.

There's a there's a big difference between a good safety professional and a bad one and and getting the wrong one on your site can cause more than just a little bit of turnover issues. And so I I get it these things matter, but but only prioritizing, you know, the expediency and the price definitely increases the chance of of higher turnover. I think number two, you know, is not being proactive. you know, too many companies wait until

they have that urgent need. And so, you know, be be be being a little more proactive in establishing you know who you're gonna work with when the time comes.

Number three, you know, not sharing enough information. We've talked on that a little bit, but make sure that your safety staffing partner has everything that all the information you think they're gonna need to to be successful in finding the person that's actually gonna fit your program. So kind of treat it like like you're hiring somebody yourself. You know what information you would evaluate somebody on. Give that information to them.

I think not giving the safety professional the the support they need, you know, once they're on site. You know, it it takes time and effort on both sides of of the fence to to make this a success venture. So making sure you provide the safety professional with you know the information they need, the policies, the procedures, setting clear expectations. You know, give them what they need to don't don't expect them to show up day one and just fall right in completely.

There is a bit of a learning curve to to your specific company. And then lastly, and th this one's tough, but safety directors, there's some companies, safety directors definitely need to be a little more involved in the in the bidding and the in the project management side of the house. again, it's an unfortunate real reality that exists within some companies. we're seeing it less, but it makes it difficult for the safety director to to adequately forecast you know upcoming needs.

And then work through issues when when the two are siloed. So again, that it's a difficult one to to to change like with the in the drop of a hat, but the more the more connected you are you know with your your project management or production side of the house, the better, you know, you're gonna be able to partner with a firm like you know safety staffing firm to to you know produce the the outcomes you want.

Scott Fowler

Let's talk a bit more about soft skills, as you noted earlier, that like that's just as important as as the technical knowledge. So when safety directors out there are, you know, looking at a potential candidate, you know. How can they ensure that they have those soft skills and you know, we're gonna fit into the culture you know, on the job site?

Ethan Fight

Yeah, so you're actually talking about the safety professional themselves, like when they're they're interviewing the safety professional themselves. I mean, it is tricky, obviously, like we personally have like a series of questions. We're evaluating things that are said and not said and body language and and all all of this. So, it is definitely more of an art form than it

is like hard science to to evaluate that. Yeah, so it takes some, there's a learning curve to that. And that's something that a contractor, you know, has to kinda learn to to trust a safety staffing partner to kinda sure kinda work through that.

Scott Fowler

You mentioned earlier, you know, kinda looking at potential partners and what separates, you know, a stronger one from somebody who's just gonna fill seats. You know, in your mind, what it what is that distinction and what should, you know, the safety directors out there be looking for?

Ethan Fight

Yeah, I mean all staffing companies can can fill seats. I mean obviously otherwise they would, they'd be out of business. So, a lot of it comes down to some things we've already discussed. But I think the keyword is partner. I'll kinda juxtapose these, you know, seat fillers to to partners in in these these following categories here. But you know, again the information they seek. Seat fillers are gonna ask some very generic questions about your project, might reveal they don't actually understand what's going on, might feel like they're just kind of taking in order like you're in a drive-thru.

Whereas partners are going to be more engaged and learning about the information that that's going to be you know unique to your your operation and and make your your project tick. Additionally relationship management. It's important to note the the safety staffing firm is is is managing three relationships, two directly and one indirectly. Our relationship with safety pros, our relationship with the client and then indirectly the client and the safety pro.

And so seat fillers could definitely lack in this area. With limited or kind of just enough communication to get by. Basically run payroll, send invoices, let me know when you're done. Whereas partners actually help manage, you know, the personal response to events. Like listen, situations happen, we're we're dealing with people here, even some of your long term your professionals, they might get a job closer to home, they have a family emergency, things are going to happen.

And you know, a few years ago, we had a long term client of ours that we work, you know, very closely with. They they pushed out company wide this you know, focus three leadership training by Tim Knight and the the big idea that they pushed in it was E plus R equals O. It's event plus response equals outcome. And you can't always, you can't always I guess anticipate or influence the event.

But your response and how how you respond to that definitely influences what the outcome's gonna be. And so really how a partner responds and manages the controllables will directly affect, you know, the outcomes. Number three, I mean candidate submission. you know, seat fillers, there's a lot of companies out there that do this. Don't have a five minute conversation with a candidate, and if they say, 'Yep, I can be there' that's your, that's your person.

They just forward the resume on and now it's on you. Whereas partners, you know, have more of a defined system to evaluate your needs, to vet safety professionals based on those needs, and then provide better, you know, better fits for your project. So without asking more questions on the front end, it can definitely be hard to determine you know the difference between a seat filler and partners before you actually engage in services.

Scott Fowler

Thinking about, you know, the changing landscape within construction projects themselves, you know, it things can change, you know, on a daily, hourly basis. So, you know, how is it important, you know, to have a partner that can, you know, scale up or scale down, you know, as those project needs shift and what does that look like?

Ethan Fight

Yeah. I mean, honestly the need for scalability is the whole reason that we're we're in business. That's that's kind of what we sell is is the capacity to scale. and to scale conveniently for lack of a better better term. you know, needs are changing quickly. Hiring internal can can take a long time. then you gotta lay off when when you're done.

It can get very messy. We had a client we've done a lot of work with in the data center world and we were we were looking to to add a second safety professional to an existing site. Had a great candidate. Went through, you know, both interviews and we had started onboarding and then they had to back out and we called our client, was like, Hey, you know, we're terribly sorry.

This is what we're doing in the back end and he he flat out told us he was like, Why do you think we outsource? Like these are the problems we don't want to deal with. Like it's fine, you know, but this is basically what we pay you all to do. So like, so it's our job to to work with our clients, to know what their needs are, when they're gonna change, and be ready to staff, you know, up or down when when the client needs.

Scott Fowler

As we get ready to close out here, kinda give some closing thoughts. If you, you know, there was, for all the safety directors out there, you know, thinking about, you know, getting the

right the right folks on their job sites, you know, what would you say to them? What you know, if you're gonna say one takeaway, something you know, something they should, you know, do this week, taking the next step, what would you say?

Ethan Fight

Be proactive. I mean, we hear it all the time, like, hey, safety, you gotta be proactive instead of reactive. You know, start evaluating some safety staffing partners today. Let them know, you know, what you're in the market for. It's okay if you don't have a need right then. Actually, we we prefer it. Like let's you it gives you time to to interview those processes and and those engines that run the business. Go ahead and get out of in front of, you know, contract terms and conditions.

Sometimes that can be a hang up. You know, I've seen that happen. You know, nail down a couple of these potential vendors and and start to build a relationship with them. I mean, we have clients that we've worked with or talked with for a couple years before we ever even staffed anybody with them. And that's fine. That's great. So, develop a partnership mindset. You know, don't don't just view them as a as a vendor or a staffing agency. The more you allow them to kinda operate as an arm of your safety department, and kinda the more you let them in, the the better outcomes you're gonna have in the end.

Scott Fowler

Going back to the the being proactive. You know, if you're interviewing these folks well enough in advance, then you know, when you have a project come up, you've got you've got ready to go. You don't have to, you know, start s start start that you know you you've start that process before the project's even begun.

Ethan Fight

Yeah, so, and I mean, I can't tell you how many times we get a call like, 'Hey, we need somebody next week,' and right, hey, like we could do it, but then you're in fire drill mode. That's, it's just not the way I would I would want to to approach, you know, placing somebody like that on site.

Scott Fowler

Exactly, exactly. It's all great things to keep in mind. Ethan, I will give you the last word.

Ethan Fight

No, hey, that listen, safety staffing, great industry. If you're a safety professional or an aspiring safety professional, especially like I mentioned, it can be tough to get into. Don't give up. You know, look just keep looking for that experience. If you can get into it, it

provides great opportunities. You have the opportunity to work on you know three or four different projects in a single year, maybe all across the country. Go places you've never gone before. Work with people you've never worked with, learn from each of those jobs and it can really really shape you as a as a safety professional in in the construction world. So, it's awesome.

Scott Fowler

Well said. Well, thank you so much again, Ethan, for coming on. It's so critical as we've talked about, you know, to have the right people, you know, in place at at the right time on your job sites that have have the knowledge that you need to help keep everybody safe. And I really appreciate you coming on and sharing how they can do that. So thank you so much again.

Ethan Fight

Yeah, no you bet, Scott. Thanks for having me.

Scott Fowler

Thank you for tuning in. Be sure to like and subscribe, and we'll see you back here in two weeks.