

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION of the Worker

By Ted Smith

Not only are we asking workers to perform incredibly difficult jobs, we are often asking them to put life and limb on the line every day. And yet, as technology has advanced, our methods to keep workers safe and minimize workplace hazards have not evolved as rapidly as they might.

In fact, many organizations still rely on traditional methods such as meetings, routine inspections and even paper reporting processes to keep workers safe.

It is not that these tried-and-true processes must be eliminated from modern safety programs. In most cases, they provide a fairly reliable infrastructure of proven safety practices and safety metrics that we can be proud of.

However, we must acknowledge that the technology exists today to advance industry toward a new view of safety. This new concept of worker-powered safety can engage workers with real-time communication that not only decreases potential hazards, but increases productivity as well, making the workers themselves a vital component of an overall digital transformation.

Until now, safety metrics have focused primarily on lagging information, attempting to prevent problems based on what has already happened. The Internet of Things (IOT), combined with strong data management practices, can help create predictive, proactive safety programs. From flagging the potential for unsafe environmental conditions to transmitting and receiving real-time information regarding an actual hazard, worker-powered safety can further

engage each individual in his/her own well-being and the well-being of teammates.

Although safety is, of course, a primary concern, platforms that incorporate IOT along with passive zone sensors, smart PPE and mobile devices can also allow workers to communicate with everyone in the company about impacts to quality and efficiency. The digital transformation of the worker translates into engagement via real-time data, and this improved communication empowers workers to perform optimally as well as safely, contributing to leaner, higher quality practices.

The Connected Worker

Real-time communications technology transforms not only the worker, but the entire workforce. Technologies such as IOT and smart PPE are only effective when they are designed to help achieve several important goals. For example, we know that the next generation of workers needs to feel comfortable and happy in their environment. They must feel appreciated as a vital member of the team. And they need to believe they have a voice.

It is when these objectives are achieved, above and beyond the implementation of the actual technology,

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that the worker becomes genuinely connected. When an organization's most important asset, the workforce, is engaged via a real-time, continuous loop of communication, individuals become part of a connected framework that powers leaner, higher quality and safer organizations.

The Impact of the New Collar Worker

Many hiring managers know that by the year 2020, nearly half of the workforce will be comprised of Millennials. Although age can be a factor, more important is understanding how to nurture the needs of these highly skilled specialists, many of whom demand that their work is enabled by technology. While a generational shift is occurring, that does not mean that more experienced workers are becoming obsolete.

New collar workers in a connected environment can benefit greatly from the continuous learning that occurs alongside their more seasoned teammates. While they have a deep understanding of new technology, these younger workers still need on-the-job experience within specific work environments. A connected workforce that encourages communication between workers can help leverage the expertise of experienced workers and create a much more engaged workforce.

Another component to digital transformation should be addressed: the impact of artificial intelligence (AI). We may be fascinated by robots and the promise of AI, but we are still light years away from a fully automated experience. Instead, most organizations are either overwhelmed by too much data or experiencing a data drought. The digital transformation of the worker can help alleviate both of these situations as long as they are fully connected and engaged, both in the task at hand and in performing that task in the safest way possible.

Rather than picturing a world with robots completing a continuous loop of information, envision instead a connected, worker-powered safety environment in which humans, equipped with the right technology, are the primary drivers of data.

Safety & Productivity Combined

When workers can share information and see it impacting management decisions in real time, the entire company can benefit. Data from a connected workforce provides leadership with a more accurate operational view on a daily basis. It also gives management the ability to mitigate risk based on a predictive, proactive view of safety. Real-time data used in this way drives a higher level of safety as more incidents are avoided. When hazards can be predicted and consequently minimized or eliminated, operations can continue virtually uninterrupted.

For quality and efficiency, workers often have valuable observations as to how operations may be improved. Unfortunately, traditional communication practices often fail to capture these key insights. When technology is used to create strong communication between all aspects of the organization, a

continuous feedback loop is established, engages the worker, and informs management. The result is a digitally transformed workforce and operations that are safer and more streamlined.

Engagement & Worker Satisfaction

The goal is to connect workers to the information, tools and equipment to keep them safer and help them be more productive on a daily basis. Few things are more demoralizing than working in an environment that is unsafe or where warnings go unheeded. Traditional reporting processes often create an enormous lag time between the actual observation and any remediation that may occur. In some cases, workers may never see any response to their comments, which can be extremely demotivating.

When workers are segmented away from management, communication is slow at best and absent at worst. This gap in communication can breed an environment in which workers do not feel valued. As noted, the impacts of an unhappy worker may be much more significant given the intrinsic needs of Millennials and the growing lack of available talent. Simply put, worker satisfaction is now a critical success factor and engagement is a huge component of overall workforce satisfaction.

Connecting workers as part of digital transformation gives workers a voice and the ability to see the positive results of their feedback in a timely fashion. Retention improves as the employment experience becomes not only happier, but safer and more productive.

Bringing the Vision Home With Technology

New technologies such as IOT, smart PPE and sensors enable this new vision of an engaged, empowered workforce, but they do not create them on their own. Organizations must embrace digital transformation from a human perspective, connecting workers to an overall framework that fosters real-time communication, stronger data management and a safer, more productive team. Safety that is worker-powered in this way does not replace traditional methods such as training and inspections. Instead, it provides a healthy boost to performance, giving workers the tools they need and want to enact real change in their environment and in their daily lives.

Digital transformation of the worker transforms the organization and the work experience of every individual. It not only impacts safety but creates a more positive company culture that in turn translates into leaner, more efficient production. Putting safety in employees' hands by allowing them to transmit and receive data in real time as well as communicate concerns and have those concerns addressed quickly are crucial components of digital transformation. This continuous interaction between the environment, the information and the workforce is the real test of whether an organization is actually driving digital transformation forward. **PSJ**