From Seat Time to Skill: How Leading Safety Teams Are Proving Competence, Not Just Compliance



For decades, safety training has been measured in hours.

Eight hours of onboarding. Two hours of WHMIS. Annual refreshers that everyone clicks through in December because the calendar says it is time.

On paper, this looks like compliance. In practice, it often has very little to do with whether someone can perform a task safely when pressure is high, conditions change, or something goes wrong.

That gap is no longer theoretical. It is showing up in incident investigations, enforcement actions, and courtroom decisions across North America. And it is why many of the most mature safety organizations are quietly walking away from seat time as their primary metric and replacing it with skills verification and competency frameworks.

Not because regulators told them to. But because incidents forced the issue.

The Incident That Changed The Conversation

After a serious crushing injury at a U.S. manufacturing facility, investigators from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration reviewed the company’s training records. On the surface, everything looked solid. The injured worker had completed machine guarding training less than six months earlier. The supervisor had completed the same course annually for five years.

What the investigation uncovered was uncomfortable.

The worker had never demonstrated the lockout procedure on the specific machine involved. The supervisor had never observed the task being performed. Training existed, but competence had never been verified.

The resulting citation focused less on the absence of training and more on its effectiveness. The penalty was significant, but the larger cost came from downtime, litigation, and reputational damage.

This pattern is increasingly common. According to OSHA data, training deficiencies are cited in roughly one quarter of serious injury investigations, but the issue is rarely that no training occurred. It is that employers cannot show workers were capable of safely performing the task that caused the injury.

That distinction matters.

Why Seat Time Is Losing Credibility

Seat time was attractive because it was easy to measure. You could count hours. You could issue certificates. You could show auditors a clean spreadsheet.

The problem is that seat time assumes exposure equals ability. Anyone who has watched a new hire struggle with a task after “completing” training knows that assumption does not hold.

Research backs this up. Studies summarized by the National Safety Council show that workers forget up to 70% of newly learned information within 24 hours if it is not applied. After one week, retention can drop below 10%. Long refresher courses delivered once a year are among the least effective ways to preserve safety-critical skills.

Leading safety teams have internalized this reality. Instead of asking, “Did they take the course?” they are asking, “Can they do the work safely today?”

That shift changes everything.

What Skills Verification Looks Like on The Ground

In organizations moving away from seat time, training no longer ends when the course does.

A new operator may complete a short learning module, but they are not considered trained until they demonstrate the task on the shop floor. A supervisor observes the work, corrects small errors, and signs off only when the task is performed correctly under real conditions.

This is not about bureaucracy. In fact, many teams find it simpler. A five-minute observation produces more confidence than an hour-long quiz. It also produces evidence that stands up far better under scrutiny.

One Canadian logistics company shared that after introducing task-based sign-offs for powered mobile equipment, near-miss reports involving loading docks dropped by 38 percent within a year. Nothing about the hazards changed. What changed was verification.

From Topics to Tasks

Another defining change is how training is structured.

Traditional programs are built around topics. Fall protection. Confined spaces. Hazard communication. These categories make sense to regulators but often feel abstract to workers.

Leading teams reorganize training around tasks and roles. Instead of “confined

space training," they define what an entrant must be able to do, what an attendant must monitor, and what a supervisor must control. Each role has observable behaviors that can be verified.

This task-based approach reduces unnecessary training while increasing effectiveness. Workers stop sitting through content that does not apply to them. Supervisors gain clarity about what competence actually looks like.

It also aligns safety with operations. When training mirrors the work people do, it stops feeling like an external requirement and starts feeling relevant.

Competency Frameworks are No Longer Just for High-Risk Industries

Competency frameworks have long existed in aviation, healthcare, and skilled trades. What is new is their spread into general industry, logistics, construction, and even office-based roles with safety implications.

A competency framework does not have to be complex. At its core, it answers three questions.

1. What does a safe performer look like at this role?
2. How do we verify that?
3. How often do we re-check it?

Leading organizations define different expectations for new hires, experienced workers, and supervisors. They stop pretending that a single annual refresher keeps everyone equally capable.

This approach also supports career development. Workers see a clear progression from basic competence to advanced capability. Safety becomes part of professional growth, not just rule-following.

Short Checks Beat Long Refreshers

One of the most counterintuitive changes is the move away from long refresher courses.

Annual refreshers are often justified as "due diligence." In reality, they are poorly timed and poorly retained.

High-performing teams replace them with micro-verification. A brief scenario during a safety meeting. A short observation before a high-risk task. A quick digital check-in when equipment or conditions change.

These moments are frequent enough to catch skill decay early, but small enough not to disrupt operations. They also generate documentation that shows active management of competence, which regulators increasingly expect to see.

Supervisors As Coaches, Not Compliance Police

Perhaps the most important shift is cultural.

In seat-time models, safety owns training and supervisors enforce rules. In skills-based models, supervisors become central to verification and coaching.

This does not mean supervisors become safety specialists. It means they learn

to observe work, give constructive feedback, and confirm competence. Workers respond differently to this. Being coached feels very different from being policed.

One operations manager put it plainly: “When my supervisors started watching how the work was actually done, not just whether rules were followed, conversations changed. People spoke up sooner. Mistakes got corrected before they became incidents.”

What Regulators and Courts are Really Looking For

Despite persistent myths, regulators are not demanding more training hours. They are demanding better evidence.

In enforcement actions and civil cases, the question is increasingly whether the employer took reasonable steps to ensure workers were capable of working safely. Training records alone rarely answer that question anymore.

As one OSHA compliance officer was quoted in a safety conference panel, “A certificate tells me someone sat in a room. It does not tell me they can do the job.”

That statement captures the direction of travel.

The Business Case Stronger Than The Compliance Case

There is also a practical reason this shift is accelerating. It saves time and money.

Seat time pulls people away from work. Skills verification happens in the flow of work. It reduces incidents, near misses, and rework. It also shortens onboarding by focusing only on what matters for the role.

Organizations that have made this transition often report faster ramp-up for new hires, fewer repeat incidents, and stronger supervisor engagement.

The Bottom Line

Training does not protect people. Competence does.

The most effective safety teams are not abandoning compliance. They are redefining it. They are moving from counting hours to proving capability, from generic courses to role-based expectations, and from annual rituals to continuous verification.

That shift is not driven by trends or technology. It is driven by hard lessons learned after incidents, investigations, and uncomfortable questions.

If you want, I can expand this into a longer thought-leadership piece with additional case law examples, build an industry-specific competency framework, or translate this message into executive-level language that supports budget and change approval.