HAZCOM: 6 SDS Traps to Avoid



Chemical safety in the workplace is a joint effort. It requires employees and employers to work together. Let’s look at 6 of the most common mistakes that occur in the workplace and how to avoid them.

Mistake 1: Relying Too Heavily on the SDS Information

The Problem: The quality of information in SDSs (safety data sheets) is always improving. But there are still too many SDSs that don’t provide enough relevant information about the chemical. A poor quality SDS doesn’t help the employee understand the potential hazard.

The Solution: You have a choice. You can:

- Ask the supplier for a more thorough explanation of their SDS; or
- Select a different manufacturer provides a more thorough SDS; and/or
- Conduct your own risk assessment on the chemical before buying it.

Mistake 2: Not Reviewing the SDS before Using the Chemical

The Problem: While it’s not a good idea to rely too heavily on the SDS, it is essential that the SDS be consulted before the product is used. But how often have you seen an employee actually reviewing an SDS for a chemical before using it?

The Solution: Ensure that the SDSs are accessible. For example store SDSs in binders at strategic locations around the site or make SDSs easily accessible electronically from any computer.

Mistake 3: Not Having the Proper PPE for the Chemicals Used in the Workplace

The Problem: SDSs tend to be pretty generic regarding PPE requirements. Of course, not all forms of PPE are the same. Even if the SDS is specific, it can raise problems. For instance, if the SDS specifies that it is a skin absorption hazard and that neoprene gloves must be used, should you stock neoprene gloves?

The Solution: A health and safety person should review the SDS of each chemical onsite to ensure adequate protection is available. At our workplace, we

developed a PPE selection guide that is available to all employees. This guide outlines:

- All of the PPE stocked onsite and the specific hazards they are designed to protect against; and
- Available respirator cartridges/canisters and outlines the specific chemicals onsite that they are appropriate for.

Mistake 4: Failing to Label Containers of Chemicals

The Problem: Unless they fall into certain exempt situations, regulated chemicals must be labeled. One reason for these requirements is that without labels, workers might try to use their senses to determine what a chemical is.

The Solution: Make labeling easy by providing blank stickers and permanent markers for workers to use. Ideally, you should keep these materials readily available at the spot where the worker obtains the chemical. Training on labeling requirements and auditing the workplace will help reduce labeling errors.

Mistake 5: Not Making HazCom Training Site-Specific

The Problem: Although there are lots of good generic HazCom training packages on the market, these packages come up short on site-specific training. Workers return from generic training – often from an outside service provider like a consultant, contractor – and think they are "all done." But they're not. Information provided in these training sessions must now be tied to the chemicals, operations, processes, and conditions of your own workplace. You need to give your workers context.

The Solution: Once workers complete generic training, provide them site-specific training that transfers the information to your site. This training should include SDS locations, safe handling procedures and spill response.

Mistake 6: Inadequate Precautions about Smoking & Chemicals

The Problem: Most workers are pretty good about washing their hands before eating. The same can't be said about washing hands before smoking. Poor hand hygiene habits can result in inadvertent ingestion and inhalation of workplace chemicals via cigarettes.

The Solution: When providing training on the safe handling of hazardous chemicals, remind workers that all hand-to-mouth actions – including smoking – carry the risk of ingesting hazardous chemicals.

Conclusion

Many if not most of the highlighted mistakes are a matter of pure common sense. But you'd be surprised at how these seemingly self-evident points get overlooked.