Incident Investigation Refresh: Making the Most of What Happened Stats and Facts



FACTS

- **Investigation Is Prevention:** An incident investigation is not a paperwork exercise — it is the process by which an organization identifies why something went wrong and what must change to prevent it from happening again.
- **Blame Is Not a Root Cause:** Too many investigations stop at the worker. When human error is recorded as the cause and the case is closed, the systemic failure behind the error stays in place — ready to produce the same outcome again.
- **Immediate Cause vs. Root Cause:** What caused the injury is not the same as why the injury happened. Identifying the immediate cause — a slip, a tool failure, a missed step — without tracing it back to its root leaves the hazard unaddressed.
- **Shallow Investigations Create Repeat Incidents:** Organizations that consistently identify only immediate causes experience repeat incidents at rates three to five times higher than those conducting thorough root cause analysis.
- **The Team Matters:** Investigations conducted only by supervisors miss the knowledge that frontline workers carry. An effective investigation team includes both management and workers who understand how the job is actually performed.
- **Corrective Actions Must Be Verified:** A recommendation made in an investigation report that is never implemented, or never confirmed as implemented, provides no protection. Follow-through and verification are where investigations succeed or fail.
- **Timeliness Is Critical:** Evidence changes, memories fade, and conditions are altered after an incident. Beginning the investigation promptly preserves the accuracy of information needed to find the real cause.

STATS

- Between 80 and 90 percent of serious workplace injuries are attributed to human error — yet human error is rarely the root cause. In most cases, workers' mistakes are symptoms of wider systemic issues that a thorough investigation would identify and correct.
- In 2024, preventable work deaths in the United States decreased five percent to 4,337, alongside a 0.4 percent decrease in hours worked, according to the National Safety Council — a trend safety researchers link in part to improved incident investigation and learning practices.
- Work-related medically consulted injuries totaled 3.95 million in the United States in 2024, according to the National Safety Council — each one representing a potential learning opportunity that, if properly investigated, could prevent a recurrence.