Course Learning Outcomes for Unit IV

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

1. Recall and discuss various factors that can affect risk perception.
2. Apply knowledge of risk perception to improve workplace risk assessments.

Reading Assignment

1. Navigate to the CSU Online Library by clicking the "My Library" button on the course menu.
2. Below the heading "Research Databases", click the link to the Business Source Complete database.
3. In the first blank search field on the database search screen, type or copy/paste the following article titles:
4. To the right of the journal article you just added to the database search screen, you will see a field labeled "Select a Field (Optional)"; click the small down arrow beside that phrase.
5. On the resulting drop-down menu, click "TI Title" to highlight and select that option.
6. Click "Search" to retrieve the desired article.
7. For help with using these instructions, contact the CSU Online Library support at librarian@columbiasouthern.edu or 877.268.8046 (toll free).

Unit Lesson

Have you ever wondered why some people seem willing to take more risks than others? Why would someone willingly jump out of a perfectly good airplane with only a silk parachute? Why are some people willing to invest in the stock market while others are not? Why do people continue to smoke cigarettes despite the well-documented hazards they present? Psychologists have been investigating these questions for many years, and while many theories abound, there is really no single answer.

Some people may take risks because they seek the reward at the end and feel that the reward is greater than the threat presented by the risk (Cooper, 2003). Others seem to avoid negative consequences at all costs. Some personality characteristics, such as extroversion and conscientiousness, have been linked to risk-taking and risk-avoidance, but it is still difficult to predict what risks will be accepted or rejected by any one person.

Why is this important for the safety practitioner? Remember that risk is a very subjective construct. Even with quantitative fault tree analysis techniques, we still need to deal with human behavior. Will our workers who are exposed to risk agree with our assessment of the risk and take the appropriate actions? Before we can apply control tactics, we need a better understanding of how risk is perceived.

According to Fuller & Vassie (2004), “Human perceptions are the conclusions and views that individuals reach about issues based on an accumulation of information and experience from the world in which they live” (p. 81). Risk perception is influenced by our own experiences with risks, as well as the opinions and experiences of those around us.

For example, despite clear scientific evidence that seat belts and laws that require seat belt use can save lives, it has taken many decades to reach a reasonable level of compliance. One of the reasons for this may be that because most people drive every day without experiencing a crash, very few experience crashes where a seat belt would prevent serious injury. The annoyance of wearing a seat belt overrides the potential risk if we have never experienced the negative consequence. What caused the recent change in compliance?
Perhaps the increase in the likelihood of getting a traffic citation has been a factor. Most states now have failure to wear a seatbelt as a primary violation, meaning the likelihood of a citation and fine has increased. The perception of the crash risk is the same, but the perception of the ticket risk has changed.

A better understanding of risk perception can help when trying to change unsafe behaviors in the workplace. It may not be enough to tell people that removing the blade guard from a saw creates a serious risk. Workers who experience a slower production rate due to the presence of guards are more likely to remove them, especially if salary is tied to production output. The incentives should be to keep the guards in place, rather than to encourage their removal.

Social norms also influence risk-taking (Cooper, 2003). In the 1960s, we began to understand the dangers of cigarette smoking. Public health officials began aggressive anti-smoking campaigns and regulation of cigarette advertising and marketing without much effect. In the 1990s, bans on smoking in the workplace became common, followed by smoking bans in most public places. Finally, the number of smokers began to decrease. Research has shown that there has been an increase in the number of young people who now perceive smoking as a high-risk activity (Center for Public Program Evaluation, 2011). Much of this change is attributed to the gradual shift in how society as a whole views cigarette smoking; the societal norm has changed in favor of the non-smoker.

Social norms are also present in the workplace. Going back to our example of removing saw blade guards, imagine new workers entering the shop and observing the guards being removed. They just went through their safety orientation and know that removing the guards is dangerous and against company policy. When they ask the veteran workers about it, they are told that the guards slow down production, and besides, “no one ever gets hurt and no one ever enforces the requirement.” In other words, removing the guard is the norm and is not perceived as a high-risk activity. In addition to increased enforcement, incentives for keeping the guards in place may be needed. Certainly, we need to remove the disincentive of linking pay to production.

In the second half of the course, we will be investigating ways to reduce risks in a wide variety of workplace situations. It is important to remember that perception of risk among managers, supervisors, and workers is likely to be significantly different. Even among safety professionals, risk perception will vary. Examining the forces and situations that influence our perceptions of risk will enable us to better determine effective risk reduction methods.

References


Suggested Reading

Learn more about this unit’s topics by researching in the databases of the CSU Online Library. The following are examples of the articles you may find:

Learning Activities (Non-Graded)

It is All in How You Perceive It

Psychology literature includes numerous survey results concerning public perceptions of risk and risk acceptance. Survey topics explore how people perceive such risks as living near a chemical plant, traveling commercially by air, driving a car, and smoking. Results from these surveys often reveal that there is a discrepancy between public perception and objective measures of risk.

Do you think perception should be included as a fourth type of risk definition? Why, or why not? Write a minimum two-page paper explaining your answer. Use correct APA formatting when writing the paper.

Non-graded learning activities are provided to aid students in their course of study. You do not have to submit them. If you have questions, contact your instructor for further guidance and information.