

The visible and invisible value of Personal Protective Equipment



What is Personal Protection Equipment? Seatbelts while driving, aprons while cooking, athletic shoes while running, and Covid-19 face masks.....

These are simple examples of personal protective equipment (PPE) which we all use daily. We might not even be using the PPE intentionally; it might just be a habit and not a decision specifically based on risk management.

However, when we think of *industry-related PPE for construction*, restaurants or hospitals, we will definitely be able to identify the required PPE prescribed by legislation.

For instance, on a construction site, hard hats are a requirement; hairnets in the restaurant kitchens; and latex gloves in hospitals. For each industry, specific PPE is required and stipulated by specific legislation.

In a previous article we discussed *The Now and the Future of Occupational Health and Safety in the Workplace*, in this article we focus on the application of personal protection equipment and the benefits associated with PPE.

Understanding the use and value of PPE

Why do we use PPE, even if out of habit? We use it because it helps us perform an activity or task in a safer way. Why do we wear shoes when exercising, or even just on a daily basis? Not for fashion purposes, but to protect our feet. Imagine walking barefoot in the shops, or in the streets, and how painful it can become.

So, if it comes so naturally for us in those circumstances, why does it always seem to be such a challenge in the workplace? Why do accidents happen in the workplace, and upon investigation why do we find that PPE was not used, or if used, improperly used? Why do people not use their PPE when they know it protects their eyesight, their brain, their life, despite constant, repetitive training?

The first answer: awareness and culture. And secondly, complacency.

Employees and employers are not always aware of the value that PPE brings to their workplace. The value of PPE needs to be communicated, and the proper use of PPE encouraged. Moreover, the use of PPE should be an integral part of a company's culture. We are quick to assume that everyone understands the value of PPE and immediately incorporates it into company culture. We forget that safety starts with ourselves.

Most of us know that PPE should always be the "last resort", or the "last line of defence". However, it should not be neglected, scrambled for at the last minute, or purchased at the cheapest price. This is what often happens. We get complacent and we see our PPE as an add-on, and not as a must, a non-negotiable component of our work environment.

The question that could be asked is: how much value do you place on your life, and how does your PPE reflect that value? What would you say of a person driving a motorcycle on the highway wearing no helmet?

What are the personal protective equipment benefits?

Let us take a look at the visible and invisible benefits that PPE provides to companies and individuals.

The visible benefits (what we see)

- PPE provides a safer work environment. It protects the employee from bodily harm and protects their health while performing a certain task or activity.
- People wearing PPE (e.g. hardhats, jackets, safety vests) are visible and less likely to be in harm's way.
- Wearing PPE looks professional and reflects a professional image to the outside world. It might even mean more work because team members working on a project are seen wearing their PPE.

The invisible benefits (what we don't see)

- PPE is tried and tested. Always be on the lookout for SABS standards that regulate quality. All PPE must conform to standards; therefore, you know that the product is worth the purchase.
- PPE manufactured for companies is mostly branded. Free marketing.
- PPE protects the image of a company. For instance, if someone dies at your company because no PPE was provided, what would the consequences be in terms of the company's reputation and finances?
- Providing your employees with PPE shows that the company takes their employees' health and safety into consideration and cares about their employees.
- By providing PPE to employees, employers are fulfilling their obligations and adhering to the Occupational Health and Safety Act.
- Using PPE promotes self-care in the workplace. It provides employees with the opportunity to make their health and safety a priority and to practise the skill of self-care, sometimes in a highly stressful environment.
- PPE provides peace of mind to both the employer and the employee.

Considerations in the workplace

Culture – What is “typical” in your organisation? Is it typical to see your employees wearing PPE out of habit and only because it is company policy and a requirement? Or do your employees wear their PPE because they actually value their lives, their families and their futures? Do they address the matter of PPE when there are concerns, or do they simply accept whatever PPE is given to them?

Top Management – Lead by example. Employees follow the example of the employer. It is always interesting to see the project manager or CEO on a construction site, wearing no PPE and doing the inspections. What would happen if the employees followed suit? They are severely reprimanded, thrown off site or worse, nobody cares and leaves them be. None of those show care for the life of a person.

Training and Awareness – We can train our employees until we are blue in the face, but without changing the culture within the company to prioritise the use of PPE and without the buy-in of management, there will be minimal or no change. Most importantly, by merely training employees on PPE because we want them to comply, basically ticking the boxes, we are implying that it is not really important. Employees will pick up on this and, once again, follow the leader.

In the follow-up blog, we will look at the psychology of PPE and a more personal approach to PPE compliance.

In conclusion

Familiarising yourself with the applicable legislation, regulations and by-laws will assist you as employer to understand the demands of the industry better. Key legislation to consider includes the OHS Act, Construction Regulations 2014, General Safety Regulations and General Administrative Regulations.

SERR Synergy assists business owners with a comprehensive OHS service which creates and continuously develops a health and safety culture and system within the business that aligns with the business's internal policies and goals. We have a dedicated and qualified team who implement health and safety legislation, and assist with small- to large-scale OHS projects, concerns or aspects.

About the Author: Inge-Marie joined our team in August 2018 and currently holds the title 'Occupational Health and Safety Lead Auditor'. She is registered with SACPCMP as Candidate Construction Health and Safety Officer, holds a SAMTRAC certificate and a B.Com Business degree from UNISA. She has more than eight years' experience in the construction and health and safety industry, specialising in roof work and working at heights. She is currently responsible for various industry-specific clients, including construction, manufacturing, chemicals and oil, as well as wireless internet service providers. She compiles OHS files, risk assessments and fall protection, emergency and evacuation plans and conducts regular internal audits for clients.

Additional sources:

<https://www.hsimagazine.com/article/the-psychology-of-ppe-a-human-factor-approach-to-ppe-compliance/>

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The logo for SERR Synergy is located in the bottom right corner. It features the word "SERR" in a large, bold, white sans-serif font, with the word "SYNERGY" in a smaller, white sans-serif font directly beneath it. The text is set against a red triangular background that has a blue outline and a slight drop shadow.

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