

Corporate Memory of Accidents Lasts Only Three Years

Three Years Later

Question:
Why do companies repeat the same types of accidents over and over?

Answer:
After three years, almost everyone in the company has forgotten the accident. So, it happens again.

Solution:
Include a dramatic illustration in the accident communication.

Dramatic illustrations are remembered up to eight times longer than text-only communications.

This Safety Minute was prepared by Larkin Communication (www.larkin.biz) in partnership with CEP.

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Research conducted by Barry Throness

Researcher Barry Throness examined how long employees remember major incidents in their company. He looked at actual incidents in his company's safety database and interviewed employees to test their memory of the various incidents. His study showed that:

- after three years, memories of the incident were almost completely gone
- the few people who remembered an incident were either directly involved in the incident, or were responsible for implementing corrective actions following the incident
- to those not involved in the incident or corrective action, it was as if the incident had never happened.

Throness says this memory loss happens even with extensive written communication describing the incident, and with redesigned training programs after the incident.

Source: Throness, B., "Keeping the Memory Alive, Preventing Memory Loss that Contributes to Process Safety Events," *Process Safety Progress*, 33 (2), pp. 115–123, <https://aiche.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/prs.11635> (Oct. 24, 2013).

Illustrations Help to Improve Memory

Research conducted by James M. Clark and Allan Paivio

Researchers tested people's memories using a series of index cards. First, they showed test subjects hundreds of index cards that contained words or images. Hours later, they were shown more index cards — some they had seen earlier, some they had not. They were asked to separate the cards they remembered seeing earlier in the day. The researchers found that:

- cards with written abstract words (e.g., "animal" or "justice") were remembered the least accurately
- cards with written names of physical objects (e.g., "dog" or "chair") were remembered 200% better than the written abstract words
- cards with pictures of objects (e.g., an illustration of a dog or an illustration of a chair) were remembered as much as 800% better than abstract words.

Source: Clark, J. M., and A. Paivio, "Dual Coding Theory and Education," *Educational Psychology Review*, 3 (3), www.csuchico.edu/~nschwartz/Clark%20&%20Paivio.pdf (1991).

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