



Safety and HR Wisdom From the Encyclopedia Britannica

Insights

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The New York Times and other publications are running articles pondering the end of the written version of the Encyclopedia Britannica and what that says about society. We were a “World Book” family, but I have waxed nostalgic about growing up in the 60’s in a small Georgia town where the encyclopedia was the only way to resolve family disputes or whip out a quick paper. No wonder families dropped a small fortune to proudly display those tomes.

By now you are thinking what the heck does the encyclopedia have to do with safety, and has Mavity lost it?

Day to day events give us wonderful analogies, examples and source material to more effectively run our businesses, maintain a safety-driven culture and make labor lawyers unnecessary. “Thinking” is a declining art, even though creative musings are often at the root of entrepreneurial success or even the twisted arguments I sometimes successfully devise to thwart my clients’ foes. So indulge me.

Lesson #1 ... the internet provides safety and HR professionals and endless supply of readily available tools and information that the “Mad Men” generation of executives never would have believed. Although I utilize many paid update services, I rely on OSHA.gov and other government sites for initial research and am stunned by the legal briefs, articles and policies I find through Google. Even better, I follow through twitter and email about 200 sites, publications and thinkers, and find practical materials analyzing why employees do foolish things and useful ideas to improve employee engagement or avoid harassment and retaliation claims. After almost 500 fatality cases, I am passionate about determining the behavioral reasons employees use bad judgment.

Lesson #2 ... internet surfing has caused an explosion of misinformation. For goodness sakes ... conspiracy theories debunked before my birth have resurfaced because of reputable appearing sites and posts. I love my college freshman’s self-aware quip in his high school senior yearbook: “Never believe anything you read on the internet. Abraham Lincoln”. Electronic misinformation has fueled resistance to AIDS treatment in Africa and refusal to get children vaccinated in the U.S. In my universe, I regularly encounter admirable safety and HR programs copied from online at business sites. Unfortunately, “form” materials must be site-specific and compliant with local law. And sometimes those materials actually are 95% compliant, but that last 5% creates a great deal of business for labor lawyers. At least allow counsel to review the final copy for those legal nuance. Most of us enjoy preventing problems more than hitting employers with huge avoidable defense

Most of us enjoy preventing problems more than fixing employers with huge avoidable defense fees. We also often find that those policies worked swimmingly for XYZ company who graciously shared them, but they have little relationship to the shop floor of the company who copied them. Remember that the reputable providers of good employer forms and policies emphasize the need to spend the time and money to customize them.

Lesson #3 ... take advantage of apps. apps are not a panacea, but used properly, they are a means to make on-the-job practices consistent, documented, and well monitored. Tablet and phone apps allow supervisors to effectively audit and follow up on safety issues or facilitate isolated technicians on customer property completing a JSA and conferring with the home office.

Lesson #4 ... don't neglect training employees and supervisors to write. You have read endless diatribes on the "text" culture and their near incomprehensible communications. I'm more concerned about the flippancy and lack of thought displayed by emails. In the business world, any communication may end up an exhibit, and email is tone death. Write every sensitive communication as if it may be a exhibit in a lawsuit because it may indeed end up as one.

Lesson # 5 ... I whiled away many an hour as a kid randomly looking up things in the encyclopedia, but my youthful forays were laughable in comparison to the billions of dollars wasted in the workplace by idle surfing. And such abuses are not the only problem. Electronic resources and communications magnify the obsessive compulsive in all of us and arguably lengthen the time to complete projects as we seek elusive perfection. And what about down time? Many employees would be more rested at night if they had not stayed up to the wee hours on social media, YouTube and the wonderful sites such as cracked.com.

I will probably buy one of the last sets of the Britannica or the World Book. I'll tell folks that it is because I am committed to restoring civilization in the event that an EMP or pandemic reduces us to barbarism, but the truth is that I'm just a tad nostalgic.

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