

TEACHING EMPLOYEES TO UNDERSTAND MATERIAL SAFETY DATA SHEETS (MSDS)

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Every employer that has one or more hazardous chemicals must comply with the OSHA Hazard Communication Program. This includes having a written program, having an individual responsible for overseeing the program, having a labeling program, securing and maintaining material safety data sheets.

The Hazard Communication Standard still accounts for more OSHA violations each year than any other single standard. OSHA is also mandated to check each company's Hazard Communication Program. They usually will interview employees during an inspection and during that interview they often times ask employees if they know what types of hazardous chemicals they are exposed to; if they know where the Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) are, and if they know how to read an MSDS. Unfortunately all too often the answer to the latter question is no.

When I begin working with a new client I often start out with the review of the Hazard Communication Program and how to read an MSDS. Reading and understand an MSDS can be difficult and confusing. There is no set standard format for an MSDS. Many times the headings are different and they are not always in the same order. The amount of detail in each varies and even the type of information provided differs from one MSDS to another. Many companies have also expended the information they provide on an MSDS to cover EPA information, D.O.T. information and other regulatory information. All of this makes it difficult to teach employees how to read one, let alone getting them to understand one.

As a result of doing Hazard Communication over the years, I discovered that MSDS don't have to be so confusing no matter how much information is provided. MSDS usually only have nine sections that relate to safety. Maybe ten if there is a section on First Aid. These sections include:

* The Chemical Identity	* Hazardous Ingredients
* Physical Properties	* Fire & Explosion Data
* Health Hazards (First Aid Procedures)	* Reactivity
* Spill & Leak Control	* Special Protection (Employee Protection)
* Special Precautions (Handling & Storage)	

These sections may differ in order and titles slightly but they are usually on every MSDS. Each of these sections are in bold letters and usually underlined so that they can be identified easily. I review these sections during my training class. Each of these sections contain important safety information, but at first glance the amount of information can be intimidating.

Employees, however, very seldom need to read all of the information on an MSDS. Most employees want a MSDS to answer a very specific question or questions. That is the key to teaching employees how to read the MSDS. Advise employees not to get lost in all this data, but simply go to the particular section on the MSDS that contains the information they are interested in. Once they have obtained the information they need then go to the next section for which they have a question.

The questions most employees have about a chemical is what does the chemical do to me? This can be found in the Health Hazard Section. This section tells an employee what the health hazards are, the symptoms, how long it takes to be impacted and what employees can do to protect themselves. If an employee wants to know how the chemical burns the section on Fire and Explosion Data provides this information. If Personal Protective Equipment is required that is covered in the section on Special Protection. Each question an employee has can be answered in one of the sections on the MSDS.

Reading and understanding an MSDS does not have to be overwhelming. It is simply as easy as knowing the question and going to the appropriate section. I found that using this technique makes the training easy and the employees have the confidence to get the information they need quickly. The MSDS becomes much less complicated and the valuable resource that OSHA had intended.

If you need any help with your Safety Program or employee training, please feel free to give me a call at 1-800-356-1274.