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7 Frequently Asked Questions about Safety Culture, Answered.

In conversation with

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Introduction.

Talk to any EHS leader in your industry and they'll tell you that one of their key focus areas for the year ahead is safety culture. *Why?*

Companies with best-in-class safety cultures typically experience lower incident rates, higher employee engagement, and improved performance. With that in mind, it's no surprise that 84% of EHS professionals indicated in a [recent survey](#) that they have already implemented programs to strengthen safety culture.

Whether your goal is to get started with safety culture or take the one you've created to the next level, we're here to help.

EHS experts Ian Cohen, Product Marketing Manager at Cority and Caleb Wall, Senior Partner at ERM, got together to answer some of the most frequently asked questions about safety culture.

Figure 1

Has your company initiated programs related to any of the following?

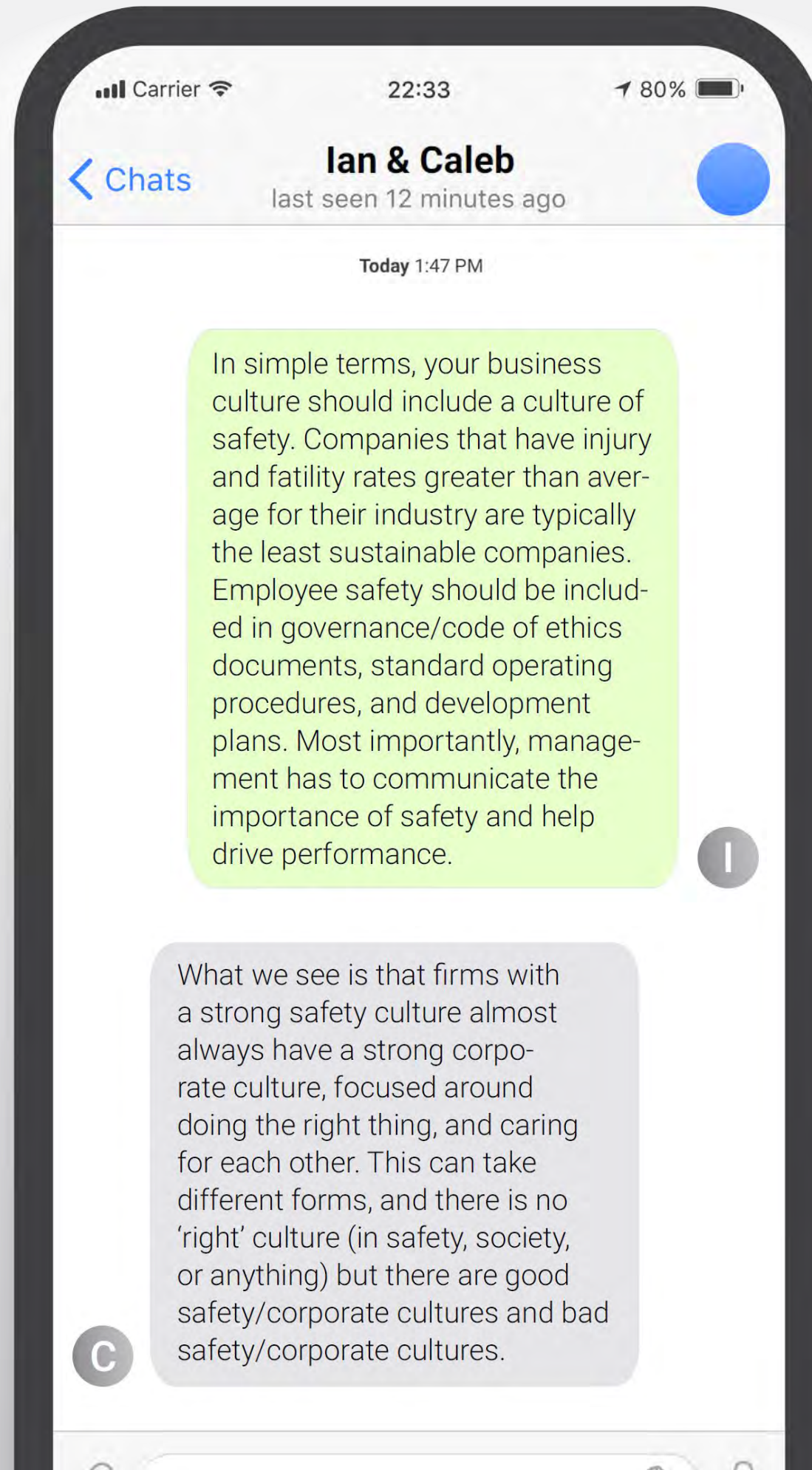Base: All respondents; multiple answers permitted (n=203).
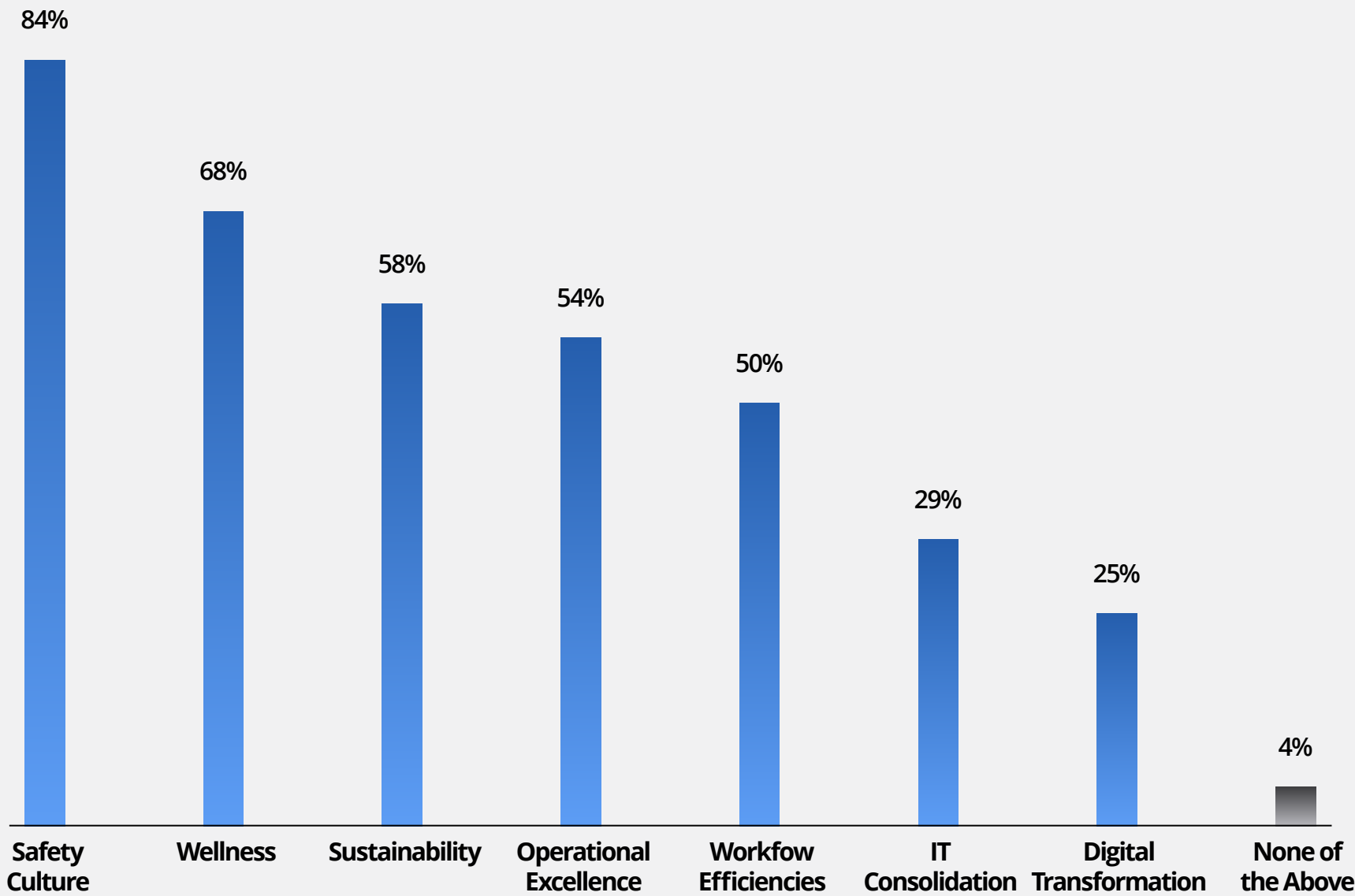
EHS Embraces the Technology Revolution. EHS Today (2019).

Chapter 1:

Getting Started with Safety Culture

Q: How is safety culture different from business culture and why?

Ian: In simple terms, your business culture should include a culture of safety. Companies that have injury and fatality rates greater than average for their industry are typically the least sustainable companies. **Employee safety should be included in governance/codes of ethics documents, standard operating procedures, and development plans. Most importantly, management has to communicate the importance of safety and help drive performance.**

Caleb: What we see is that **firms with a strong safety culture almost always have a strong corporate culture**, focused around doing the right thing, and caring for each other. This can take different forms, and there is no 'right' culture (in safety, society or anything) but there are good safety/corporate cultures and bad safety/corporate cultures.

Q: How do you address safety culture when you have very different work groups?

Caleb: **Safety is personal. Making safety personal, and owned, is one of the most important – and difficult – aspects of safety culture.**

So, achieving a healthy safety culture means accepting different views and diversity of thought, on the 'how' we get to a safety culture that works for everyone. It also means accepting only one set of thoughts about the 'what', which is a focus on eliminating harm.

Ian: I completely agree with Caleb, you have to make safety personal and each employee has to want to own safety, which can certainly be challenging.

One thing I recommend is looking at the job roles in your company and identifying the specific safety risks that may exist for them. **You should never assume that any job is free from safety risks.** You then have to communicate

"Instilling a strong culture can and does go a long way when it comes to maintaining your brand's reputation and driving operational excellence."

these risks to each employee. **Many workplace injuries and illnesses happen because of a lack of knowledge, so make sure employees understand the risks that are present onsite and what they need to do to avoid, minimize or mitigate personal risks.** For example, if an admin enters the shop floor to discuss a matter with a supervisor or employee, are they properly trained on where they can and can't walk, and do they know what type of PPE is needed?

Q: How can a company use safety as a competitive edge?

Ian: It's all about sustainability. Part of being a sustainable company is keeping employees safe on the job. This cuts down on costs, such as worker's compensation, medical bills, insurance costs, agency fines, and legal fees. **There are also reputation risks associated with poor safety performance. Consumers and businesses want to buy goods from companies with a positive social reputation and that includes ensuring employees are**

safe at work. Instilling a strong safety culture can and does go a long way when it comes to maintaining your brand's reputation and driving operational excellence.

Caleb: If you want to read about how transforming a safety culture can lead to a change in corporate culture, and how this drives operational and financial results, take a look at The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We do in Life and Business by Charles Duhigg.

The book walks you through Paul O'Neill's first presentation as the new CEO of the Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa) in 1987 and how focusing on safety led to a fourfold increase in profits.

That said, **safety is a shared responsibility, so if firms are doing things in safety that are working and saving lives, they should share it across the industry** (as Alcoa did and continues to do today.
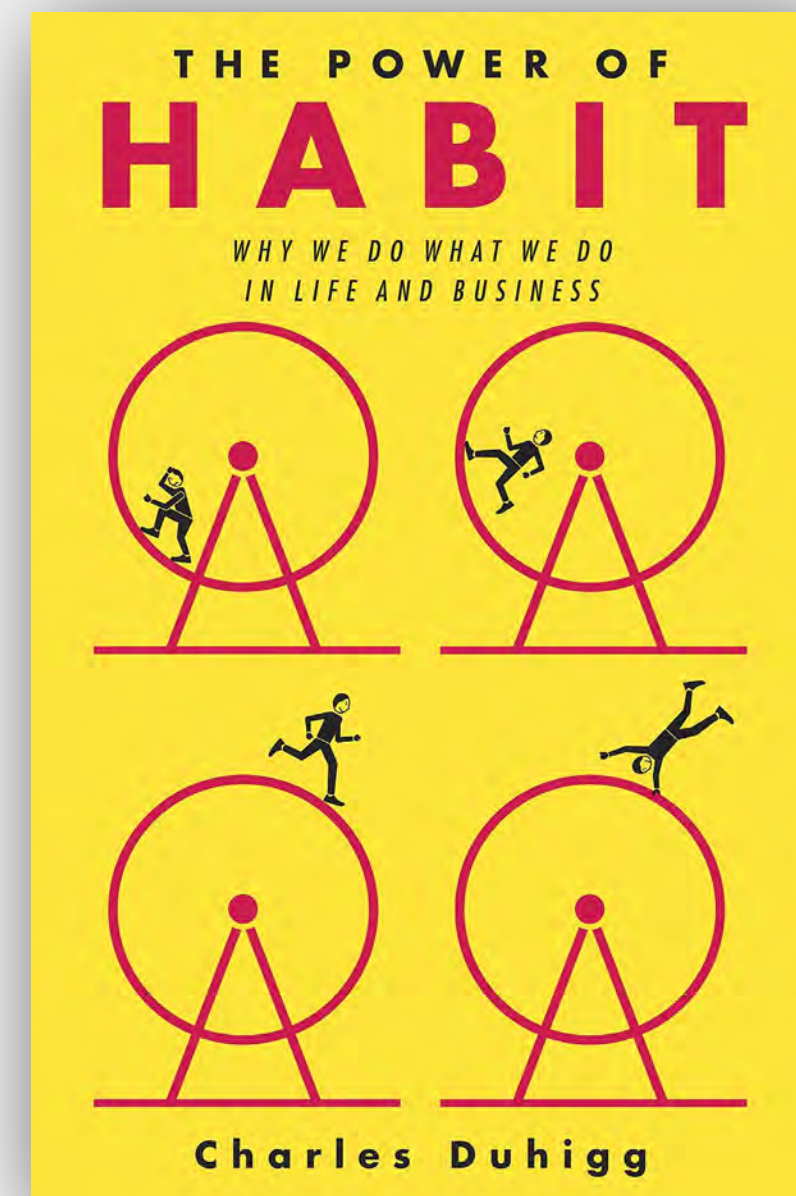
Chapter 2:

Measuring Safety Culture

"Start with 'Why'."

Q: Can you illustrate ways to measure safety engagement and what activities equate to engagement?

Caleb: Start with 'Why'. Why are we asking our teams to spend their time engaging around safety? It's about helping them understand what safety means to us as a firm. It's about taking the time to identify hazards. It's about reinforcing every day the sense that we could get hurt, and that we need to do things all the time to make sure we don't. **It's also about learning from and sharing our learnings from these engagements. It's NOT about meeting minimum numbers, metrics, goals or penalties around quotas.**

So, based on this, start to track the activities that we are asking folks for. Safety meetings, toolbox talks, Take 5 standdowns, etc. As these metrics emerge, start to look at the outputs of these activities (near-miss reports, remarkable safe behaviors, etc.). Then start to look at the outcomes from this. It takes time but start with 'why' and then you'll know where you need to get to.

Ian: For me, every interaction between management and employees is an opportunity to listen and learn from each other. **Engagement has to be a two-way street; it can't simply be management dictating the terms and conditions.** That said, measuring engagement can be challenging. I recommend conducting anonymous surveys because it can take some of the bias out of the results. You also need to determine if there's value in the various touchpoints within your organization through the survey results as well as through a meta-analysis that looks for correlations between touchpoints and safety incidents.

For example, are you seeing a reduction in near misses as you increase the number of pre-job safety briefings, management townhalls, lunch and learns, safety audits, safety walk-downs, or behavior-based safety reviews? It's also important to determine if these activities have a positive or negative impact engagement scores in the short-term as well as over time.

Figure 2

35%
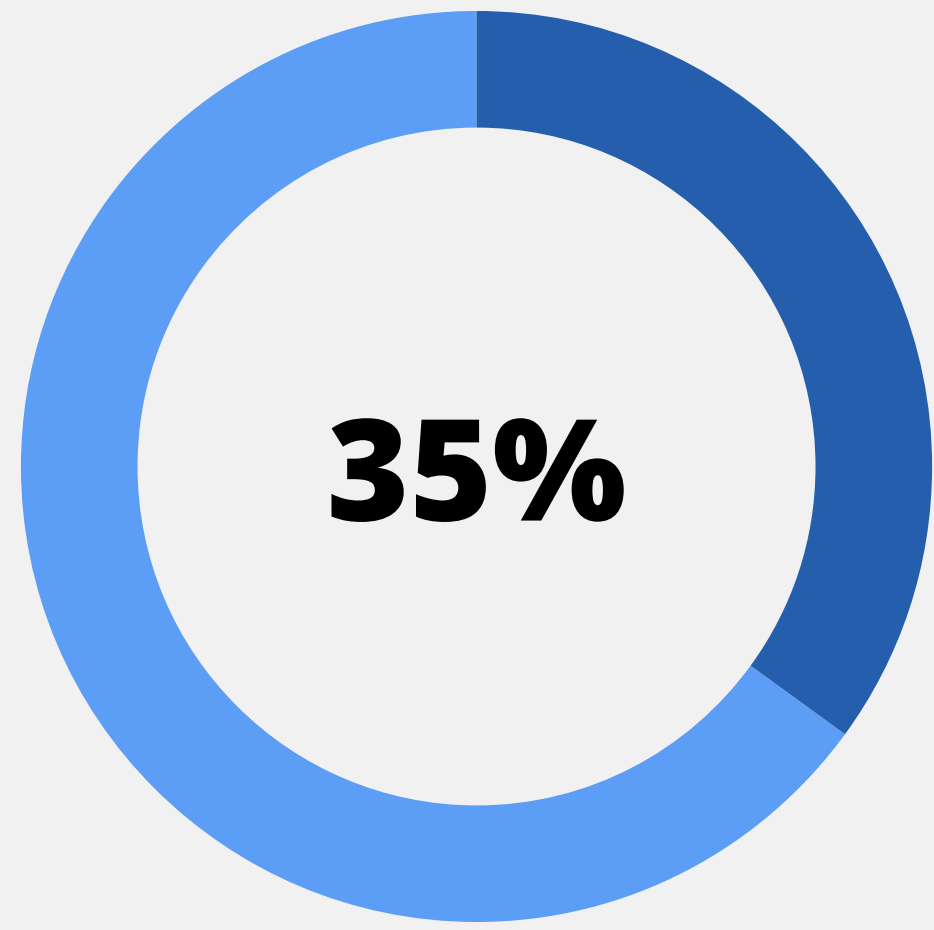
35% of respondents are currently using data analytics to improve EHS in their workplaces.

EHS Embraces the Technology Revolution. EHS Today (2019).

RECOMMENDED READING

For more information on metrics to consider tracking to improve your safety culture, check out:

Q: Getting data is easy for us, but we struggle to translate this data into meaningful leading and lagging indicators. What do you recommend?

Ian: William Deming once said, "just because you can measure everything doesn't mean you should."

With that in mind, you really need to look at your processes and procedures to determine what are the right things to measure. Determining what and when to measure is part science and part art. It's going to be an iterative process. **It's also important not to forget about the metadata that's being collected by employees during inspections, audits, safety briefings, and near miss or incident reporting.**

When measuring safety performance, I think it's important to look at near-miss and incident data but not just the raw numbers. You need to also look at that metadata to

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determine if there are underlying variables at play, such as tenure of employee, age of employee, hours worked since last incident, training hours completed, and type of work the injured or ill employee was engaged in during the time of injury/illness. When you have a firm grasp on the lagging indicators, you can then look to make changes to minimize or mitigate the risk of future incidents. Remember, finding correlations can be challenging and even if you find one it doesn't always equal causation.

Ultimately, your lagging indicators can help you identify which leading indicators to track. Some common examples include:

→

Common Examples of Leading Indicators

Number of training hours completed

Audits/Inspections completed on time

Audits/Inspections completed with/without issues

Safety briefings/pre-job briefings held each week

Participation rates

Chapter 3:

Using Technology to Drive Safety Culture

"The reality is that technology - if implemented correctly and focused on finding the right problem and solution statements - enables us to do things better, faster, cheaper and safer."

Q: Data is the catalyst that points to what needs to be done. How do you get top management to move the organization forward since the biggest pushback is often that no one has time or funds to implement a technology program?

Caleb: Anything we do needs to be justified in terms of a business case. The reality is that technology – if implemented correctly and focused on finding the right problem and solution statements – enables us to do things better, faster, cheaper and safer. **Getting there means starting with the problem we want to solve – not the cool new tech we want to deploy – and building an investment case around that problem and solution statement.** If there is a payoff, like long term gains for short term investment, the organization should be able to find the money.

Ian: Getting buy-in and project funding from management is an issue we hear all the time from the EHS professionals

we speak to. To help address this, we wrote a chapter in our eBook, [The Ultimate Guide to EHSQ Software Success](#), which walks through how to secure buy-in across the different levels of your organization.
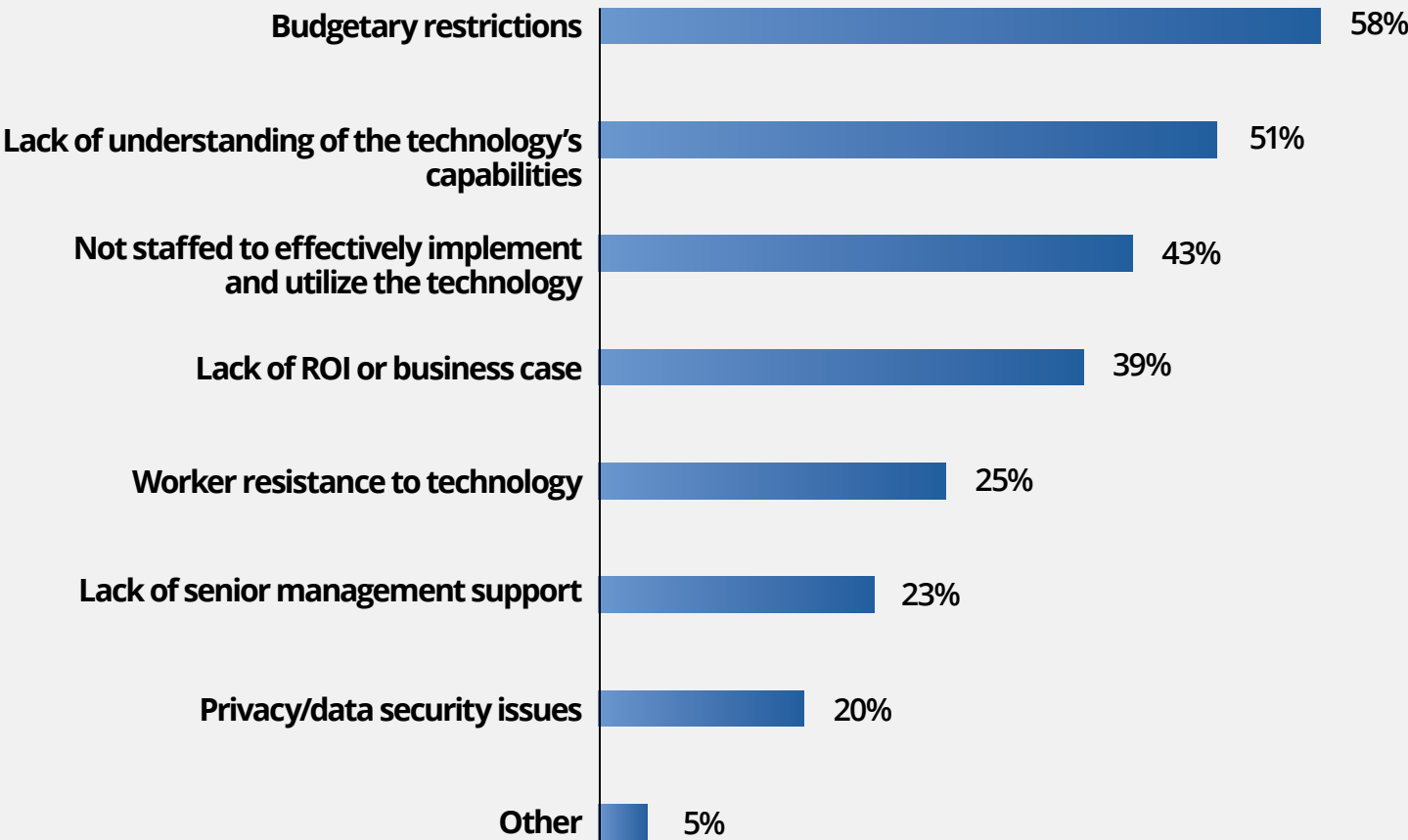
When it comes to the C-suite you need to be able to show the value to the company in real dollars. I recommend starting with incidents. Collect data from the last three to five years on the company's worker's compensation costs, absences, property damage, and impacts on operations. Then, calculate cost savings by reducing your annual incident rate by 5%, 10%, and 15%. By eliminating data silos, you should be able to demonstrate how leveraging technology to track and manage near misses and incidents that result in injuries, illnesses and/or property damage can be used to minimize or mitigate the risk of future occurrences across your organization, which will result in reduced costs.

What do you consider the biggest barriers to technology adoption for EHS at your company?

Base: All respondents; multiple answers permitted (n=203).

Barrier	%
Budgetary restrictions	58%
Lack of understanding of the technology's capabilities	51%
Not staffed to effectively implement and utilize the technology	43%
Lack of ROI or business case	39%
Worker resistance to technology	25%
Lack of senior management support	23%
Privacy/data security issues	20%
Other	5%

EHS Embraces the Technology Revolution. EHS Today (2019).

Disadvantages of Spreadsheet Applications

1. They lack security, so information can be corrupted

2. There is no audit trail, which means you may not know that data has changed

3. They typically live on someone's computer, so access is limited to other users without the use of email chains, which presents more challenges when it comes to maintaining version control

Q: What are the advantages to using a data analytics software system instead of a simple tool such as a spreadsheet application?

Ian: While we all love our spreadsheets, (see my article on why it's time to ditch the spreadsheets) they pose their own unique issues and risks.

Leveraging enterprise EHS and Quality software solutions enables you to eliminate these risks and more.

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Conclusion.

Leveraging technology to drive safety culture may sound like a novel idea initially, but many of you are already doing this.

From wearables to smart PPE to sensors and beacons, companies are increasingly looking to technology to help solve complex issues, including improving worker safety.

Using various types of hardware and software to gather data that helps you develop and update programs and processes is fundamental to demonstrating a commitment to employee safety and creating a strong safety culture.

Next Steps

To see how you can create a strong safety culture with technology that standardizes and streamlines your processes and engages your employees, watch this 2-minute video:
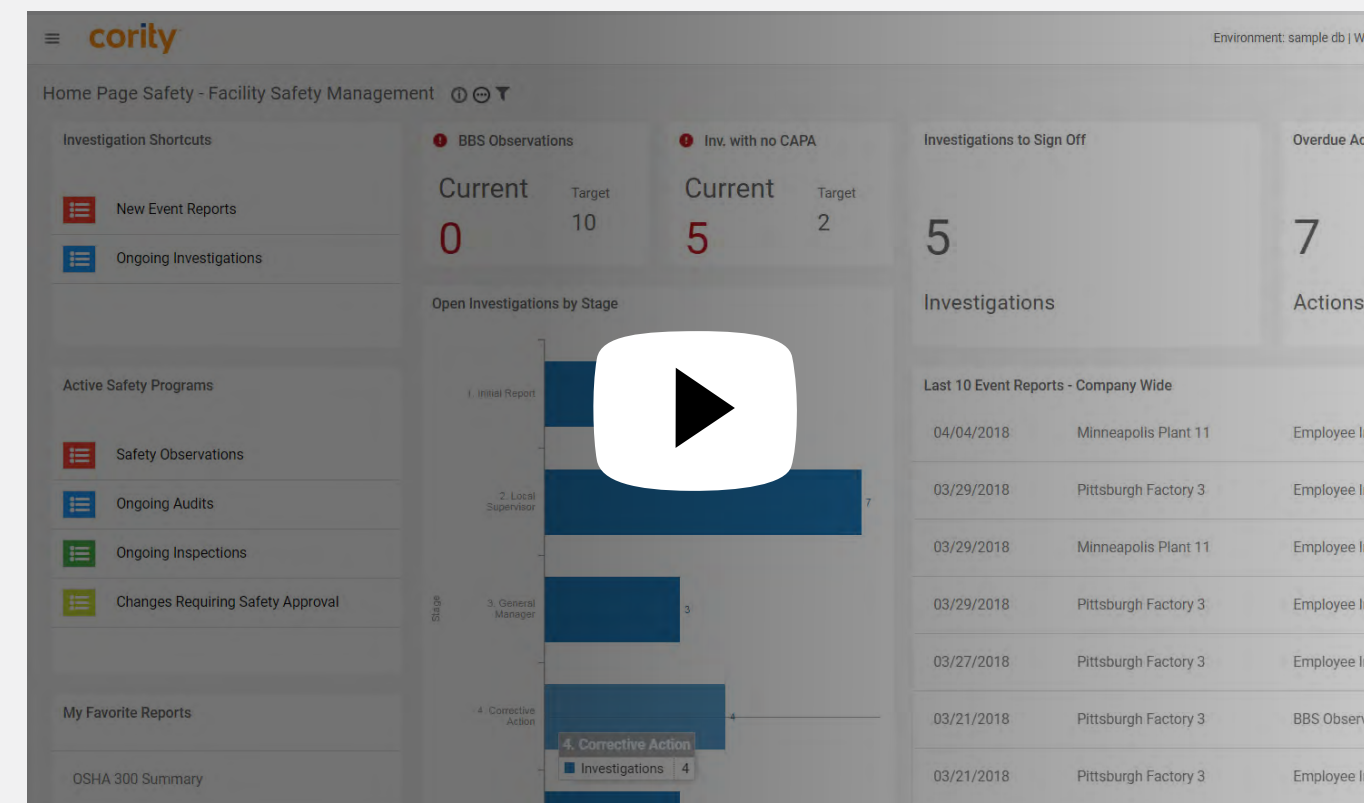
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