

PROTECTING YOUR MOST VALUED ASSETS

Protecting the health and safety of a company's employees, their most valued asset, is by far one of the most important activities of any utility or company.

Across the globe, agencies like the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (US), European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU), Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (Canada), Health and Safety Executive (UK) and the Industrial Safety and Health Association (Japan) among others, exist to promote the health, safety and well-being of employees.

Regulatory agencies describe the scope of specific compliance areas and each company decides/interprets how best to implement supporting rules and processes. Regardless of the geographical region, regulations will inevitably change over time but what will not change is the need to collect and maintain records that are verifiable and auditable.

Workplace and condition specific, personal protective equipment (PPE) is an investment every company must make to ensure the safety of their employees. PPE is used to minimise exposure to a variety of hazards. Examples of PPE include gloves, sleeves, shields, foot/eye protection, protective hearing devices (earplugs, muffs), hard hats, respirators and full body suits. PPE can also include blankets and various liners for certain types of work and vehicles. PPE goods are expensive, and organisations are expending (rightly so) significant amounts of money each year. The efficient purchase, monitoring, maintenance, and retirement of these items is paramount to ensure they are effective in protecting employees. These items must be tracked from purchase to retirement in a manner that maximises employee safety and provides a means to verify compliance with the various regulations governing the use of PPE.

Controlling the economic drain

Without efficient PPE software in place, tracking and controlling the distribution of PPE can be monotonous, overwhelming, prone to error and because it is a 'cost of

doing business', sometimes goes under the radar of senior leadership. There's only one thing worse than having no controls and that is thinking that controls are in place and being adhered to. There are many small companies using paper to track PPE while others have upgraded to MS Excel for this purpose. Paper systems are by their nature hard to access at an enterprise level, are easily lost and/or damaged and are error prone. Commercial off-the-shelf software, like Excel, cannot adequately track the data nor create timestamps to sufficiently document processes that have been executed. If you have no way to verify quantity on hand (available inventory for swap-out/goods rotation) the company will likely end up buying more goods than necessary. Running out of PPE can easily side-line one or many employees as PPE is an essential part of the tools required to do their work safely and efficiently. If/when there is an incident, records verifying compliance must be easily accessible and verifiable. Fines and

penalties for regulatory non-compliance can be severe and the negative exposure can have a long lasting negative impact. The goal of every company should be to have all their employees return home in the same condition that they arrived. All PPE goods have a scheduled rotation for replacement. Periodically, PPE goods are collected from the field and employees are issued new goods. Naturally it is useful to have a system that knows what PPE is assigned to each employee, why they have that particular PPE, and when the PPE needs to be rotated back for re-testing and/or retirement.

What's required from your PPE system?

Over the last decade or so, software companies have made significant strides in creating software platforms specifically designed for PPE. Listed below are some of functionalities that your PPE system needs to encompass:

- **Configurable to handle compliance**
Your system needs to be able to add new and change existing compliance rules without disruption to the business. Regulations are constantly being revisited by regulated agencies and the cost of non-compliance can be detrimental to the organisation and dangerous for the employee.

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- Customisable to support any type of PPE goods**
Your system should not be rigid and must allow you to define whatever type(s) of PPE that are required by the regulators. This should include the full range of PPE, rubber goods and tools. User defined equipment should be a core capability for the system
- External system integration**
Integrating with your procurement and other systems involved in processing PPE goods are also useful capabilities. Checking to verify that a PO is still active before the goods are received will reduce errors and ensure synchronisation between systems.
- Scanners and barcode printers**
The system should be able to support a wide range of barcode scanners that can more efficiently support the movement of goods throughout the various business areas when compared to performing these activities manually. The ability to affix printed barcode labels is a must for tracking serialised PPE.
- Shipping and receiving**
The system needs to be able to track the receipt of shipments and also support the ability to ship the required PPEs to one or many field locations. Full knowledge of when goods arrived, and when they were processed will enable better control of inventory on hand.
- Sample and acceptance qualification**
Most organisations will perform 100% sampling on every piece of PPE received. That will differ from PPE type as well as the organisation using that PPE. The system needs to be able to support 100% acceptance testing as well as a variety of statistical sampling methods.
- Barcodes and serialised/non-serialised PPE**
Check with your PPE provider, they may be helpful in assigning barcodes and/or serial numbers for the PPE goods you typically order.
- RFIDs**
Having your manufacturer create RFIDs for each PPE good will accelerate your tracking, shipping and management of PPE goods. Check with your PPE provider as this option may be available.
- PPE assignments and roles**
Supporting role based (job function) and/or location-based PPE assignments can streamline your administration in terms of what goods need to be available by department location or role.

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- Assignee transfers**
Employees may change roles, get promoted or otherwise move around and when that happens the PPE goods previously assigned may not be applicable for their new position. The system needs to be able to easily identify what PPE should be returned and what PPE their new role requires.
- Customisable rotation schedules**
Different PPE goods will have different rotation schedules that determine when they need to be retested and/or removed from inventory.
- Historical Inquiries**
The system needs to be able to display historical data about the PPE goods as well as the history for an employee, detailing the goods they have had in the past and when those goods were assigned and returned.
- Ease of use**
One of the advantages of purpose-built platforms is that they are designed to satisfy the business requirements

- of managing PPE through appropriate workflow processing thereby reducing administration overheads.
- Automatic re-ordering notification**
When inventory falls below the re-order threshold, the system should automatically notify administrators to re-order goods.
 - Automatic reminders for returning PPE**
The system should support email notification as well as cellphone text alerts. Creating automatic notices to management and staff will reduce the potential of having expired PPE goods not returned for recertification or disposal. This feature also greatly reduces administration overhead.
 - Reporting and transparency**
Reporting to senior management, department supervisors or regulators needs to be accessible and the ability to support ad-hoc reporting is essential. Exporting the selected/filtered data to Excel/CSV/PDF should also be a core function.
 - Business intelligence and analytics**
In today's IoT world, obtaining insight into PPE performance and failures will aid the organisation in understanding the risks associated with a particular brand/model of PPE.

In summary
Statistics show that employees become injured in the workplace because they either weren't using PPE or were using it incorrectly. If the main reason for injury was that the employee either didn't use PPE because the PPE goods were not available when they needed them, or they didn't know what PPE was needed, it will be an unforgivable oversight by the company. After an injury, the company will need to produce records supporting what PPE was needed for a particular job function, when the employee was issued the PPE and when the PPE was last inspected/tested.

Do not be caught short as the moral and financial impact of complacency in the area of PPE management can be devastating to your company and your employees, who are after all, your most valuable assets. **SEI**



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