



# Safety Communication in a Diverse Warehouse

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Warehouse Safety has seen some significant communication challenges in recent decades as the same warehouse work space has become increasingly populated with employees of varying backgrounds and abilities.

Nourishing a workplace safety culture — while also meeting training and staffing demands — can be challenging, especially in a working environment that features full-time, part-time and temporary staffing. Communicating **safety** to such a diverse workforce requires leadership, cooperation and, sometimes, creativity. What creative steps have you taken to effectively communicate safety in your facility?

## Creative Safety Communication

Temporary employees stand to gain the most from creative safety communication. As their supervising employer, you are responsible for the safety of temporary employees in your workplace. To begin with, consider the fact that their time spent in your warehouse may range from a single shift to a permanent position with your organization. Envision your warehouse from the perspective of a person who is not only new to your workplace, but to warehouses or industrial environments in general. Doing so will help you appreciate the importance of clear and understandable safety communications such as signs, labels and floor markings (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Examples of a safety sign and floor marking.

## Temporary Worker Jobsite Orientation

If I am a temporary worker who is in your warehouse for the first time, I will have to rely solely on the knowledge gained from a brief jobsite orientation. Otherwise, I will be dependent on other employees for guidance as to where I can and cannot go around the workplace, among other safety issues in a warehouse. If, however, your warehouse is clearly marked with floor markers,

barriers and signs in appropriate colors, language and graphics, it will be much easier for me to abide by the rules of your workplace. Communicating hazards clearly decreases or even eliminates the need for assistance in understanding workplace rules.

## Seasonal Business Peaks

According to the American Staffing Association, more than 3 million temporary and contract workers are employed by staffing companies in the US every week. That said, workplace populations swell significantly whenever there are short-term increases in workloads that require employers to increase staff sizes. Seasonal business peaks — like fourth quarters in many warehouses — are even busier because organizations are not only moving more product, but also training temporary employees to work safely and effectively in an unfamiliar place.

Personally, I have worked at organizations where the employee population quadruples during peak work seasons: 25 percent were full-time employees and 75 percent were temporary. Such a significant and sudden surge in staff increases the potential for training and oversight burdens, which results in unsafe activities as well as workplace injuries. In my experience, companies have increased the number of employees without adding enough supervisors to provide onsite leadership for the temporary workforce. For that reason alone, communicating safety in the workplace through floor markings, signs and labels is vital.

Having a large number of short-term employees on your staff is usually a recipe for unsafe activities on the job. If, however, pedestrian walkways and safe work areas (as well as hazardous and non-work areas) are explicitly marked, the clarity will pay big dividends in preventing accidents and limiting lost work time. In addition, worker morale will rise among both permanent and temporary workers who can identify both safe and unsafe areas around their workplace.

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**As stated in OSHA's *Temporary Workers' Rights*, temporary workers have the same rights as permanent ones, which include:**

- A safe workplace free of dangers
- The chance to receive training in clear, understandable language
- The right to speak up about safety
- An opportunity to report work-related injuries without being punished

Warehouses can face OSHA violations as a result of the number of injuries that occurred in the workplace, and that number includes both permanent and temporary employees. Temporary workers have higher rates of workplace injuries, and statistics show that they also are roughly twice as likely to suffer a severe injury on the job.

### A Lot Is at Stake

Depending on the nature of the situation, OSHA could hold both the employer and staffing company responsible for such violations. Although they play separate roles, temporary staffing agencies and host employers share the responsibility of workers' safety.

Every employer should consider workplace safety hazards that they can prevent and correct to better comply with OSHA standards. Staffing companies may provide general health and safety training before temporary employees start work at a warehouse.

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**Employers are responsible for providing:**

- Site-specific orientations
- Trainings
- Signs and markers

**To help temporary staff members with identify workplace equipment and avoid hazards, site walk-thrus are an essential part of the orientation process for both permanent and temporary employees.**

Familiarizing new workers with floor plans, evacuation routes, work areas and off-limits areas is much easier when you have distinguished floor markings and emergency exits. The same logic applies to high-traffic areas as well as work and break areas.

### Identifying Hazards

I have firsthand experience dealing with injuries to temporary employees in a warehouse environment. I remember an employee who suffered an injury from a conveyor nip point in an area that full time employees knew was off limits only through their own experience working for the company. Because there were no signs or markings indicating the hazards in that area, however, the temporary employee was none-the-wiser and even more at risk than co-workers. That kind of communication ambiguity leads to unsafe work areas and the potential for expensive fines for employers. Following the injury (and fines), the hazardous area was marked clearly with signs reading "OFF LIMITS" and "NOT A WORK AREA (see Figure 2)."



**Figure 2:** Examples of hazardous area warning signs.

### Communicating Hazards

Clarity of communication also increases with customized signs that include large photographs displaying work areas which are properly cleaned and organized. Lean manufacturing methodologies extol the extensive use of floor markings and signs to clarify, organize and dedicate specific spaces for specific functions. In the same vein, employers whose workplaces include extensive signage and floor markings only enhance the safety awareness of their entire workforce, both permanent and temporary.

## Visual Safety

So, when you are considering how to make your warehouse safer for all employees, think about each employee as though it is his or her first day on the job. Communicate safety at an appropriate level through the use of signs, labels and floor markings. If safe and unsafe areas are clear to brand-new workers, they should be clear to all employees. All parties involved – from full-time employees to temporaries and company leadership to OSHA inspectors – will benefit from the clarity that visual safety communication supplies (signs, labels, floor markings) bring to your warehouse.

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## About the Author

*Tim Tompkins is a 25+ year career Environmental Health & Safety professional with experience in both compliance and enforcement aspects of OSHA and other federal, state and local regulatory compliance agencies. As a former OSHA General Industry Outreach trainer, Tim worked extensively in warehouse and manufacturing safety.*

## About Seton

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