

## Safety and Motivation for Autonomous Workers

By [Robert Pater](#) Nov 01, 2008

Many organizations have encountered resistance or noncompliance trying to get plant-bound employees to work safely. This despite reminders, threats, or tomes of policies and procedures (some so ponderous they might create back problems from lifting them). So what chance do you have of inculcating safety checkoffs, judgment, and actions with people who receive minimal or no supervision, who work outside and perhaps check in only occasionally? Actually, a lot, if you approach it the right way—slim, if you don't.

Autonomous workers: route sales reps, delivery personnel, service/maintenance/installers, long-haul drivers, shipboard crews, well site or pipeline oil industry staff, foresters, contractors, and more, operate in small or geographically spread locations with few or no co-workers. While autonomous staff can independently fulfill customer needs, they also experience unique Safety exposures, transitioning between many kinds of constantly changing areas (slips/trips/falls, motor vehicle injuries?), operating on ergonomically uncontrolled customer turf (softtissue or hand injuries?), potentially misaligning with company Safety messages and objectives, and not being consistently monitored.

Look up the word “autonomous” and you'll find definitions ranging from “independent and having the power to make their own decisions” (Cambridge dictionary) to “not controlled by others or by outside forces; self-governing” (American Heritage®) and “free from external control and constraint in action and judgment” (Webster).

This illuminates the challenge: motivating, transferring skills, and reinforcing these with those largely operating on their own. Experience shows command and control doesn't induce high-level performance even in 21st Century plant-based sites; this approach is even less successful with those who operate farther away.

What can you do? Above all, don't accept a “can't-do” attitude of giving up trying to reach far-flung workers. And avoid repeating the same old ways that have only shown limited success.

Instead, identify and reduce obstacles to autonomous worker safety:

**Can't observe/monitor these workers?** So don't waste time trying once-in-blue-moon monitoring methods they can easily sidestep. Rather, help them learn to self-monitor forces mounting in their body, where they direct attention, and more.

**They tend to be more independent, in general, more resistant to authority than others?** So don't incur extra pushback by heavy-handed mandates and pressures to conform to difficult to-enforce rules. Create personal ownership of their Safety through simple and effective methods they can port to work and favorite home activities.

**They may not say when they find safety procedures not applicable and tend to just do it their own way?** So gain credibility by consulting with representative autonomous

workers before communicating safety expectations to all.

**They're disconnected, offering minimal team support or contact with supervisors or peers?** So select safe actions that are self-reinforcing; enlist their families as safety supports.

**They work under time pressures?** So focus on safe methods and skills that require little out of their busy day while reaping significant returns.

Of course, these are merely start-up ideas; there's much more that can be done.

But honest thinking is critical. What's easy and convenient to deliver may not be what's needed or best. Many default to training autonomous workers through Internet vehicles. While these can broadcast information or reinforce previously developed skills, there's no way this can replace live contact to individually motivate workers, respond to unanticipated concerns, or help high-grade behavioral improvements by overcoming a full range of exposures. Rather, better utilize moments of face-to-face contact— new hire orientation, training on new equipment or procedures, an HQ person meeting with them in the field, conferences, etc.—to deliver passes at critical personal safety skills. Then, employ multiple delivery mechanisms to provide further info and reinforcement.

### **Encourage Internal Self-Motivation**

Command, no. Invite, yes. Move from “pressuring” or “cheerleading” toward Self-propelled Safety.

Help them become even better self-regulators so they can become accomplished safety practitioners. Enlist their perspective to sharpen higher-level problem-solving that works in their world.

Magnetize their interest through strong invitation, rather than pushing fear or threats. Elicit and address their interests and concerns.

### **Set and Reset Expectations Continuously**

Specifically, do this before hiring and with remote/phone check-ins, e-mails, other communications. Emphasize what's possible and how safety methods help/don't hinder their ability to get things done quickly and better—both at work and at home.

In many ways, all organizational members ultimately work their own job. But, especially, feed outside independent workers' interest and skills for making best Safety decisions and taking best actions with their control.

### **A**bout the Author

Robert Pater is Managing Director, Strategic Safety Associates and MoveSMART®. To contact him, visit [www.masteringsafety.com](http://www.masteringsafety.com).