

# Festive season poses unique challenges for construction industry

As the festive looms, the construction industry is bracing itself for a unique set of challenges that necessitate a heightened focus on safety. Amidst the holiday cheer, factors such as workforce dynamics and weather conditions play a crucial role in ensuring workplace safety.



Data from the Federated Employers Mutual Assurance company (FEM) reveals that an average of 368 claims were recorded in December over the past three years. This demonstrates the need for a robust safety strategy. Historically, December has seen a surge in incidents within the construction sector, with March and July also witnessing a yearly increase in incidents.

The high number of claims in December is particularly noteworthy, given that most projects operate only for the first two weeks of the month before closing for the builders' holiday.



R317m in duplicate payments to lawyers recovered from Road Accident Fund

Chiara Carter 30 Nov 2023



GVK Siya-Zama's Craig Laskey says despite the company's figures being much lower than the industry average, historically the construction company has seen a significant spike during November and December of each year with "fall from height" and "struck by" incidents being the highest.

"Our incident statistics over the past two years showed that more than 80% of accidents were associated with poor employee behaviour. Therefore, our primary focal point over the past year was to address behaviour through practical learning," he notes.

## Remain vigilant

Laskey says it is important to remain vigilant, especially over this period, by keeping a skeleton crew on duty. He adds that third-party security can help ensure the safety of closed sites and prevent unauthorised access. "Shutting down a site is

not about abandoning a site, but rather about putting a system in place for frequent monitoring of closed sites."

"Children are naturally curious and those in communities close to construction sites often try to find ways to explore their surroundings. Measures need to be taken to discourage dangerous behaviour – machinery must be stowed away, infrastructure dismantled and rubble removed, amongst other precautions."

Communication relating to safety should be foremost during this period. But Laskey notes that it is common for risk and safety training to be too theoretical, highlighting the need for better communication and practical safety awareness drives.

He continues by saying that in an environment where one person's actions affect the safety of others, operations and health and safety management should go hand in hand.

"We have started moving away from verbal communication only, to visible leadership and in-person, demonstration-led learning to create increased awareness of risks on site.

## Management behaviour

Laskey adds that management behaviour and employee motivation are closely linked.

"There is a proven link between acknowledgement and motivation, which helps employees feel appreciated and empowered while motivating them to end the year on a high note, and safe. The company invites teams to get into the year-end spirit by decorating offices and workspaces and hosting social events to encourage employees in the completion of their final tasks for the year."

The summer festive season also brings with it extreme and unexpected weather conditions that add to risk at this time of the year. "Climate change resulting in higher temperatures and changes in rainfall increase health and safety risks in the workplace," he adds.

*"The effects of heat stress is a big factor in construction and outdoor activities, with climate model trends for this century indicating the potential for heat exposure to increase by 2 to 4°C during the hottest months, thereby changing heat risks from a low risk to a moderate risk for much of South Africa."*

And while every organisation in the construction industry is governed by the Occupational Health & Safety Act No. 85 of 1993 to ensure workplace safety, more can and needs to be done to ensure a safer work environment for employees during the festive season.

"Our safety campaigns have become an integral part of our business. These include our 'safety is a big deal' campaign, which emphasised the importance of safety over production deadlines. Site teams and workforce are fatigued and looking forward to spending a well-deserved break with family and loved ones, and situational awareness is paramount to ensuring

that all workers get to go home safely," Laskey notes.

"Similarly, our 'safety builds strength' campaign, which is aligned to our slogan, is focused on the fact that safety is everyone's responsibility, and that a strong safety culture leads to a strong business that values its employees," he concludes.

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