

Accidents waiting to happen: Insider knowledge

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Workplace accidents must be treated like any other source of knowledge if companies and their employees are to learn from such incidents and prevent future accidents from occurring. That is the take home message from research to be published in the *International Journal of Human Factors and Ergonomics* in March.

Hernâni Veloso Neto of the Institute of Sociology at the University of Porto, Portugal, explains that industrial and [workplace accidents](#) rarely have a positive effect within an organisation, but they do represent a potential opportunity to learn about risks and so effect behavioural and procedural changes to preclude similar events from taking place again. Neto has undertaken a review of the specialist research literature in this field as well as focusing on a [case study](#) in the metal-working industry. From the information thus obtained he has highlighted three obstacles that stand in the way of treating workplace accidents as a source of useable knowledge.

First, there are fundamental structural barriers, which are related to the organisational system in which news and data concerning an accident are not disseminated beyond those immediately affected by the incident. There are inter-individual barriers between line managers and staff for instance. Thirdly there are barriers that arise because of the behaviour and response to the accident of those directly involved or affected, so-called intra-individual barriers.

"To learn from accident experiences, organisations must create

mechanisms to foster knowledge from the onset and to elicit changes based on that information," Neto explains. He points out that if these "resources" are not fully exploited, then the barriers cannot be circumvented and accidents will be repeated. He concludes that the [adoption](#) of a knowledge system that would allow organisations to focus on internal and external case studies and encourage reporting of accidents, causes and outcomes across the whole organisation would improve understanding of workplace accidents and elicit changes more efficiently.

More information: "Workplace accidents as a source of knowledge: opportunities and obstacles" in *Int. J. Human Factors and Ergonomics*, 2013, 1, 376-389

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