



Take an Active Role in Stopping Shortcuts



*It is everyone's job
to act safely and
watch out for the
safety of others.*

A “shortcut” is a quick or easy way to do a job without following the safe work procedures required to prevent injury, in other words, risky behavior. When performing routine tasks we continue to take these shortcuts because “nothing bad” has ever happened. We reason that we are making the job easier and saving time by skipping safe procedures (that we think only add more time to the job). Sooner or later though, the odds say we will get injured because of these shortcuts. A shortcut can easily cause an accident which results in serious injury or death.

The following is an account of an accident that involved a former employee of Exxon Mobil: “Accidents weren’t the kind of thing that happened to me. They happened to everyone else. I knew all of the safety rules and regulations, but I didn’t need to follow them because I knew all of the shortcuts too. I didn’t wear personal protective equipment, such as safety glasses, because it wasn’t cool. I was arrogant – and wrong. On a hot August day in 1980, my life changed forever because the shortcuts I took caused a refinery explosion that burned half my body.

At the time of the accident I was an operator for Exxon, refining raw product into gasoline. Exxon’s management team had a safety procedure in place for changing out a blank – the task I was asked to perform. I could have followed the safety procedures, but I didn’t. I chose to ignore them. I had taken shortcuts thousands of times before and nothing ever went wrong – until the night my actions destroyed a part of an Exxon installation and gave me all the time in the world to think about my attitude toward safety.



While I was taking the shortcuts to change the blank, the flammable petroleum product in the line surged up, splashing me in my eyes and drenching my shirt. When I realized what was going on I ran from the area. Unfortunately, I had left my truck running.

The chemical vapor hit the truck's ignition system as I ran past. The truck exploded into a ball of flames that engulfed me. I was on fire. I ran to a puddle to put myself out. I tried to shut other valves off, but it was too late. The refinery started to go up in flames.

I can't begin to explain the pain I was in. It was unbearable. When you are burned as badly as I was you need to go through a process called debriding. It is excruciatingly painful, but it has to be done to prevent scar tissue. You are lowered into a tank containing water, bleach and antibiotics. The burned skin and new scabs that form are peeled off. It's done every day. I endured three months in and out of debriding tanks.

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The greatest pain, though, was the pain my accident caused my family. Here I am, 29 years after the explosion, and it breaks my heart to know the suffering my family experienced and continues to experience because of my arrogance and vanity.

I spent five years in the hospital and have had 30 to 40 operations; all because I didn't want to take the time to follow the safety procedure when changing the blank.

It took years for me to talk about what happened. Now I travel around the world sharing my story at events such as the National Safety Council's Annual Congress & Expo. It is my hope that people who hear my story learn to never take shortcuts and always wear PPE. Safety procedures are in place for a reason, and ignoring them can mean disaster.

It is tempting to take a shortcut, especially if you are in a hurry or if you don't feel like making the effort to do the job safely. You may be new on the job and not understand the hazards or you may be an experienced worker who has used the shortcut before without anyone getting injured. However, it is always worth taking the time and effort to do the job correctly by using all the recommended safeguards.

Please remember, it is everyone's job to act safely and watch out for the safety of others. If you see someone taking a shortcut, speak up. The only way we will eliminate accidents is by taking an active role in the safety of others and ourselves. Accidents caused by taking shortcuts can cause major changes in our lives or the lives of our loved ones.

