



## Urban Legends in the Workplace

In the 1930s, during the five-year construction of the Hoover Dam, approximately seven workers slipped and fell as more than 4.4 million cubic yards of concrete was being poured. Coworkers, unable to stop the flow, were forced simply to watch as the men became entombed in the dam.

This story of the workmen trapped in the Hoover Dam has been told again and again through the years. On nearly every tour of the dam, a tourist is certain to ask just how many bodies are eternally resting in the concrete. Many find the answer shocking: none.

Although it is estimated that more than 100 workers died during construction of the Hoover Dam, not one was killed by being buried in the concrete. This is a classic case of an urban legend. These generally exaggerated stories of distorted reality appear everywhere – including the safety world.

### Workplace Legends

It seems natural for people working in high-risk environments to have fears and concerns about their safety. Urban legend expert Jan Harold Brunvand believes many urban legends “evolved as people talked about their concerns and mixed bits of fantasy with real incidents.”

According to Lorraine Davison, project manager with the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety in Hamilton, Ontario, “A lot of these stories are believed because, given the right circumstances, they could be plausible.”

Take, for example, the old story of a welder who was blown up on the job when a spark ignited a disposable lighter he carried in his front pocket. According to urban legends Website Snopes.com, the story is not true. However, disposable lighters have been found to explode when exposed to high temperatures. So the story of the welder, although untrue in the particulars, does contain some potentially useful safety advice.

### Tool or Deterrent?

Davison believes some urban legends have their place in the safety industry, claiming the lessons they contain can be valuable educational tools. But on the flip side, many legends actually can serve as a deterrent to safety. “Substituting myths for effective training ... impedes the safety of and efficiency of any operation,” said Mark Geiger of the Naval Safety Center in Norfolk, VA. One misconception, tested on the Discovery Channel show “MythBusters,” is that steel toe boots can sever a worker’s toes if a heavy object is dropped on the worker’s foot while wearing the boots. Similarly, there exists a commonly mistaken belief that solvents that one cannot smell cannot be harmful. “A number of solvents have odor thresholds above their occupational exposure limits,” Geiger said. “These and other misunderstandings may impede the ability of workers to understand how best to protect their health.”

### Address the Myth

So what can a safety professional do to ensure employees are receiving sound, reliable safety information? Davison of the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety first suggests a search for truth – investigating the validity of rumors and possible urban legends. As the Internet has aided in the proliferation of many urban legends, it also can serve as an invaluable tool to verify their truth.

It also is wise to set up training programs that take into consideration not only the myths and legends themselves, but also the underlying fears at their root. “Try to address the misunderstandings in a way that respects workers’ insights,” Geiger suggested, adding that informal meetings with employees prior to training can help structure a program to effectively address the concerns and needs of a particular group.



As an example, Geiger cites the reluctance some military personnel have felt toward using hearing protection in combat situations, for fear of impairing their sensitivity to background noise. An open understanding of these fears led to an alteration in the training to focus "on the long-term benefits of hearing protection in routine operations to preserve this sensitivity."

In this situation, the myth and the fear were addressed, training was modified in response and, as a result, workers are safer. Awareness of not only what myths and legends exist, but also why they exist, is critical to creating a safe work environment.

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