

Everyday Safety

Tailgate Talks

Safety Alarm Fatigue

Workplace alarms, signals, and bells are often so common that we don't even notice their existence, however they are a critical part of keeping a work environment safe.

The benefits of alarms

Many job sites and workplaces are naturally loud and require the use of alarms to alert employees to potential danger. Dangerous types of equipment or the potential for emergencies may also require employees to be made aware of threats to their health and safety through the use of auditory alerts and alarms.



The problem of safety alarm fatigue

The “beep beep” of a forklift horn, the start up alarm on a piece of equipment, shift whistles, fire alarm drills, and truck back-up signals are just a few of the “special” sounds and signals meant to keep workers alert and safe in busy workplaces. Unfortunately, the cacophony of sounds meant to provide critical information to workers, in addition to the myriad of ambient noises prevalent in a busy workplace, can lead to a dangerous effect known as *safety alarm fatigue*.

Safety alarm fatigue is a serious problem in multiple industries and can be a difficult challenge to overcome when attempting to create a safe work environment. Safety alarm fatigue occurs when an individual or group is constantly exposed to safety alarms, warning sounds, or alert bells in the workplace and, as a result, become desensitized to them. Desensitization to safety alarms can lead to decreases in reaction time when encountering the specific hazard or situation that the alarm is meant to inform workers of, or in the worst cases, lead workers to completely disregarding the alarm altogether.

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Action Item:

How to make sure alarms work for you instead of against you

- Conduct regular training
- Eliminate nuisance alarms and eliminate them if they are not warranted or do not indicate a problem that needs correcting
- Make alarms distinct and recognizable
- Use spotters if hearing protection is preventing an employee from hearing and reacting to alarms
- Train employees to never compromise their situational and environmental awareness
- Make sure alarms are accompanied by visual signals whenever possible
- Differentiate between drills and actual emergency scenarios
- Check alarms often to make sure everything is in full working order. Ensure specific responsibilities are being carried out (batteries are fresh, bulbs are not burnt out, etc)



Resources and References:

Blackmon, R., & Gramopadhye, A. (n.d.). IMPROVING CONSTRUCTION SAFETY BY PROVIDING POSITIVE FEEDBACK ON BACKUP ALARMS. *Journal of Construction Engineering and Management*. Retrieved June & July, 1995

Hanover Testing Labs



Warning Signal Checklist

Yes	No	Has your workplace been assessed for need of warning sounds? Evaluate natural and man-made hazards, machinery, evacuation routes and systems, process handling, and special or unique situations.
Yes	No	Is your alarm system designed based on the level and type of hazards present at the site? It is monitored and updated as needed?
Yes	No	Does this assessment include compliance with ADA and needs for visual as well as audible alarms? Are supervisors aware of those on site who are hearing-impaired?
Yes	No	Are all employees advised as to what the sounds mean? What about visitors and contractors?
Yes	No	Are employees advised as to actions needed to respond to the alarm, such as evacuation, special PPE, sheltering in place, safe locations for workplace violence situations, etc.?
Yes	No	Are employees who do not speak English advised as to meanings of alarms and responses to them? Do you include all languages on the site?
Yes	No	Is each sound specific, and do employees understand how to get additional information if needed?
Yes	No	Are volunteers, temporary employees, and contractors advised as to sounds, meanings, and needed actions? Is there a process for constant turnover of crews?
Yes	No	When alarm styles are changed or updated (for example, fire alarms changed from bell to chimes), do you consult the local authority having jurisdiction? Is this documented in safety minutes, etc.?
Yes	No	Do employees who wear hearing protection in the workplace understand they should still be able to hear the warning sounds? Is an alternative, such as having a watch person in place, available in the event there are problems? (Usually it can be solved by trying a different model of hearing protection. Other warning system levels can be adjusted if needed.)
Yes	No	Are employees aware of potential for disciplinary action for disabling or circumventing alarms that are required, such as disabling a forklift's back-up alarm or turning down the Public Address system?
Yes	No	Is there a backup plan in the event your primary warning is not operational (for example, air horns are used if the PA system is not functioning, a lookout is posted for firewatch, etc.)?

This checklist was originally published in the 2007 article "The Sounds of Safety" by Occupational Safety & Health Magazine

Date: ____ / ____ / ____

**“Safety Alarm Fatigue”
Sign In Sheet:**

Name:

Signature:
