

Compliance Alert

OSHA Training Standards Policy

This Issue

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Employer's Training Obligation

Many OSHA standards require that employees receive training so that work will be performed in a safe and healthful manner. Some of these standards require "training" or "instruction," others require "adequate" or "effective" training or instruction, and still others require training "in a manner" or "in language" that is understandable to employees. It is the Agency's position that, regardless of the precise regulatory language, the terms "train" and "instruct," as well as other synonyms, mean to present information in a manner that employees receiving it are capable of understanding. This follows from both the purpose of the standards -- providing employees with information that will allow work to be performed in a safe and healthful manner that complies with OSHA requirements -- and the basic definition that implies the information is presented in a manner the recipient is capable of understanding.

In practical terms, this means that an employer must instruct its employees using both a language and vocabulary that the employees can understand. For example, if an employee does not speak or comprehend English, instruction must be provided in a language the employee can understand. Similarly, if the employee's vocabulary is limited, the training must account for that limitation. By the same token, if employees are not literate, telling them to read training materials will not satisfy the employer's training obligation. As a general matter, employers are expected to realize that if they customarily need to communicate work instructions or other workplace information to employees at a certain vocabulary level or in language other than English, they will also need to provide safety and health training to employees in the same manner.

Enforcement Guidance for OSHA Compliance Officers

If the OSHA compliance officer determines that a deficiency exists in the employer's training program, he/she must document evidence of any barriers or impediments to understanding, as well as any other facts that would demonstrate that employees were unable to understand the training and apply it to their specific workplace conditions. If a reasonable person would conclude that the employer had not conveyed the training to its employees in a manner they were capable of understanding, the violation may be cited as serious.