



How to manage your supplies of personal protective equipment

A manufacturer's guide to controlling your PPE costs and losses

A well-functioning plan for the management of your personal protective equipment (PPE) will keep your employees safe and have a positive impact on your bottom line. Further, using the latest networked vending machines and cloud-based inventory-management software, designing and implementing such plans has never been easier.

Wherever your machine shop is in the world, it is likely that you will have to make a significant effort to ensure the health and safety of your employees. Personal protective equipment (PPE) will play a key role in helping you to fulfil this obligation.

PPE can include items such as safety helmets, gloves, eye protection, hazmat suits, high-visibility clothing, safety footwear, safety harnesses, ear plugs, ear defenders and respiratory protective equipment (RPE). In appropriate situations, you may have to provide disposable PPE, such as single-use coveralls and face masks.

The proper use of PPE by your team will protect its members from viruses, injury – and even death – save your company money and improve your productivity.

Of course, your obligations to the health and safety of your employees do not stop with the purchase and distribution of PPE.

You need to make sure that the PPE is not just being used, but being used correctly. As such, you need to draft a PPE management plan that encompasses everything from the purchase to the distribution and correct use of PPE, to ensure that your employees are protected, and you are complying with your local regulations.

This is no easy task, but by using some of the online, cloud-based tools you might employ to manage your tool cribs, the purchasing, monitoring of stocks, dispensing and re-ordering of PPE can be made significantly simpler.

Your responsibilities

Regulations vary around the world, but broadly speaking you will be required to provide appropriate PPE to all your employees. You will be responsible for:

- Identifying when and where PPE needs to be used;
- Choosing and providing the appropriate PPE;
- Training your employees to use, maintain and replace PPE, as required; and:
- Ensuring that PPE is used properly.

These responsibilities might appear straightforward enough to fulfil on paper, but doing so in the real world is significantly more complex. That is why you need a proper PPE management plan. Further, as management, you need to drive this plan. Your employees will not buy-in to the plan unless the senior people in their organisation do the same.



The last line of defence

Before drawing-up your plan, you need to recognise that PPE is the last line of defence for your employees. There are a number of other steps that you can take to prevent potentially serious accidents from happening.

In the first instance, you should look to eliminate hazards from your machine shop all together or substitute the hazard for something safer. You could stop using a certain hazardous chemical in your processes, for instance, or substitute it for a non-toxic alternative. You should then look to isolate your employees from hazards, using such as mechanical guards, fences and safety mats.

These options are not always practical, however. As such, you can implement administrative controls that change the ways in which your employees go about their work; think training, signage and making procedural changes. Once you have exhausted your options, you can fall-back on PPE.

Hazard assessment

You should conduct a hazard assessment to see if any of the options above are suitable for your machine shop, and to determine the sorts and quantities of PPE you will require. Keep an eye out for tripping points and moving objects, and health hazards such as harmful chemicals or excessive noise. Observe your employees as they work and ask them questions about how you could make their jobs safer.

As you determine the PPE that you will need, you can think about how each piece of safety equipment will be used and whether it can serve multiple purposes. Reducing the number of types of PPE you need will not only saves money over the long run, but it can free-up the minds of employees so they can focus better on their jobs and taking other steps to stay safe.





The management plan

Once your hazard assessment is complete, you can then put someone – or a team of people – in charge of your PPE management plan.

The content of your PPE management plan will depend on your company's needs, but will typically include:

- A statement explaining why the plan is necessary and how it will benefit the company;
- A section outlining who in the company is responsible for each part of the plan;
- Guidelines for each type of PPE that will be used at your company;
- Training guidelines;
- PPE checklists that will be used to monitor your plan.

You can then put your plan into action and source your PPE.

Priorities for purchasing

The price of PPE is of course important, but you need to make sure that the products are of sufficient quality to protect your employees and are designed well, so that they will be comfortable to wear.

If possible, stick to just a few trustworthy suppliers; while it may save money to buy your masks from one vendor, gloves from another, and face shields from a third, this will be hard to manage long-term. Further, it will be much easier to deal with just one or two vendors if you have problems or when items need to be re-ordered. Customer service and the quality of the products are as important, if not more important, than their cost.

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Managing stocks

Of course, your inventory of PPE will need to be managed properly. An effective system for organising PPE must be developed and a database will need to be kept and updated regularly. For re-usable and/or expensive items of PPE, you will need a check-in and check-out policy, so that the location of equipment and the last people to use it can be identified. Using a simple paper check-out sheet may seem appealing, but it will not work for long and is easy to cheat. Electronic systems are usually the best, and the use of barcodes can make check-in and check-out simple.

Finally, the PPE needs to be kept safe and its consumption tracked. No-one likes to think about their employees stealing from them, but it happens. One of the leading contributors to fraud and theft is opportunity—in this case access to the PPE.

Easy inventory management

This inventory management can be achieved easily using vending machines and cloud-based inventory-management software, such as CRIBWISE.

Vending machines hold PPE on your site until your operatives need it and come in many shapes and sizes, such as: screw-type units more typically used to dispense snack food; rotating carousels; lockers for larger items; and: cabinets that look much like portable tool chests.

Regardless of their format, these machines will keep track of their contents. To take out an item of PPE, a user might need to use a unique pin code or swipe card and they might even be able to link this activity to one or more jobs. The machine logs withdrawals automatically and you can view and analyse records of items taken out of the machine, by whom, when and for what reason.

PPE by the numbers¹

- **98%** of employees have seen others not wearing PPE when they should have been, and **30%** say that they have seen this repeatedly. The top four excuses for not wearing PPE are: it looks unattractive; it is too hot; It does not fit properly; it is not easily accessible.
- **84%** of employees who sustain head injuries were not wearing head protection.
- **90%** of all workplace eye injuries could have been prevented through wearing proper safety eyewear.
- **25%** of all workplace accidents involve the hands or fingers; wearing gloves reduces the risk of these injuries by **60%**.
- **25%** of workers are regularly exposed to noises at or above recommended limits. **99%** of noise-induced hearing loss can be prevented if proper ear protection is worn.



¹ <https://s32891.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/PPE-Infographic.png>

Case Study: Managing PPE at Valmet

Valmet, Finnish supplier to the paper-making industry, uses CRIBWISE in its in-house logistics department to manage the storage and distribution of consumable items, such as PPE. This entire department is currently run using an easy-to-use portable hand-scanner with CRIBWISE, but the software will soon be deployed in combination with a Kardex storage system. The adoption of CRIBWISE has reduced wastage and prevented consumable items from being used for unauthorised purposes—saving time and money. Indeed, it has cut the use of gloves by approximately 50%. It has also reduced the amount of stock being held on shelves by a significant amount.

Further, CRIBWISE now orders stock items automatically when they are needed, meaning that the time-consuming task of raising purchase orders for these items no longer needs to be carried out. The receiving of these items is also now automated.

Given that only about 5% of the stock is owned by Valmet, with the balance owned by suppliers until it is used, the CRIBWISE system reduces the cost of ownership of these items and improves stock-control for both Valmet and the companies that sell products to it.



Image courtesy of Valmet Oyj

The main benefit of these vending machines is automated re-ordering; as the machine runs low, it will send a restocking order to the supplier(s) of the PPE, which ensures that operatives will have the equipment they require. Having the confidence that the right PPE will be available for the job, just when it is needed, can do much to reduce PPE spend.

Further, vending machines allow PPE usage to be monitored. They track who is using what on the shopfloor and managers can use this information to assess demand for PPE and any anomalies in use that can then be investigated further.

In concert, these benefits will ensure that - even in the medium term - you will recover the capital investment that you made in the vending machine by reducing your operating expenditure associated with the purchase of PPE.

We can also emphasize the financial benefits of having a vending machine, explaining that it is a cost at first (CAPEX) but in the medium term you'll payback the investment as your cost with PPE (OPEX) will be smaller due to inventory control continuously.

Conclusions

Safe employees are happy employees, and happy employees will be more productive. Further, the correct use of PPE will reduce your chances of having to pay for costly staff absences, either through injury or illness. Drawing up a full PPE management plan can be a daunting and lengthy process, but its implementation can be made significantly simpler using automated vending machines backed up with cloud-based inventory-management software, such as CRIBWISE.



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