



## **What Does Keeping Paper Have To Do With Safety?**

You need to keep records. You keep records of customer transactions, of purchases, of payroll and taxes paid and insurance bought and so on and so on. Somewhere buried in that “so on and so on” are safety and environmental records. You need to keep those to prove you’re doing things right – and to prove you did things right in the past.

Who cares about those records?

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency or the county environmental health department may ask for copies of hazardous waste manifests for up to three years after the waste was shipped. But you want to keep records that you handled your waste responsibly for longer than that. It isn’t that the law requires it. Instead, if you’re later accused of dumping your waste in a farmer’s back yard, that manifest will help prove that you did dispose of waste correctly.

Air quality records, such as the VOCs you used last year, need to be kept for at least five years.

If you’re visited by OSHA, the compliance officer will start off the visit by asking for paperwork. If you have more than ten employees, you’ll be asked for your OSHA 300 injury log. Your material safety data sheets will be requested, as will your written programs - at a minimum, your Right to Know program and an assessment of what personal protective equipment is required. Collision repair facilities will be asked for their respirator program. You will also be asked for safety training records, such as those for Right to Know and respirator use. You aren’t likely to be asked for old records; the current ones will do.

So is there a reason to keep old safety records? Of course. For compliance purposes, with a few exceptions, only the current records are needed. But what if an ex-employee, ten years from now, sues you for telling him to work with hexamethylgobbledygook, and further insists that he was never given any information about that? How will you prove he was wrong? Or if a researcher discovers that employees who worked with hexamethylgobbledygook get hairy knuckles? Will you even know if your employees worked with the stuff?

If you kept your MSDSs, you’d know. OSHA requires that you keep records of employee exposure and medical monitoring for the duration of employment plus thirty years. That includes any employee exposure monitoring results, any medical testing done (such as medical approval for respirator use), as well as a record of the chemicals with which employees worked. The latter does not have to be the material safety data sheets, though. An inventory list may suffice.

Keeping good training records can help keep you out of trouble. If an employee files a complaint with OSHA, stating that he never received training on that stuff, your training records will fill in the holes in the employee's memory. OSHA compliance officers ask employees if they had training on the hazards with which they work. If the employees don't remember (or don't understand the question, so answer no), and you don't have the records to prove you did it, you're likely to be cited.

How should you keep the records? Preferably not in a box buried deep in a closet. If that's where they are, I'd bet that no one will remember them when the compliance officer is sitting in your office. Set up a file drawer specifically for safety and environmental records. Have a file for each year's VOC reporting. Have one for each year's waste records. Include hazardous waste manifests, all carefully matched so you know the waste ended up where it was supposed to be. But also include records for disposal of other wastes, such as oil and fluorescent bulbs. Have another file for safety and health programs, and another for safety training records for that year. Alternatively, have a file for all Right to Know training, all respirator training and fit testing, and so on.

The one caution about a file drawer just for safety records: some of the records that would logically go there, such as medical monitoring reports or medical reports after an injury, may be considered private data. You want to make sure you don't mix up private data with non-private data, such as training records. Keep the private data in with restricted employee files. Records that an employee has been medically approved for respirator use, by the way, are not usually considered private (but the questionnaires used for that evaluation are).

Keeping good, well-organized records makes your life easier overall. It keeps your blood pressure down, knowing you can find the requested records when the enforcers ask for them. And it shows you've given some thought to your safety program. That's a stress-free way to get off on the right foot with inspectors.

*This article is intended to provide general information (not advice) about current safety topics. To discuss your specific concerns and how CHESS may help, please contact CHESS at 651-481-9787 or [chess@chess-safety.com](mailto:chess@chess-safety.com).*