



THE COST OF SAFETY

With around a quarter of all industrial accidents affecting the eyes, and the rising financial implications of workplace injuries, companies are tightening up their policies on protective eyewear. Mei-Yin Teo reports.

Every year thousands of eye injuries occur in UK workplaces. In 2006-07, 1,694 were reported to the Health and Safety Executive, resulting in three days off work, and 688 were listed as major, meaning the possible loss of an eye. The financial cost of these injuries is staggering, not to mention the personal trauma to the injured worker.

Many injuries can be prevented with the use of proper eyewear to guard against flying particles (such as dust, wood and metal), chemical splashes, radiation or burns, cuts and collision. With minimum compensation for loss of sight in one eye at around £100,000, according to healthcare provider Healthsure, eye protection is high on companies' agendas.

Now that the new Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act 2007 has come into effect, the financial repercussions have

never been more real. For the first time, companies and organisations can be found guilty of corporate manslaughter as a result of serious management failures, resulting in a gross breach of duty of care.

Determined to help reduce the number of accidents in the workplace, companies like Arco, one of the UK's leading safety equipment suppliers, are taking on an advisory role by offering safety solutions that can help businesses protect their employees. According to the HSE, employers have a legal duty of care to properly train and protect employees against occupational risks. If they fail to do so, the cost of workplace accidents to businesses can be devastating.

Over the past couple of years, companies have grown increasingly nervous of the possibility of being sued over health concerns. Many are now making eye protection mandatory. 'In

the past, it was more defined by who should wear safety specs and where, but companies are now adopting a blanket policy,' says Ian Walbeoff, Bollé Safety's general manager for the UK and Ireland.

Jenny Smith, Arco's assistant product manager, has witnessed the same trend. 'If an individual is onsite, whether they are an employee or a visitor, the company will require them to wear safety spectacles regardless of the potential danger,' says Jenny.

'Another reason that companies are seeing the importance of protecting employees is time loss on the job due to injuries,' says Paul Lovett, sales director at Inspects, a global licensee for the Caterpillar (CAT) brand of safety specs, which is distributed through Bond Safety in the UK & Ireland. According to Paul, 25 percent of all industrial accidents involve the eyes; some are damaged for life.

As companies tighten up on health and safety, the number of individuals required to wear eye protection is expanding. No one argues against protecting the eye, but the challenge is to produce something people will wear. In other words, it has to be comfortable and stylish. Designs have to suit a more diverse group than ever before. 'When you take into account that approximately 75 percent of the workforce are not used to wearing spectacles on a day-to-day basis, then comfort becomes paramount,' says Nigel Day, uvex's product manager for eye and hearing protection.

According to John Goacher, technical support manager at Sperian Protection, many factors affect the fit of safety spectacles including nose shape and size, temple width and even ear shape. It is possible to supply spectacles in different sizes to address this situation, but this would ►►



►► mean stocking every size. Now companies are producing eyewear ranges that can be adjusted to fit almost any wearer.

Equally important is appearance. There's no budging on this point. Simply put, today's workers are reluctant to wear something they don't want to be seen in. And the industry has responded. Many manufacturers now offer products that are virtually indistinguishable from high street fashion glasses.

'The motivation must be the wearer. Many times cost wins over value, largely due to the fact that the person purchasing the eyewear isn't wearing it,' says Nigel. 'If you spend £1 on a pair of specs that are uncomfortable, you take them off every chance you get, but if you spend £5 and you wear it all the time, the value shoots way up.'

Paul from CAT agrees. 'If the specs are more desirable, the wearer is more likely to take care of them and wear them out of work; some people even take them home. Also, if it's a brand like CAT that people can relate to, they are more willing to wear them.' CAT launched a range of non-prescription safety specs last year with six stylish models, each with a range of different lenses for use in all conditions. The specs feature the latest developments such as UV filters, anti-fog lenses and adjustable temple length and angle, and meet European, US, Canadian and Australian safety standards.

One product does not suit all. Wearing and buyers need to work closely together to determine the best eyewear for the end user. Uvex, one of the world's largest producers of non-prescription protective eyewear, spends a large percentage of its time educating wearers on how spectacles protect, and the selection process.

'If we put four different styles on a table, many would go for the coolest looking one, but this may not always be the most suitable. It sounds dead simple but there is a lot of technical stuff that goes into it,' says Nigel. 'We have a saying: "the best eye protection is the one that gets worn". So we

"If specs are more desirable, the wearer is more likely to look after them"

spend a lot of time with education and support – this is our added value.'

Christine Mello, senior product manager for Sperian Eyewear, believes that education, and before and after-sales service, helps drive compliance. 'We position ourselves as a solution provider; not just an eyewear supplier. We take on a consultant role and try to understand what the end user needs, depending on their job and the hazards that come with it.'

The challenge of creating spectacles that more people will wear for longer periods of time has resulted in significant improvements in technology and innovation. Polarised lenses not only enhance comfort, but improve performance as well. They protect against glare and reflections, and eliminate dazzle that is not possible with standard tinted lenses.

'The flooding in the UK this past year, means there has been a rush for polarised lenses,' says Jenny. 'They are great for people working by water; such as in quarries, or in the fishing or plumbing industries.'

Bollé Safety, which is celebrating its 120th anniversary this year, has developed the market's first polarised safety lens. But as Ian explains, 'the cost is a factor – polarised lenses can be

five times as much as standard ones. Even though people are beginning to realise their benefits, you still need a certain volume to manufacture them cost effectively.'

Transition lenses incorporate an advanced technology that allow them to adjust to changing light — from clear indoors to as dark as sunglasses outdoors. They are perfect for workers who are always moving between different light conditions. Once again, price plays a role in the buyer's decision-making process; transition specs are significantly more expensive than regular safety specs.

Innovation is constantly improving products, and the latest eyewear is lightweight, has non-mist, non-scratch and UV properties, and is trendy, sporting stylish shape ranges from long and narrow to wraparound. And fashion is now the principal factor influencing the direction of the industry. Peter Coleman, Swiss One Safety's director, says the company's in-house design team follows what's happening in the high street and adapts the style to safety glasses.

Most eyewear manufacturers are following suit. Arco has instilled a sense of flair and panache in its new Igard range released this September. Departing from the traditional 'clear lens, blue temple' look of its existing line, the five innovative styles employ metal or sporty frames, wraparound design and Silver Mirror lenses.

The construction industry has also brought style into the spotlight. Its relatively recent arrival onto the safety eyewear scene has put it in public view

like never before. 'In the past, individuals in workplaces only saw fellow employees, but construction workers are visible to the public,' says Nigel. 'On top of this, wearers only used to need specs or goggles if they were operating power tools, but now it's mandatory simply walking across a construction site.'

This, combined with the rising female workforce, has created a demand for lightweight, comfortable frames to suit the changing face of eye protection wearers. The first innovation under the new Sperian brand for eye protection, (formerly Pulsafe from the Bacou-Dalloz Group), the Sperian Ignite safety spectacles, are lightweight, sporty and sleek. The frameless design offers 180-degree of unobstructed, distortion-free vision. They have adjustable saddle pad nose pieces and soft, cushioned temple tips that give a personalised and secure fit.

Uvex introduced Super G in August 2007, a new line of extremely light frames, and recently launched a new prescription ordering website to help companies speed up selection and ordering online. Since 20 percent of uvex's sales focus on sports and ski goggles, and 80 percent on industrial eye protection, the company uses the same technology for both. 'No one says you have to wear ski goggles, but people do because they are useful, comfortable and look good,' says Nigel. 'If we apply the same technology to our safety specs in terms of performance, style and comfort, then I believe we're on the right track' ■

Top: Bollé's Contour Metal safety spectacles. Below, left to right: the difference that polarised lenses can make.