
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Achieving Zero Lost-Time Injuries in High-Production Environments

Emmanuel Ijeoma

Independent researcher and Health, Safety & Environmental (HSE) Professional in American Society of Safety Professionals (ASSP), New York, US, Institute of Safety Professionals of Nigeria (ISPON), Port Harcourt, Nigeria, Nigerian Institute of Management (NIM), Nigeria, Nigerian Institute of Management (NIM), Nigeria

Corresponding Author: Emmanuel Ijeoma, **E-mail:** emmanuel.ijeoma1990@gmail.com

| ABSTRACT

Zero lost-time injuries (LTI) is one of the most disputed goals for industrial operations, particularly those with high production. Sustained pressure to boost production, minimize downtime and keep operations efficient within tight time windows is present in sectors like manufacturing and oil and gas. In such a scenario, safety is often seen as being at risk of production intensity, adding to the old dictum that the more productive the better the risk. This paper calls that assumption into question and asks if there is a way to get to zero LTI without sacrificing production results. Based on the safety science, high-reliability organization (HRO) theory and operational performance research, the study analyzes the structural linkage between safety and productivity in complex industrial systems. The paper suggests that the incidents in high output settings are not necessarily a direct result of volume of work done but can be a result of system fragmentation, low quality of operational integration, inconsistencies in leadership, and uncontrolled variability in work processes. The study investigates the conditions of the organizations, using both quantitative analysis of production and safety data, along with qualitative evidence from manufacturing operations and large oil and gas projects, with a combined mixed-method approach. Specific focus is on leadership behaviour, safety climate, operational discipline, workforce engagement, process stability, and embedding safety in the production planning and performance management system. The results suggest that the characteristics of operations that enable a combination of high productivity and low incident rates are similar for organizations that achieve high productivity: having integrated safety governance, a proactive approach to risk management, uniform supervisory practices, and a close connection between safety goals and operational decisions. As an integral part of safety systems, a mature system can help ensure greater process stability, fewer operational interruptions, more reliable workers and more consistent production. The paper concludes that the safety-productivity relationship is not necessarily negative. In high production environments, zero LTI can be achieved if safety becomes a part of the operational architecture of the organization in the form of a core performance function, not a separate compliance activity. But achieving sustainable operational excellence is not a matter of balancing safety and productivity but one of developing systems that can achieve both at the same time.

| KEYWORDS

Zero Lost-Time Injury, Safety Performance, Productivity, High-Reliability Organization, Manufacturing Safety, Safety Culture.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

1.1 Productivity and Safety in Industrial Operations

Productivity and safety have been among the most controversial and, in some cases, misunderstood aspects of industrial operations. In high-output workplaces, especially in manufacturing and oil and gas industries, the organizations work under

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continuous pressure to produce volume, abide by strict deadlines, and achieve maximum costs with thinning margins. These are structural pressures and not episodic. Consequently, ease of operation is usually the main goal of the design of operational systems, and safety is placed at the same level as a need, which should not interfere with productivity.

In this case, safety is often viewed as an antagonistic priority, something that has to be offset against production, not being part of it. This sense is magnified in a world where performance indicators are strongly focused on output indicators like throughput, utilization, and reliability of delivery. This leads to a slow but significant change in organizational behavior, and frontline decisions start to be based on immediate production benefits, instead of compliance with safety measures, especially when the two seem to be conflicting.

This is not an empty perception based on empirical evidence. Hofmann, Jacobs, and Landy (1995) established that misfit between the pressures of operations and the safety systems in high-reliability process industries tends to increase the rate of incidents, especially when the supervisory practices are focused on output rather than safe work practices. Equally, Kaminski (2001) found that organizational strategies that focus on enhancing efficiency, like work-intensification and shorter recovery periods, could unintentionally increase safety hazards when lack of subsequent system changes. These results have traditionally supported the hypothesis that the existence of the cost involved in trade-offs between safety and productivity is not only real but inevitable.

This assumption has, however, been increasingly contested by modern studies in the field of safety science and operations management. An accumulating amount of research indicates that safety and productivity are not necessarily mutually exclusive goals but rather mutually reliant effects of underlying system design. In their empirical study of industrial organizations, Veltri et al. (2007) established a positive relationship between good safety performance and operational efficiency, which shows that a mature safety system organization is likely to perform better than others in productivity measures. Karanikas et al. (2018) also support this correlation by stating that safe working conditions decrease disruptions in operations, increase workforce stability, and improve the general system reliability.

This change of mindset has an implication. It rephrases the main question on whether safety undermines productivity to how organizations can devise systems where both can be attained simultaneously. This is not just a theoretical difference but has real-world implications concerning the organizational structure of operations, performance measurement, and the ability to make leadership decisions when under pressure.

This paper answers this question by discussing whether or not zero lost-time injuries (LTI) in high-production settings can be attained without reducing production. The paper will be based on empirical studies as well as operational experience of large-scale oil and gas projects and high-volume manufacturing systems, and examine the conditions under which safety and productivity are mutually reinforcing. It also explores the leadership practices, system architecture, and performance integration systems that facilitate this alignment, with the intention of establishing a model of sustainable safety-performance results that can be replicated.

2. Safety-Productivity Paradox

2.1 Safety Interventions As Remedies to Incidents

The positioning of safety and productivity as opposing goals can be found in the early industrial efficiency ideas, especially those with a Taylorist influence of scientific management. These models had productivity gains that were mainly attained by optimizing tasks, specializing work, and minimizing waste of time. Although productive in boosting production, these methods tended to give human concerns a backseat role, resulting in work environments in which safety measures were seen as obstacles to productivity, instead of elements of system operation.

In this paradigm, safety interventions, be it procedural, administrative, or engineering-based, were often added as remedies to incidents that had already taken place, as opposed to being part of system design. This orientation of reaction helped to maintain the long-standing belief that safety and productivity are at odds with each other, where improvements in one can mean losses in the other.

2.2 Monitoring, Learning and Adaption

Modern studies, however, have a radically different view. Through the notion of high-reliability organizations (HROs) as proposed by Weick and Sutcliffe (2007), it is shown that organizations in high-risk settings are able to attain high productivity and low incidence rates, i.e., aviation, nuclear power, and offshore oil operations. The organizations do not take advantage of the lack of risk but control it by paying constant attention to the interactions of systems, timely identification of anomalies, and rigorous operation.

The key element of this approach is the understanding that safety is not a static state but a dynamic process. Constant monitoring, learning, and adaptation are kept to maintain it. Yorio and Wachter (2014) support this opinion by demonstrating that human-performance-oriented safety management practices (e.g., behavioral reinforcement, engagement of leadership, proactive hazard identification) could be effective in limiting the number of injuries with no adverse impact on productivity. This implies that safety, as well as its effective implementation, augments operational performance as opposed to limiting it.

2.3 Impact of Occupational Health and Safety on Productivity

Additional empirical evidence is given by Bayram et al. (2017), who determine that the investments in occupational health and safety have an indirect positive impact on productivity in a variety of ways, such as a decrease in absenteeism, employee morale, and costs associated with accidents. These results undermine the old-fashioned cost perspective of safety and place it as a strategic investment with quantifiable payoffs.

In systems terms, the interaction between safety and productivity is mediated by factors like process stability, competence of the workforce, and organizational learning capacity. Stability of processes minimizes variability, and more predictable and efficient processes are realized. With properly trained and assisted workers, the chances of errors leading to disrupted production are reduced. When organizations learn about the near-misses and incidents, they enhance their capability to avoid the occurrence of future disruptions.

In contrast, in disaggregated systems with these components not coordinated, the productivity gains can be at the cost of temporary adjustments, which elevate risk over the long term. These adjustments, like going around processes, working longer hours, or using machines beyond their safe limits, could keep the production going in the short run but will come with latent conditions that will culminate in accidents and machine breakdowns.

This repositioning is, especially, important in intensive production settings, where the risk of error is very low, and the impact of disruption is great. It changes the emphasis of dealing with trade-offs to the development of integrated systems, where safety and productivity are the reinforcing results of the same underlying conditions.

3. Zero LTI-Performance Operational Conditions

3.1 System Integration and Safety Design

To implement zero lost-time injuries in a high-production environment, a complete change in the paradigm of safety management toward compliance regulation to safety performance that is system-integrated is essential. Compliance, although needed, is limited in nature; it will ensure that they meet the minimum standards, but not robustness during operational pressures. On the contrary, zero LTI performance is a result of systems that are designed to predict, absorb, and adjust to variability without jeopardizing safety.

Industrial case studies all reveal that the only organizations that are able to maintain zero LTI performance do not consider safety as a separate operation. Safety is, instead, entrenched in the organizational operational fabric, which has an impact on the planning, execution, and assessment of work. According to Blanco-Juárez and Buele (2025), there is a high coherence between the leadership intention, operational processes, and safety objectives in such organizations, which leads to an effective system where safety considerations are a part of decision-making at every level.

This integration is especially imperative in manufacturing environments that produce high output. Many production systems tend to be highly interconnected; that is, a failure in one section of the process can easily spread to other parts of the process. In such circumstances, small safety accidents, like a slip, a malfunction, or an ergonomic problem, will cause big losses in production. Farid and Neumann (2020) show that the risk of injuries has not only a negative impact on the well-being of workers but also a direct effect on productivity and the quality of the product, as it brings in the variability and contributes to a higher risk of making mistakes.

3.2 Oil and Gas Operational Complexity

Stakes in oil and gas activities are even greater. The construction of pipelines, offshore drilling, and maintenance of the facilities entail intricate interactions between human operators, heavy equipment, and hazardous environments. Cornelissen, Van Hoof, and De Jong (2017) note that it is important to always be aware of the situation in such circumstances, have a well-developed communication system, and be able to adjust to new circumstances as much as possible. Lack of proper management of such interactions may lead to accidents with dire operational and environmental impacts.

Pragmatically speaking, zero LTI is not the goal of getting rid of all sources of risk, which is a non-realistic goal, but the control of variability within reasonable limits. This is a process that entails coming up with systems that are resistant to operational strains,

be they because of higher production demand, resource limitation, or environmental conditions. It further stipulates that safety should be a part of the fundamental processes of operation, which include production planning, worker scheduling, equipment upkeep, and performance evaluation.

3.3 Role of Leadership in Safety Performance

Leadership is very important in facilitating such conditions. Studies on the safety climate point out that leadership commitment is among the most potent factors to forecast safety performance (Clarke, 2006). Nonetheless, dedication should be converted to a pattern of action- observable participation, safe habits reinforcement, and performance of incentives and safety results. Frontline behaviors soon become adjusted to the priorities of leaders, even when the latter are not explicit but implicitly influence their behaviors.

However, the situation is different when leaders define performance by incorporating safety into their definition. The concept of safety is integrated into work practices and does not form a subsidiary issue that should be handled independently. In the long run, this integration will result in more stable operations, a lower number of incidents, and high productivity.

In such workplaces, safety and productivity are not in conflict; they complement one another. Stable systems reduce the number of disruptions, allow workers to maintain a steady output, and provide an environment in which workers and processes can work optimally.

4.0 Integrated Evidence Practice and Analysis

4.1 Research Methodology (Mixed-Method Approach)

This research is mixed-method, combining quantitative research on operational data with qualitative data that is based on a long and extensive field experience in both manufacturing and oil and gas settings. The quantitative aspect is aimed at investigating the dependence between the production output and the safety performance with the help of datasets that reflect the volumes of production, the number of incidents, and the rate of lost-time injuries during different periods of operation. This is supplemented by qualitative observations of high-risk projects, such as pipeline construction, offshore operations, and high-volume manufacturing systems, where safety-performance dynamics are the most observable when under pressure.

The quantitative results refute the old belief of the negative correlation between productivity and safety. In several different datasets, there was no pattern of negative correlation between higher production output and higher incident rates. Quite to the contrary, the stable or even better safety performance was also noted during a series of operational periods that were marked by a high level of production. Those were not just incidental outcomes but were related to the environment in which safety systems were designed to be structured into the working processes and not considered as external controls. This is in line with Maudgalya et al. (2008), who reveal that integrated management systems, which entail integrating safety, quality, and productivity, have reinforcing feedback loops that improve organizational performance as a whole.

4.2 Conditional Nature of Safety-Productivity Relationship

Nevertheless, the fact that there is no negative correlation does not mean that high productivity is necessarily associated with better safety. The association is conditional. When there was poor system integration, the pressure to produce gradually led to a gradual erosion of safety discipline. This was manifested through sluggish reporting of incidents, deviation from procedures, and more workarounds. These states of affairs, over time, led to the build-up of latent risks, which is in line with the Reason (2000) model of organizational accidents, in which failures arise as a result of the congruence of systemic weaknesses and not as a one-off occurrence.

These findings are enriched with qualitative insights. Safety was not placed as an equal operation but as a part of the functioning in high-performing environments. Risk assessments, maintenance schedules based on the requirements of the operations, and front-line supervisors enhancing the safe work behaviors in the execution process were part of production planning. The key factor to maintaining this integration was leadership. Production and safety implications were always considered in the decision-making processes so that the short-term output gains would not compromise the long-term stability of the system.

4.3 Organizational Fragmentation and Risk Behavior

Conversely, the environments that had inferior safety performance had apparent characteristics of fragmentation. The safety precautions were laid down on paper and were not always adhered to, especially when there was increased pressure on production. Employees tended to work around the production output limits by going around the control measures, and incident reporting systems were not used as they were thought to have no repercussions or feedback. These trends are in line with those obtained by Hofmann and Stetzer (1996), who point to the role of organization climates in which production is valued over safety to cause more risk-taking actions among employees.

4.4 Leadership Influence on Safety Outcomes

The behavior of leadership stands out as a conclusive aspect of distinguishing these environments. According to Clarke (2006), a leadership commitment is a key predictor of the safety climate, but the commitment has to be manifested by regular activities. Practically, this involves the observable leadership, safety integrated in performance discourse, and structures of accountability that support safety. In the case of such responses, the safety performance was not affected due to the high production demands. In areas where they were not, there was a decline in safety performance even with the existence of formal systems.

On the whole, the combined evidence indicates that zero LTI is not a goal but a result that can be attained under certain circumstances. These conditions are not characterized by decreased intensity of operations, but by the extent of conformity between the safety systems, production processes, and the behavior of the leadership.

5. Families of Systems with Zero LTI Performance

5.1 Replicability of Safety Performance

Though both the empirical evidence and the operational evidence support the possibility of reaching zero lost-time injuries in high-production environments, the most important question for practitioners is not whether it is possible to reach zero lost-time injuries, but whether it is reproducible. Even success in isolated cases, although worthwhile, is not a form of sustainable model unless the conditions under which it is achieved can be systematically replicated in contexts of various operations.

As a fundamental element of replication, system design is a key component, and not an individual undertaking. The organizations that have sustained zero LTI performance have institutionalized it by ensuring that they have it as part of the operating models. This involves making safety aspects part of the production planning processes, incorporating risk evaluation in the normal decision-making processes, and making performance measurement indicators indicate output and safety results. Zohar (2010) highlights that the climate of safety is influenced by the consistent organizational cues, especially those that are measured, rewarded, and enforced. Once safety is incorporated into these signals, this makes it self-reinforcing.

5.2 Standardization vs. Adaptability

In this process, standardization is vital. Through exemplary performance, high-performing organizations come up with repeatable safety practices that can be transferred to sites and projects without losing their effectiveness. But standardization cannot be done without it. There also has to be the flexibility of systems to adapt to the local operating conditions, especially in an environment where there is variability and uncertainty. The ability to balance between standardization and adaptability is one of the characteristics of resilient systems (Hollnagel, 2014).

The other important aspect is data integration. Those organizations that are successful in replicating zero LTI performance take advantage of data not only to report but to make predictions. They can intervene in advance of incidents by recognizing leading indicators like the frequency of near-misses, behaviour observations, deviations in processes, and so on. This is a proactive strategy that transforms the safety management into proactive containment and not reactive management, as is the case with resilience engineering.

The sustainability of such outcomes is also reliant upon the engagement of the workforce. Safety will be a shared responsibility rather than a top-down directive as the workers are engaged in hazard identification, risk assessment, and continuous improvement. This is in line with the results of Griffin and Neal (2000), who show that involvement of employees in safety practices is a significant way of enhancing both compliance and participation practices.

5.3 Leadership Consistency Across Levels

Notably, consistency in the leadership behavior at different organizational levels is also needed in replication. Commitment by leadership at the top alone is not enough, as it must be translated to the supervisory practices at the front line. Congruity between strategic intent and operational performance will ensure that safety priorities are upheld during different operational circumstances, such as times when production is at peak pressure.

Simply put, there is no sense in duplicating zero LTI performance, but recreating the conditions of the system that produces the results. When applied regularly, safety and productivity will no longer be competing goals, but will form part of the operational excellence.

6. Conclusion

6.1 High Production Settings

The fact that high productivity and safety are assumed to be mutually exclusive does not stand the empirical test. They are neither competing priorities nor independent outcomes, as they are both defined by the design of the system, the leadership behavior, and the discipline of operations. The fact that the safety-productivity trade-off story remains alive today does not represent an inescapable opposition between the two, but rather a lack of ability to create systems where they can co-exist with each other.

This paper shows that the performance of lost-time injury can be zero in high-production settings under the conditions that safety becomes a part of the organizational operational core. This kind of integration changes safety into performing rather than as a compliance requirement. Safety helps directly to increased productivity outcomes by decreasing variability, minimizing disruptions, and increasing workforce stability.

The practice implications are numerous. Companies should get away from compliance-based safety management to integrated performance systems where safety factors are infused in the planning, execution, and evaluation processes. That means resetting performance metrics, accountability for leaders, and organizational focus. Safety is measured not merely by the absence of accidents, but by the presence of safe, reliable, and sustainable operations.

This integration cannot be optional in case of high-risk sectors like manufacturing and oil and gas, where the complexity of their operation and the risk of being exposed to hazards are important. It is what sustainable performance is based on. System designs that do not consider safety in the design of the system might be able to realise short-term productivity benefits, at the expense of long-term stability and resilience.

Finally, it is not the question of whether organizations can afford to focus on safety as well as productivity. The facts indicate that they simply cannot do away with it.

About the Author

Emmanuel Ijeoma is an independent researcher and Health, Safety & Environmental (HSE) Professional

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