

[THE FAMOUS WHO CLAIM US]

FRANZ KAFKA

Writer spent much of his life in the industry and created the first civilian hard hat.

Insurance folks: if you've ever wanted to be "Kafkaesque," well, you already are. Franz Kafka, one of the most influential German novelists of the 20th century, (*The Trial*, *The Metamorphosis*, *Amerika*) didn't just have a fly-by career in insurance. He stuck with it for 14 years. As a young lawyer, he joined Italian carrier Assicurazioni Generali, where he complained his 10-hour days gave him little time for his own writing.

He moved on to become chief legal secretary of the Worker's Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia (now the Czech Republic), investigating industrial injuries and assessing compensation. He hated it; he told friends it was shallow, tedious and distracting from his real life's work. He even tried to enlist in the army during WWI for a little excitement but was needed where he was. He spent the war years as virtual CEO of the Institute.

Despite his protests, Kafka was diligent, generating ideas for on-the-job safety, including the first civilian hard hat, and militating for better health benefits for veterans. He produced the annual report and proudly sent it to his friends.

Just last year, the Princeton University Press published *Franz Kafka: The Office Writings*, a collection of essays, letters and articles composed on his day job. These included "Fixed-Rate Insurance Premiums for Small Farms Using Machinery," "Accident Prevention in Quarries" and "Measures for Preventing Accidents from Wood-Planing Machines." The book also includes three years worth of letters in which the writer-bureaucrat complains about his pay and begs for compensation suitable to the effort he's putting in. Nothing new there. But in retrospect, it's ironic that Kafka, who fought for workplace safety, also ended up as a partner in an asbestos manufacturing plant. He died of tuberculosis at age 41.

—Louise Lague

