

The Benefits of Occupational Health and Safety Profession

Growing up in a mining town, I understand the inherent importance of health and safety in all occupations. I, like almost everyone else in our town, had a loved one that regularly worked in hazardous underground or processing conditions. Each work day, the worry remains that they may not make it back to surface safe and whole. While the relief that the older generations in my family are moving on to retirement or more cushy senior positions, I watch as my friends, younger relatives and former classmates assume these challenging roles. So far my family and friends have been lucky, but I have seen other families in the community lose loved ones, and the heart wrenching loss they continue to suffer.

Nearly all accidents are preventable. I believe it is here where occupational health and safety (OHS) professionals can have the largest beneficial impact. Effective prevention of occupational injuries and diseases can be orchestrated by OHS professionals through the education of employees, remaining current with evolving safety legislation, procedures and technologies, and collaborating with workers and management to develop effective protocols.

Although Ontario has had some form of legislation covering OHS for over one hundred years, a significant portion of workers and supervisors still perform duties they do not completely comprehend (MOL, 2012). A major priority of any OHS professional should be to communicate the risks associated with all tasks within an organization, educate workers on the use of control measures to reduce risk, and inform supervisors and employers on their responsibilities in protecting workers. While many companies have a general safety training protocol for employees and contractors, these standard indoctrines often fall short of effectively communicating important health and safety information to individuals. For example, tool and task specific training for workers (e.g. loader and chainsaw operations) are presented in the same

non-engaging manner. Therefore, it is essential for OHS professionals to concisely and effectively present health and safety information. This can be accomplished by creating presentations that are enjoyable and educational, allowing workers retain what they've learned. Many current OHS presentations are convoluted, contain redundant information and are visually unappealing because they are focussed on covering as much information as possible rather than summarizing the salient points in a memorable manner.

Organizations have a duty to ensure every worker is properly informed and trained, yet many are failing to do this because they do not have effective training programs. How many annual WHMIS sessions does one sit through before actually remembering where the MSDS are stored? How many workers at remote work sites remember emergency protocol when government emergency services are unavailable? Astonishingly enough, some workers still do not realize they have the right to know, the right to participate in OHS at work and the right to refuse unsafe work! OHS personnel must break the cycle of employees simply going through the motions of OHS training and forgetting what they learned. Properly informed employees who rigorously follow safety protocols are the best prevention methods and OHS professionals are the best way to make this happens. Following this further, OHS personnel have the responsibility of making workers aware of the dangers of complacency. This can be accomplished by enforcing accountability in both workers and senior management. For example, regular site inspections and monthly worker evaluations often fall to wayside due overwhelming workloads. OHS professionals can help supervisors prioritize these evaluations to ensure accountability is maintained.

With the advent of Basic Occupational Health and Safety Awareness Training in the Occupational Health and Safety Act, OHS professionals are instrumental in ensuring all

members of an organization know their responsibilities in maintaining health and safety (O. Reg. 297/13, 2014). This includes remaining up to date with legislation and how it affects company operations. Subscribing to *Canada Gazette* and *Ontario Gazette* is an easy way to stay current. Handily, the OHS Act and Regulations is published annually in a consolidated, pocket sized edition, making it more accessible. OHS personnel can use their knowledge to interpret new legislation and advise employers on the best way to apply these standards. Furthermore, OHS personnel have extensive professional and academic contacts within the health and safety field, enabling the exchange of information on novel procedures and technologies. These resources allow for more efficient problem solving that would normally be unavailable.

All workers should feel secure when performing tasks, and not have to worry about facing repercussions for taking time to work safely. Oftentimes, in the pursuit of profit, upper management does not receive sufficient time and money to prioritize worker health and safety. This attitude can cascade down to all employees. Therefore, OHS professionals can aid in the facilitation of communication between all groups to maintain a safe and productive workplace. I have experienced and heard of countless examples where a safety protocol was cut short just to save a few minutes. OHS professionals can use their knowledge to help counteract this toxic mindset and find compromising ground. In much the same way, they can assist workers who have health and safety concerns but are too worried over job security to broach the subject with supervisors/management. An OHS professional should be a trustworthy source in which workers can comfortably confide their health and safety without repercussions. Then, they can directly address the worker's concerns and/or bring them to the attention of management. Effective OHS personnel can build trust in OHS programs by walking around and gaining personal insight by talking directly with workers. Similarly, they can cooperate with senior management to figure

out how investing in safety can help meet business goals. This will benefit the overall workplace by improving moral and applying corrective actions to hazards that may have been missed or ignored.

Trained OHS professionals offer a matchless set of skills and knowledge that optimize the health and safety of workers. They can effectively educate employees, they are uniquely positioned to monitor novel legislation, procedures and policies, and they can be the bridge between senior management and workers to resolve issues and facilitate solutions. OHS personnel can focus their time and expertise on prioritizing workers' well-being where employers may be unable to do so.

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