

The Role of OHS Professionals in the Globalizing Canadian Workplace

Occupational health and safety (OHS) professionals typically manage OHS systems and concerns in the workplace. Canadian workplaces are increasingly interested in hiring and supporting OHS professionals. These professionals ensure that workplaces follow and understand the local legislation and regulations; prevent accidents and illnesses that could cost the company in insurance premiums and fines; and help foster a positive safety culture and climate that encourages workers to be safer and more productive. OHS professionals need certain competencies and information literacy skills to handle upcoming challenges in the Canadian and global economy.

A 2014 report estimates that almost 80,000 people are employed in an OHS role in Canadian organizations, and an additional 6,000 are employed in a related management area (ECO Canada, 2014). Over 28,000 of these individuals are employed in a specific OHS role, such as being an OHS specialist or an occupational hygienist. 28.4% of OHS professionals work in a government setting (ECO Canada, 2014). Other common workplaces for an OHS professional include manufacturing, scientific firms, and the gas and mining industries. The OHS profession is growing: employment has increased 43% from 2006 to 2011 (ECO Canada, 2014). More than half of OHS managers indicate that they intend on hiring more staff or maintaining current staffing levels (ECO Canada, 2014). Canadian organizations are clearly investing in OHS professionals – the next question is why?

One of the most salient reasons to hire an OHS professional is to ensure an organization is meeting current legal requirements in health and safety. Government agencies that oversee health and safety legislation also have the power to inspect workplaces, issue work orders, issue

penalties, and prosecute (MOL, 2013). In Canada, an organization must adhere to provincial or federal legislation depending on its classification: for example, an airport is federally regulated, and a construction company is provincially regulated. There are additional pieces of legislation that may regulate an organization: an OHS professional at a hospital will also have to consider public health and infection control regulations (MOL, 2013). OHS professionals must keep up with changes in OHS legislation. For example, the Globally Harmonized System (GHS) is replacing the Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) in Canada, and workplaces must implement changes (CCOHS, 2017B). Heads of organizations are becoming increasingly aware that they may be criminally responsible for failing to ensure the health and safety of employees under the Bill C-45 amendment to the Criminal Code of Canada (CCOHS, 2017A). There are also optional groups and associations an organization may wish to join, and membership eligibility may include meeting higher standards of practice. If a company has sites in different provinces or countries, they must follow additional laws and regulations. An OHS professional can help an organization meet legal requirements, as well as demonstrate due diligence when ensuring health and safety.

OHS professionals are trained or have experience in analyzing and interpreting different types of safety data. Indeed, the majority of OHS employers indicate the ability to analyze, interpret, or collect samples related to environmental and occupational parameters as essential qualities in OHS candidates (ECO Canada, 2014). Occupational health and safety laws often have associated regulations that outline Occupational Exposure Limits (OELs) for chemicals and other hazardous exposures (CCOHS, 2017C). Interpretation of these OELs can differ if employees work abnormal shifts, are exposed to mixtures of agents that affect the same body system, and more (CCOHS, 2017C). Even if a safety professional does not analyze occupational

samples, he or she should have an understanding of which sampling method to select based on organizational needs – for example, a sample method used to determine OEL compliance will typically be more rigorous and expensive than a screening analysis. OHS professionals must also have an understanding of the statistical relevance of action levels (NIOSH, 2015) and sample numbers (NIOSH, 1977) and how these parameters affect the certainty of sampling results intended for compliance testing.

An effective OHS system can save an organization a lot of money. Many provinces, states, and countries have workplace insurance schemes to payout benefits to victims of workplace accidents and illnesses. Often, these government insurance plans charge employers premiums to cover the cost of benefits. In Ontario, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) manages the distribution of workplace accident and illness benefits (WSIB, n.d.). Schedule 1 employers, which are most employers in the province, pay a premium rate that is based on their accident performance with similar employers (WSIB, 2008). If an organization consistently has more accidents or claims than other organizations in their industry, their premium rate increases. Alternatively, if their accident rates are lower, their premium rate decreases. Schedule 2 employers, such as Crown agencies and school boards, pay accident and illness compensation directly (WSIB, 2008); therefore, decreasing the amount of claims will also save on costs.

OHS professionals help create and foster a positive safety culture and climate. Employees of organizations with strong safety cultures are more likely to report near misses, accidents, and trust colleagues and supervisors (Probst and Estrada, 2010). These behaviours can help lower accident rates, which leads to employees taking less sick days (McCunney, 2001). Healthier

employees are happier and more productive in their workplaces (Miller and Haslam, 2009; Lamm, Massey and Perry, 2007).

Organizations' need for OHS professionals will continue to increase as certain workplace trends continue. As globalization strengthens investment all over the world, organizations will need to ensure that they are successfully navigating different OHS legislation. Companies must be aware of their public image more than ever, and a positive OHS system will help create a good public image. Organizations are also turning towards contract or temporary workers, rather than full-time, permanent staff (Grant, 2013). Studies suggest that increased organizational reliance on temporary workers erodes safety culture (Beus et al, 2010) and may lead to increased accident and injury rates (Villaneuva and Garcia, 2011; Saha et al, 2004). OHS professionals help meet these challenges and trends in Canadian workplaces and across the globe.

In order to provide these roles and services, OHS professionals need to have the right set of skills, knowledge, and abilities. Hiring managers indicate that strong communication skills, an ability to analyze occupational data, and an ability to liaise with stakeholders are essential competencies for most OHS positions (ECO Canada, 2014). Research on safety management systems suggest that OHS professionals must have strong information literacy skills to correctly retrieve, understand, and interpret OHS related data in an increasingly information dependent economy (Yang, 2012). The Board of Canadian Registered Safety Professionals (BCRSP) is changing its certification eligibility requirements to reflect a greater need of OHS professionals to have the education and experience to compete in the global market (2017).

OHS professionals support their organizations by helping to ensure compliance with legislation, understand complex occupational health data, save costs by preventing accidents and illnesses, and help encourage a positive safety culture. OHS professionals can also help

organizations navigate health and safety matters in a globalizing economy. To handle these challenges, OHS professionals must have the communication skills, education background, and the information literacy competencies to continue learning new systems and trends. Canadian employers will continue hiring more OHS professionals as organizations become more safety conscious, global, and information reliant.

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