

In 2016 I joined a new organization as a warehouse manager. Within my first week on the job I noticed that while dangerous work was being performed, there were no health or safety supports present. Like many organizations with few lost time injuries and no major health and safety incidents, this retailer/distributor felt their lack of safety protocols was not an issue. I disagreed, but had minimal power to alter their perspectives. Nevertheless, over the next few months of my employment I established some safety training and protocols, but I consistently came up against the employer's resistance to spend money and time ensuring employee safety. It was not that the employer did not want a safe workplace. In actuality, the employer and the workers wanted the same thing: a safe and profitable business. However, in this organization, the employer did not have the knowledge or skills to ensure the workplace was safe nor the time to learn how. They also did not understand how safety could actually improve profitability not compromise it. The employees, for their part, lacked the experience and authority to improve unsafe work conditions and were forced to accept whatever conditions set out for them. The organization continued to privilege profit over safety and simply hope that worker injuries or lost time did not undermine this. The result was that both the employer and workers were frustrated, stressed, and ultimately uncomfortable in their workplace, with workers feeling unsafe and disempowered, and the employer not knowing how to fix this.

This is not an unique story, but rather represents a common set of experiences across Canadian workplaces. In what follows, I argue this sense of discomfort and imbalance is symptomatic of organizations that lack an Occupational Health and Safety Professional (OHSP). The psychological relief for both employer and worker when an OHSP is utilized allows for better, more productive work all around and decreased health problems that result from workplace stressors. The balance and comfort provided to all members of an organization when an OHSP is

working to maintain an efficient and effective ‘team safety’ environment and promoting a strong safety culture is a powerful benefit in itself but is not often mentioned alongside more tangible benefits such as increased profitability.

An OHSP has the competence and capability to focus on the well-being of an organization’s staff, material assets, and business continuity.¹ Without such a professional, an organization must split its concern between issues of health and safety (on one hand) and those of remaining profitable in an ever-increasingly competitive market (on the other). In too many cases, concerns for profits trump those of safety. The OHSP serves as a catalyst to maintaining a safer and healthier workplace and as a relief to the employer who, of course, wants the safest and healthiest thriving workforce, but may not have the time or skill to nurture it.

There are a number of measurable benefits enjoyed by the workers within an organization with an OHSP on staff. The most important is, of course, the ability of the organization to provide a safe and healthy workplace. This comes as the result of a positive safety culture, an effective Workplace Responsibility System (WRS), and open communication concerning hazards, near misses, and incidents.² Some of the moral, legal, and financial benefits include:

Lower incident/accident rates	Mitigated time loss due to illness/injury
Decreased long-term medical absences/disability claims	Mitigated loss due to emergency situations/disasters
Compliance with legislative standards and industry best practices	Decreased insurance premium costs/WCB rates

¹ “Competent” is used in much of the legislation when discussing a level of skill and knowledge held by an expert in the field but INSHPO has recently suggested a more future looking anticipatory element be added to requirement in the form of “capability”. See ASSE’s *The Employer’s Guide to Hiring a Safety Professional*, page 9 for the definition of ‘competent’. See INSHPO’s *Occupational Health and Safety Professional Capability Framework*, page 9 for the definition of ‘capable’.

² The Workplace Responsibility System is the group of internal and external stakeholders of an organization who each individually play a role in ensuring the safety of each other stakeholder by following their legislated responsibilities and going above and beyond to make their workplace as safe as possible.

Indication of due diligence	Reduced or eliminated cost of fees, fines, or contraventions to regulations, etc.
Improved safety performance	

Naturally, employing an OHSP costs the organization, not only in salary, but also in time required to properly train staff to implement policies and procedures, and in employing and maintaining hazard controls. Yet, recent statistics from the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety indicate that the return on investment (ROI) for an organization when employing an OHSP is three times. That is, for every dollar invested in safety, three dollars comes back.³ Further, in *Managing for World Class Safety*, J.M. Stewart points to studies of Du Pont Canada and National Rubber, both of which saw increased profits that corresponded to improvements towards outstanding safety practices.⁴ These material benefits would appeal to most business owners and provide a strong incentive for investing in an OSHP. Immaterial benefits are also derived from employing and OSHP, and despite their importance, they fail to receive the recognition they deserve.

Immaterial benefits include the psychological security and well-being employees experience when their company invests in safety, and the stability provided between employer and employee when it comes to concern for profit versus concern for safety. In a recent interview, Stanford professor Jeffrey Pfeffer claimed that health and safety professional’s focus on the physical environment in recent years has dramatically lowered physical accidents and safety issues. He insists that professionals should now concentrate on the social or human environment

³ Government of Canada, Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, “Promotion,”- https://www.ccohs.ca/topics/wellness/promotion/#ctgt_details-panel6

⁴ Pages 1, 2, 17-23 (and Figure 2-5).

and helping to reduce work related stress.⁵ Certainly the two are intertwined. Reducing work place stressors creates psychological benefits and improves overall psychological health, which in turn supports physical health.

Workers who know there is a system in place focused on their well-being feel a level of support and comfort that others do not. According to Kelloway (et al), “[t]wo decades of research have provided consistent evidence that management commitment to health and safety results in higher levels of employee motivation to work safely and better organizational safety records.”⁶ In addition to increased productivity, improved morale, and decreased turn-over rates, employees feel empowered to voice safety concerns without being met with concern for profits.⁷ And this is where the OHSP comes in. With the competence and capability to review health and safety concerns and the ability and knowledge to act on them, the OHSP provides a level of support not clouded by myriad other organizational concerns.

The OHSP provides security and equilibrium to the employer as well. Employers can be confident that health and safety issues (and any resulting potential losses without a safety system) will be mitigated. This enables upper management to concentrate on other aspects of their business. As an intermediary between the unique interests of upper management and workers, the OHSP provides protection throughout the organizational structure and fosters a safer and more productive environment.

Returning to the opening vignette, as someone who has experienced workplaces with an OHSP and those without, I can say with certainty that the happiness, healthiness, and overall well-

⁵ This interview in *The Washington Post* discusses Pfeffer’s new book called *Dying for a Paycheck* that was released on March 20, 2018.

⁶ See *Management of Occupational Health and Safety*, Pages 10 and 11.

⁷ Stewart points to a survey indicating that organization with workers who feel empowered to take action in safety are safer. The top safety organizations have 81% of workers who believe they are empowered, while higher than average organizations have 67%, and poor safety organizations have only 17% of workers believing they are empowered in this way. See, *Managing for World Class Safety*, page 246.

being of staff within an organization with an occupational health and safety professional stands heads and shoulders above one that does not. Were an OHSP on staff at this organization, workers would have a designated person to answer their questions about working safely and have a person to train them. The employer would enjoy the comfort in knowing the organization is prepared in case of emergencies, that hazards have been controlled, and that fines, fees, turnover, and absenteeism are not undermining profitability. While the numbers clearly support the benefit of an OHSP from a profitability standpoint, beyond the numbers, from the perspective of employer and employee psychological well-being, an OHSP is immeasurably valuable.

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