

Essay in response to: *In your view, explain what benefits an occupational health & safety professional can provide to an organization?*

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The immediate benefits to an organization's bottom line are often how health and safety is promoted. This financial gain or the fear of regulatory charges sometimes becomes the reason that an organization seeks out an Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) professional. This profit-centric point of view overlooks many other benefits an OHS professional can provide to an organization. Furthermore, there exist circumstances where the financial benefits or potential losses associated with health and safety are not realized by all members of the organization. During the Union Carbide-Bhopal disaster, shareholders suffered losses, there was a large cost to the company value and the surrounding community was devastated but despite all this, the top management actually received large bonuses to prevent takeover attempts (Hopkins, 1999). This example shows that the financial benefits or losses may not be realized by all individuals. In this situation, the people who had the largest say in the direction of health and safety suffered very little from the lack of it.

Although many potential benefits exist, in my perspective, there are three fundamental and far reaching benefits that OHS professionals provide to an organization. First, the OHS professional allows the organization and its members to fulfill their moral duty for providing health and safety. Second, OHS professionals provide the benefit of expert knowledge and experience. The third key benefit OHS professionals can provide to an organization is contributing to sustainability of the organization.

Every organization must comply with the legal obligation of the jurisdiction in which it operates. However, the organization and the members comprising that organization should be considerate of their moral obligations in addition to any legal obligation. The moral obligation for occupational health and safety can be found in many schools of thought. Many religions value the protection of life and prevention of harm. The Bible says in Proverbs 24:11-12 states “If you see someone on their way to death or in danger of being killed, you must do something to save them” (Hengeveld, 2011). Various humanistic and scientific theories also demonstrate the need of health and safety in the workplace. An example of this is seen by the need of existence in Alderfer’s (1969) *An empirical test of a new theory of human needs*. Many schools of philosophies also seek the protection of the person. John Locke argued that people have a right to life which is based independently of the laws of any particular society (Tuckness, 2012). Immanuel Kant also stated that “human life has an inherent value, not because of what we passively enjoy, but only because of what we actively do” (Rohlf, 2010). Modern collective rational thought also identifies health and safety as an obligation, as reflected by the variety of law and international declarations. The ILO SafeWork Director, Sameera Al-Tuwaijri said “Beyond the economic issues we have a moral obligation: The human costs are far beyond unacceptable” (International Labour Office, 2009). Many different viewpoints would identify health and safety at work as a moral obligation. Rational thought, the religious perspective, the humanistic perspective, scientific perspective and various philosophies stand for the preservation of life and prevention of bodily harm which would encompass health and safety at work. The occupational health and safety professional provides the benefit of fulfilling this undeniable obligation of an organization.

OHS professionals provide the knowledge and experience required by an organization to sustain health and safety. Simply designating a person to be in charge of health and safety cannot produce the same results that an educated and well trained OHS professional can produce. OHS is a niche of knowledge that cannot merely be supplemented by a layman. The US Occupational Health and Safety Administration investigated an accident where a worker was asked by a supervisor to ventilate a confined space. The worker used an oxygen hose instead of fresh air. A second worker entered the confined space while smoking. Due to the oxygen enriched atmosphere the second worker was engulfed in flames and died (US Department of Labour, 2005). The knowledge and experience of an OHS professional would have averted such a mistake.

Similar to how organizations value the knowledge and expertise of lawyers or accountants, leveraging the knowledge and expertise of OHS professionals would also bring benefits to an organization. This particularly applies during emergency situations, where relying on personal judgements without proper knowledge or training to deal with them can prove fatal. An example of this was seen in an accident investigation conducted by the US Chemical Safety board. On October 2, 2007 five people were killed and three others injured when a fire erupted 1,000 feet underground in a tunnel at Xcel Energy Company's hydroelectric power plant in Georgetown, Colorado. The fatalities were a result of workers becoming trapped deep underground during an operation to coat the inside of the tunnel with epoxy using highly flammable solvents (US Chemical Safety Board, 2010). The lack of emergency planning and no trained personnel on site were among the reasons cited for the accident and fatalities. OHS professionals have formal education in the scientific methodology of accident prevention as well as experience handling various situations. This knowledge base enables OHS professionals to

handle even new situations they encounter. The application of the OHS professional's knowledge and expertise therefore is a key benefit to any organization.

The final key benefit OHS professionals provide to an organization is that they contribute to the sustainability of the organization. Consumers and stakeholders are evolving, looking beyond the price tag and seeking to do business with organisations showing responsibility in the way they conduct business. Informed investors are also beginning to recognize that the organizations that successfully handle their impact on things such as health and safety or environment have lower than average risk compared to other organizations. Larger organizations also recognize that by demonstrating sustainability via demonstrating responsibility on topics such as health and safety, their shares will appeal to a wider group of shareholders and institutions, increasing the share price and overall value of the organization. In the world today consumers have a large choice in a range of products, all of reasonable quality and price; this means that they are likely to prefer products produced in a responsible way (Camplin, 2011). Inevitably health and safety is a part of the responsibility that consumers and stakeholders are looking for.

Health and Safety also increases efficiency as incidents, lost time, regulatory shut downs, unhealthy workers all cause inefficiency. Substantial links between the implementation of health and safety programmes and their beneficial impact on productivity are emerging. One study presented by Massey et al. (2007), on workstation changes demonstrated a 1,000 per cent productivity increase within less than three months, for the cost of \$5000. Reduced absenteeism, reduced staff turnover, improved corporate image and improved job satisfaction/morale are all benefits that contribute to sustainability and are things that OHS professionals can provide to an organization, thereby contributing to the sustainability of that organization.

Imagine a future where people go to work and feel safe day after day, knowledge and experience are leveraged to prevent accidents as well as improve the health of everyone in an organization and where an organization is valued by all of its stakeholders due to its sustainable nature. This is a future where the full benefits of the OHS professional are harnessed.

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