



## Occupational Health Guide

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Preventing illness and improving physical and psychological wellbeing in the workplace in an era impacted by COVID-19

This document has been written to provide technical guidance for organisations seeking to review their Occupational Health provision to ensure it meets recognised global standards and best practice in maintaining employee wellbeing.

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## - The Rationale for an Occupational Health Service

As stated in the **Introduction to [ISO/FDIS 45001 Occupational health and safety management systems](#)**, “an organisation is responsible for the occupational health and safety of workers and others who can be affected by its activities. This responsibility includes promoting and protecting their physical and mental health”.

While most businesses will already have in place appropriate Health & Safety (H&S) systems, fewer will recognise the importance of investing in **Occupational Health (OH)** services.

Although it true to say that there is considerable overlap between H&S and OH, both are required to effectively “promote and protect the physical and mental health” of each employee and as a consequence for the overall benefit of the business.

Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines Health & Safety as “**preventing people from being harmed by work or becoming ill by taking the right precautions and providing a satisfactory working environment**” with a focus on the work environment and hazards within it. In contrast, Occupational Health is “**the promotion and maintenance of physical and mental wellbeing of all staff and the prevention of ill health**” with a focus on the health of each worker and their individual vulnerabilities.

OH addresses the interaction between an individual's health and their work, considering the impact of a person's work on their health both positively and negatively, as well as the impact of health problems on their ability to carry out their work effectively and robustly.

Put another way, H&S focuses on the physical and operational working environment addressing issues of safety and the risk of injury, whereas OH focuses on the personnel in that same environment and in particular their health and wellbeing, and any factors which might put them at increased risk of harm.

H&S is mainly about safety and avoiding accidents and injuries, compared to OH which is mainly about health on an individual, both preventing illness and maximizing wellbeing of both physical and psychological health.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of the health and wellbeing of the individual worker with a growing recognition that a narrow H&S strategy is inadequate when it comes to ensuring business continuity as companies seek to re-open their normal workplaces as social distancing measures are gradually relaxed.

At this time the importance of health and wellbeing of workers has been highlighted in two key ways:

- 1) Workers do not have the same health risks in the face of COVID-19 hazard:
  - a. Some workers are at increased risk of contracting COVID-19.
  - b. Other workers are at much greater risk of complications following COVID-19 infection.

- 2) Workers are not able to cope with the psychological dimension of COVID-19 to the same extent:
  - a. Pre-existing mental illness put some at greater risk of a significant exacerbation of that illness during lockdown and the post-lockdown phase when there is a slow gradual return to previous activities.
  - b. Some workers have experienced significant life events related to COVID-19 and so return to the workplace with diminished psychological resilience.
  - c. Others due to underlying personality traits or personal circumstances which predispose them to increased perceived anxiety about COVID-19 on return to the workplace. For example, someone prone to worry and another person with a child with special needs at home are likely to have greater concerns about contracting COVID-19.

### **What are businesses looking for from an Occupational Health service?**

While efficiency and a prompt turnaround is vital for certain high frequency OH services e.g. pre-employment work health assessments, pre-deployment health screening, when it comes to complex case management referrals, where health considerations are threatening the performance of an individual worker or the organisation itself, there is a need for high-level specialist advice delivered by an experienced suitably qualified healthcare professional, whom they can trust and depend upon.

In such circumstances, they are not expecting a technological solution but a person-centred one where the credentials of the person(s) providing the service is critical, rather than the efficiency of the process. On that basis, an effective OH service requires both smart systems and appropriate technology solutions e.g. case management system with online portal and a team of suitably qualified and specialist OH clinicians.

## **- Models of Occupational Health Services Provision**

OH services can be effectively delivered by an in-house team, including OH nurses, doctors and administrative staff. However, over the last 20 years there has been a trend to outsource the OH function to one of a large number of commercial OH providers, either in its entirety or, as some businesses choose to do, retaining strategic oversight in-house in the person of a Chief Medical Officer (CMO) or a small core team who then provide a quality assurance role for the outsourced service.

## **- Components of an Occupational Health Service Offering**

### **1) Fitness to work assessments**

- a. **Pre-Employment Work Health Assessment** to determine the fitness of a prospective employee for a specific role, whether they are fit, subject to any restrictions or whether they are likely to qualify for reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010.

b. **Case Management Referrals** where an employer is seeking specialist OH advice for an employee in the following circumstances:

- i. long term sickness
- ii. repeated short-term absences attributed to sickness
- iii. to provide advice, where an employee has a disability, on reasonable adjustments to the job/workplace or redeployment to another suitable role
- iv. to exclude health reasons for poor work performance
- v. to provide advice on the fitness of an employee to attend formal meetings
- vi. ill health medical retirements

c. **Pre-travel Medical Screening** to determine fitness and provide advice to international business travellers or those to be deployed on an international assignment with or without dependents.

This specialist travel medicine service offers a comprehensive health risk assessment with respect to an individual's fitness for travel taking into account the specific health risks encountered at the destination in question and any pre-existing medical conditions which the employee themselves may or may not be aware of.

In particular, the medical screening seeks to identify health issues which are associated with an increased risk of any of the following:

- i. Sudden incapacity i.e. rapid loss of capacity requiring immediate assistance, including emergency healthcare caused by medical conditions e.g. epilepsy.
- ii. Subtle incapacity i.e. a progressive degradation of an employee's functional capacity caused by medical conditions e.g. progressive neurological conditions or from medication taken to deal with such conditions which impact on attendance at work and work performance.
- iii. Ongoing healthcare provision costs during deployment e.g. repeat prescriptions for daily (or standby) medication, routine monitoring and outpatient reviews. Where possible, an indication will be given as to whether such healthcare provision would be available in country or if other arrangements would need to be put in place.
- iv. In this way it is possible to identify a small core group of international travellers within the business who are cleared fit to travel with appropriate measures in place to mitigate against any identified health risks and advice on health management and lifestyle to promote their overall health and wellbeing.

d. **Specific Risk Assessments**

- i. Expectant mother risk assessment
- ii. Night worker risk assessment applicable to shift workers required to work outside of normal office hours
- iii. Workstation assessment where recommended in view of pre-existing medical conditions likely to be exacerbated by desk-based working or where DSE self-assessment highlights a problem

## 2) Health Promotion and Wellbeing Measures

- a. Seasonal flu vaccination
- b. Health promotion campaigns and roadshows
- c. Executive medical examinations for senior staff

## 3) General guidance and advice akin to a CMO function

- a. Guidance and advice on relevant changes in health legislation as they occur and on action needed to ensure compliance with the changes e.g. reportable illnesses.
- b. Prompt guidance and advice on illnesses/health issues and any precautions/measures that should be implemented to minimise risk to the employee and others. For example, advice on COVID-19 risk mitigation measures in order to ensure that the workplace is COVID-secure.
- c. Workplace assessment to evaluate current H&S and OH provision at an organisational level.

## 4) Mental Health Provision

- a. Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)
- b. Short-term counselling
- c. Training of selected employees in psychological first aid

## 5) Health Surveillance in relation to relevant legislation e.g. COSHH/Noise/Vibration legislation

- a. Lung Function
- b. Hearing
- c. Skin
- d. Hand Arm Vibration

## 6) Statutory Medical Examinations if required

- a. HGV/Forklift Driver/Airside Driver medicals
- b. Confined Spaces medicals
- c. Mast Climber medicals

## - Next Steps

**Collate data on workforce in the following areas:**

- 1) Demographics and background characteristics with a breakdown by country, function, occupation etc.
- 2) Workforce management issues, such as business critical occupations, staff retention, and sickness absence data.
- 3) Uptake of current OH service provision e.g. number of case management referrals, pre-employment work health assessments, ill health retirement cases per annum.

## - How Anvil can help

The importance of safeguarding and promoting employees' safety, health and wellbeing in the workplace cannot be underestimated, but when dealing with globally mobile workforces and differing standards of service provision, it can often prove difficult to manage.

The World Organisation (WHO) recognises that there are significant discrepancies in the availability and standards of occupational health services around the globe, with major gaps between and within countries in the exposure of workers to occupational hazards, and in their access to occupational health services.

With such major differences in the local services available, working with an established and trusted partner to provide widespread availability and consistent levels of service is vital if organisations are to protect both themselves and their employees.

Anvil's clients enjoy peace of mind that all their employees, regardless of where they are located, are offered the same exceptional and comprehensive level of service, through the proven capabilities of our highly esteemed team of specialists and centralised approach to carrying out global occupational health services and programmes.

Anvil's occupational health services can help you to operate globally with confidence, knowing that you are able to:

- Provide safe and dynamic workplaces for your employees
- Manage employee health and wellbeing with confidence
- Comply with the varying global rules and regulations
- Fulfil your duty of care requirements

**Contact us today to connect with one of our Occupational Health experts.**

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