



Workplace health issues

Exploring the training needs of
health and safety practitioners

Summary report 2009

IOSH, the Chartered body for safety and health professionals, is committed to evidence-based practice in workplace safety and health. We maintain a Research for Public Benefit Fund to support research and inspire innovation as part of our work as a thought leader in safety and health.

All recipients of funding from our Research for Public Benefit Fund are asked to compile a comprehensive research report of their findings, which is subject to peer review.

For more information, visit our [research page](#).

In this document, you'll find a summary of the independent study we commissioned from Nottingham University: 'Exploring health and safety practitioners' training needs in workplace health issues'. This report is part of a suite of activities centred on encouraging greater participation by safety and health professionals in improving workplace health.



The University of
Nottingham

What's the problem?

Today, the world of work is more diverse than ever and it's continuously changing. Unfortunately, change can have negative effects as well as benefits, and often presents us with a new set of problems and risks to deal with. This transformation of the workplace and the way we work has led to new types of occupational hazard. In recent years, workplace health issues in particular have attracted greater attention. This is unsurprising – if we're unable to work because of health problems, we're affected socially and financially. Though we don't know the exact economic cost of absence and worklessness caused by sickness in the UK, it's thought to be greater than the current annual budget for the National Health Service.¹

Health and safety practitioners have a role to play in improving workplace health. But how can we help to make sure they're effective? To start with, we need to know the key workplace health issues they encounter and understand what areas they need training in – now and over the next five to 10 years.

We commissioned Dr Stravroula Leka, Professor Sayeed Khan and Professor Amanda Griffiths at Nottingham University to research into this issue. We asked them to find out what workplace health issues should be targeted through education and training schemes.

The researchers' four key goals were to:

- find out what workplace health experts saw as priority issues
- canvass IOSH members' views on priority issues
- identify the key knowledge, skills and abilities that health and safety practitioners will need in the future
- suggest priority areas which can be tackled through Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses.

What did our researchers do?

The team at Nottingham University gathered information from a panel of experts and IOSH members. The project was carried out in three stages:

- semi-structured interviews with health and safety experts representing relevant stakeholders
- a Delphi² survey looking at the views of these experts

¹ 1 Black C. Working for a healthier tomorrow. London: TSO, 2008.

² Delphi is a structured communication process which allows a number of individuals, as a group, to reach agreement and deal with a complex problem without meeting face to face. A small monitor team sends a questionnaire to the group members and, based on the results, develops another questionnaire for participants to complete. Individuals are given summarised feedback of the group

- an online survey of IOSH members undertaking the CPD programme.

The researchers carried out phone interviews with 30 workplace health experts representing industry, regulatory bodies, sector skills councils, and educational and professional bodies. They were asked for their opinion of:

- current priorities in workplace health
- the current role of health and safety practitioners in workplace health
- the future role of health and safety practitioners in workplace health
- whether health and safety practitioners have the right blend of knowledge, skills and abilities to deal with current workplace health priorities
- topics or issues that health and safety practitioners should not deal with, if any.

The team used the information to develop a Delphi survey and the same 30 experts were invited to participate electronically in two stages.

A total of 25 experts responded to the first round of the survey by ranking their top five workplace health issues. In the second round, participants were asked to decide on their top three priorities from the overall top five issues; this time there were 18 respondents. The participants also had an opportunity to disagree with suggestions from other members of the panel about the future role, skills and knowledge of health and safety practitioners.

Using the results of this survey, the research team designed an online questionnaire to work out priorities for practitioner education and training programmes.

Questionnaires were sent to all IOSH members undertaking CPD in 2006 (8,826) and there were 1,679 valid responses. The questionnaire survey asked respondents for their views on:

- the current and emerging priorities in workplace health over the next five to 10 years
- which areas they would like to see included in CPD training
- what areas of knowledge and skills were essential for future health and safety practitioners in workplace health matters
- their preferred mode of course delivery.

Members were also asked to provide general information about themselves.

response and have at least one opportunity to reconsider their views. (Adapted from Linstone H A and Turoff M. *The Delphi method: techniques and applications*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1975)

What did our researchers find out?

The researchers looked at the interview and Delphi survey data and found that the experts' top five priorities in workplace health are:

- common mental health problems (anxiety, depression, perceived ill health)
- sickness absence
- musculoskeletal disorders
- how to engage and advise SMEs
- evaluation of health and safety interventions.

The experts thought that the future role of practitioners will include:

- a proactive and preventive function
- a holistic approach – thinking and working in partnership with other professionals - managing external OSH providers/contracts
- persuading senior management and making the business case for OSH
- facilitating the integration of OSH into normal business practice.

They also believed 'distinguishing between work-related and non-work-related OSH problems' would form an important part of health and safety practitioners' roles.

Some of the key areas in which practitioners will need new knowledge and skills to cope with increased occupational health demands are:

- presentation and training
- conflict management
- early identification of problems
- keeping up to date with new regulations and newer knowledge areas
- behaviour change
- influencing and leadership skills
- communication
- management and organisational skills
- ethics and confidentiality
- evaluation skills.

The experts agreed that health and safety practitioners can tackle any area in workplace health provided they know their limits and work with other expert groups. However, a few felt clinical management, therapies and health promotion should remain outside the practitioner's role.

When the team analysed the results of the practitioner survey, it found that:

- 'common mental health problems', 'work-related stress', 'health surveillance and identification of emerging risks', 'planning for major health scares and incidents' and 'work-related driving' are the top current and emerging training priorities, as shown in Table 1 below
- 'attitudes, persuasion and behaviour change', 'risk perception and communication', 'change management', 'legislation and guidance' and 'organisational culture' will be the most important knowledge areas for practitioners in the future
- 'influencing', 'making the business case for workplace health', 'early identification of workplace health priorities', 'leadership' and 'understanding essential business models and processes' will be the most important skills for practitioners in the future
- practitioners would prefer a mixture of e-learning and face-to-face workshops or modules, held on weekdays – see Table 2 below.

Training priority	Number	%
1 Common mental health problems	771	45.9
2 Management standards for workplace stress	660	39.3
3 Health surveillance and identification of emerging risks	580	34.5
4 Planning for major health-related scares and incidents	575	34.2
5 Work-related driving	567	33.8
6 Work-life balance	533	31.7
7 Immigrant/migrant work population	503	30.0
8 Non-standard workplaces	496	29.5
9 Return to work and rehabilitation	493	29.4
10 Health promotion	480	28.6

Table 1
Respondents' top 10 desirable training priorities

Preferred method of training delivery	Number	%
Mix of e-learning and face-to-face workshops or modules (weekdays)	998	59.4
E-learning (entire course via the internet, including online delivery of course materials and tutorials)	376	22.4
Mix of e-learning and face-to-face workshops or modules (weekends)	246	14.7
Other	51	3.0

Table 2
Respondents' preferred method of training delivery, in descending order

Our researchers also explored whether the views of members were associated with particular profiles (age, level of health and safety experience, IOSH membership category, level of qualification, membership of IOSH networks). They found significant differences:

Age and membership grade

- Chartered Members, in contrast to other members, consider 'return to work' as important and 'health promotion' unimportant.
- The younger the respondent, the more likely they are to consider 'health promotion' as an important issue. Similarly, the less experienced the respondent, the more likely 'health promotion' is to be an important issue.

Education

- Respondents with British Safety Council level 6 are more likely to indicate 'common mental health problems' as important and an area for further training.
- Respondents with NEBOSH Part 2 or a Diploma 6 are more likely to consider 'health surveillance' and 'identification of emerging risks' as a higher priority.
- Those with S/NVQ 4 in OHS practice are more likely to view 'immigrant/migrant work population' as an important priority issue.

IOSH Groups

Members from at least 16 IOSH Groups responded to the survey – see Table 3 on page 07.

- Respondents in the Healthcare Group considered 'management standards for work stress' as an important priority. Compared to members in the Construction or Offshore Groups, those in the Healthcare Group also considered 'common mental health problems' important. On the other hand, Healthcare Group respondents didn't view 'work-related driving' or 'immigrant/migrant work population' as important priority issues or training needs.
- Construction Group members viewed 'health surveillance and identification of emerging risks' as an important issue; they also felt that 'work-related driving' and 'immigrant/migrant work population' are both important issues and areas for training. In contrast, they didn't see 'work-life balance' or 'health promotion' as important workplace priorities, although they did see them as areas for further training. 'Non-standard workplaces' was neither an important priority issue nor a training need for Construction Group participants.
- Hazardous Industries Group respondents prioritised 'health surveillance and identification of emerging risks' as an important issue and training need.

Group members also considered both 'work-related driving' and 'work-life balance' as important areas for training.

- Those in the Public Services Group considered 'common mental health problems' as a more important issue and further training need, compared to practitioners in the Construction, Offshore or Safety Sciences Groups. They also considered 'non-standard workplaces' and 'return to work and rehabilitation' to be important priority areas. However, Public Services Group respondents found 'immigrant and migrant work' to be a less important priority issue and area for training.
- Retail and Distribution Group participants found 'work-related driving' and 'non-standard workplaces' as important workplace health priorities, and generally considered that 'health promotion' was not important.
- Education Group respondents indicated that 'planning for major health-related scares and incidents' is an important training area and priority issue. Respondents in this group also considered 'return to work and rehabilitation' as an important issue compared to other groups, such as Railway and Offshore.
- Rural Industries Group respondents, like those in the Construction Group, considered 'work-related driving' as both an important issue and training need compared to other IOSH groups.
- Safety Sciences Group participants identified 'common mental health problems' as an area for further training but not an important priority issue. They also shared the same view as Fire Risk Management Group respondents that 'management standards for work stress' was a desirable area for further training – this view was generally considered as unimportant among respondents in the Offshore and Railway Groups. In addition, Safety Sciences respondents considered 'planning for major health related scares and incidents' an important workplace priority issue.
- IOSH Communication and Media Group respondents tended to view 'work-related driving', 'work-life balance', and 'health promotion' as important areas for training.
- Participants in the Fire Risk Management Group found 'health promotion' and 'management standards for work stress' as an important priority issue and area for further training, respectively.

IOSH Group	Number	%
Construction	382	22.8
None	249	14.8
Public Services	233	13.9
Environmental and Waste Management	182	10.8
Healthcare	160	9.5
Consultancy	134	8.0
Education	108	6.4
Fire Risk Management	98	5.8
Railway	72	4.3
Hazardous Industries	58	3.5
International	55	3.3
Retail and Distribution	50	3.0
Offshore	49	2.9
Food and Drink	38	2.3
Safety Sciences	38	2.3
Communications and Media	30	1.8
Rural Industries	23	1.4

Table 3
Respondents' membership of IOSH Groups, in descending order

What does the research mean?

- Overall, health and safety practitioners and experts share the same views on the highest priority issues for workplace health – common mental health problems and work-related stress.
- The top key issues shared between the two groups, though not necessarily in the same order, also include:
 - health surveillance and identification of emerging risks
 - musculoskeletal disorders
 - sickness absence
 - planning for major health-related scares and incidents
 - work-related driving
 - work–life balance
 - engagement of and advice to SMEs

- evaluation of OSH interventions
- immigrant/migrant population.
- CPD programmes should target all priority areas and aim to develop key knowledge and skills to meet the current and emerging needs of practitioners.
- Factors such as age, qualification, category of IOSH membership, IOSH group membership and level of health and safety experience can influence practitioners' views on workplace health issues and training needs.

Don't forget

Like most studies, this one had some limitations. Health and safety practitioners participating in CPD at the time were targeted for the study and nearly three quarters of them were Chartered Members. Since this sample was dominated by a larger percentage of Chartered Members than is generally reflected in the total IOSH membership, findings are representative for this category of health and safety professionals.

Also, although the study covered a wide variety of IOSH groups, some groups were under-represented. The team found some interesting differences between sub-groups of practitioners, but further research which involves a good distribution of the various categories of members may reveal significantly more.

What's next?

This project forms part of a suite of work and initiatives in the area of occupational health and training. We've already produced good practice guides on rehabilitation and return to work ('A healthy return') and on raising performance through training and competence ('Setting standards in health and safety'). Both guides are available free from www.iosh.co.uk/techguide. Our future plans in the field of occupational health include:

- developing our online Occupational health toolkit (www.ohtoolkit.co.uk) – so far we've covered stress, musculoskeletal and skin disorders and respiratory problems
- more research on the effect of the changing world of work on health and safety practice. The following projects specifically focus on the relationship between aspects of work, health and wellbeing:
 - the relationship between work and improved health, safety and wellbeing (Cardiff University)
 - the effect of work-related violence on health and wellbeing: a longitudinal cross-lagged study (University of Sheffield)

- an epidemiological study of occupational voice demands and their impact on the call centre industry (University of Ulster)
- the health and safety and health promotion needs of older workers (Institute of Occupational Medicine)
- the implications of managing the health and safety needs of post-retirement age workers (Brunel University).

Together with the Department for Work and Pensions, we're funding a pilot scheme for training health and safety professionals on health at work and return to work issues. We're also funding the distribution of free HSE/HSL training material on local exhaust ventilation to our members.

Our summary gives you all the major findings of the independent project report by Nottingham University. If you want to read about the study in more depth, you can download the full report at [iosh.com/research](https://www.iosh.com/research).

IOSH is the Chartered body for health and safety professionals. With over 50,000 members in more than 130 countries, we're the world's largest professional health and safety organisation.

We set standards and support, develop and connect our members with resources, guidance, events and training. We're the voice of the profession and campaign on issues that affect millions of working people.

IOSH was founded in 1945 and is a registered charity with international NGO status.

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