

Overtime and Workplace Safety: Understanding the Risks and Mitigation Strategies for OHS Managers



In today's fast-paced work environment, overtime is often viewed as a necessary means to meet deadlines and maintain productivity. However, extensive research indicates that excessive overtime can lead to significant health risks for employees and increase the likelihood of workplace accidents. As an Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) manager, it's crucial to understand these risks and implement strategies to mitigate them, ensuring a safe and healthy workplace.

The Link Between Overtime and Increased Accident Risk

Several studies have highlighted the adverse effects of prolonged working hours on employee health and safety:

- **Health Implications:** A joint study by the World Health Organization and the International Labour Organization estimated that over 745,000 people died from ischemic heart disease or stroke in 2016 due to working 55 hours or more per week.
- **Increased Injury Rates:** Research has shown that employees working overtime are at a higher risk of workplace injuries. A study found that jobs with overtime schedules were associated with a 61% higher

injury rate compared to jobs without overtime.

- **Fatigue and Cognitive Decline:** Extended work hours can lead to fatigue, resulting in decreased attentiveness and impaired cognitive function, which are significant contributors to workplace accidents.

These findings underscore the critical need for OHS managers to address the risks associated with excessive overtime.

Strategies for Mitigating Overtime-Related Risks

To safeguard employee well-being and maintain a safe work environment, OHS managers should consider implementing the following strategies:

1. Establish Clear Work-Hour Policies

Develop and enforce policies that limit the number of consecutive working hours and ensure adequate rest periods between shifts. For instance, avoiding shifts longer than 12 hours and ensuring at least 10 hours of rest between shifts can help reduce fatigue-related incidents.

2. Promote a Balanced Workload

Ensure that workloads are manageable within standard working hours to minimize the necessity for overtime. Regularly assess staffing levels and redistribute tasks as needed to prevent employee burnout.

3. Implement Flexible Scheduling

Offering flexible work arrangements, such as flextime, can help employees balance work demands with personal responsibilities, reducing stress and improving overall job satisfaction. Studies have shown that flextime can lead to reduced absenteeism and enhanced performance.

4. Encourage Regular Breaks

Promote the importance of taking regular breaks during shifts to help employees rest and recharge, thereby maintaining high levels of alertness and productivity.

5. Monitor and Review Overtime Practices

Regularly analyze overtime patterns to identify trends and address underlying issues contributing to excessive overtime. This proactive approach allows for timely interventions to prevent potential safety hazards.

6. Foster a Supportive Work Environment

Cultivate a workplace culture that prioritizes employee well-being. Encourage open communication, provide access to mental health resources, and recognize the signs of overwork to support employees effectively.

CONCLUSION

While overtime can be a temporary solution to increased workloads, it's imperative to recognize and address the associated health and safety risks. By implementing comprehensive strategies that promote reasonable work hours, balanced workloads, and employee well-being, OHS managers can play a pivotal role in mitigating these risks and fostering a safer, more productive workplace.

Sources

- 1. World Health Organization and International Labour Organization Joint Study:** This study estimated that over 745,000 people died from ischemic heart disease or stroke in 2016 due to working 55 hours or more per week.
- 1. Increased Injury Rates with Overtime:** Research indicates that jobs with overtime schedules are associated with a

61% higher injury rate compared to jobs without overtime.

1. **Fatigue and Cognitive Decline:** Extended work hours can lead to fatigue, resulting in decreased attentiveness and impaired cognitive function, significantly contributing to workplace accidents.
1. **Shift Work and Safety:** Studies have shown that compared with day shifts, injuries and accidents increase by 15% on evening shifts and 28% on night shifts. Longer shifts are also associated with more injuries and accidents: 10-hour shifts had 13% more and 12-hour shifts had 28% more than 8-hour shifts.
1. **Karoshi – Death from Overwork:** The phenomenon of “karoshi” in Japan highlights extreme cases where excessive work hours have led to fatal outcomes, emphasizing the severe risks associated with overwork.
1. **Effects of Fatigue on Safety:** Fatigue is a major safety concern in many fields, especially in transportation, because it negatively affects the human operator’s internal state, leading to disastrous accidents.