Take 7 Steps to Ensure U.S. Tariffs Don’t Compromise Workers’ Safety



The trade war with the U.S. is escalating with both countries adopting 50% tariffs on approximately $20 billion of each other’s goods. All of this will have an impact on not only the Canadian economy but also the safety of Canadian workplaces. That’s because how companies respond to tariffs may change the risks their workers face on the job. **Bottom Line:** Canadian safety directors must be tuned into and prepared to deal with the potential impact of tariffs on their Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) program. Here are seven areas to focus on.

1. Reassess Risks in Response to Tariff-Related Operational Changes

Tariffs will force companies to cut costs. That may result in not only staff reductions but also changes to basic operations. Tools, equipment, materials, work methods, and locations—just about anything and everything will be on the table.

What To Do: Review your most recent hazard assessments and determine if they need to be updated for post-tariff operations. So, for example, revise hazard assessments for operations that were carried out by four workers which will now be performed by only three people. And don’t assume a

hazard assessment still works simply because the operation itself hasn’t changed if the conditions, both physical and mental, under which it’s performed have changed. Tariff-related risk factors to consider:

- Workforce reductions.
- Replacement of experienced workers with less experienced personnel.
- Workers are assigned additional duties.
- Increase in production targets.
- Overtime replaces lost staffing.
- Equipment is kept in service longer.
- Deferral of preventive maintenance.
- Work is moved to a different location.
- Temporary storage or production areas are created.
- Introduction of alternative materials or equipment.

2. Ensure Current Safety Measures Work for Post-Tariff Hazards

Post-tariff hazard assessment may have ripple effects on your current safety measures.

What To Do: After revising your hazard assessments, determine whether your current engineering controls, work policies and procedures, training, PPE, etc., are still going to be effective. If not, you’ll need to make adjustments to the new state of hazards.

3. Beware of the Safety Consequences of “Doing More With Less”

Management’s need for cost-cutting may create an especially dangerous combination that causes safety to deteriorate: fewer

workers, more work, and greater pressure to maintain production.

What To Do: While you don't want to reflexively oppose all cost-saving measures, it's incumbent on OHS directors to make management aware of the potential safety consequences of particular measures before they're implemented. The question to ask management: Which safety control will this measure affect? Examples:

- If maintenance is deferred, will equipment still be safe?
- Will supervisors assigned to oversee two areas instead of one still be capable of ensuring safety?
- How will the acceleration of a production line impact machine guarding, ergonomic risk, or pedestrian traffic?
- Will workers assigned to additional duties or longer hours be too fatigued to work safely?

3. Double Down on Efforts to Protect Workers from Stress, Fatigue, and Burnout

Tariff-related layoffs and staffing shortages may lead to fatigue, overwork, and burnout. Workers are also likely to experience elevated levels of mental stress. All of this can result in slower reaction times, impaired judgment, reduced concentration, and more errors.

What To Do: Monitor the indicators of whether fatigue is becoming a safety problem, including:

- Overtime hours
- Consecutive shifts
- Extended workdays
- Night-shift scheduling
- Absenteeism

- Near misses
- Errors and rework
- Incident rates
- Worker complaints, and
- Vacation or time-off patterns.

Persuade company execs to make preservation of workers' mental health a priority. Rather than treating it as simply an HR scheduling issue, revisit your fatigue-risk controls and take active measures like implementing a Workplace Fatigue Risk Management System. Remind management that workers who are physically present but fatigued aren't as safe or productive as fully alert workers.

4. Ensure Safety Equivalence of Substitute Supplies, Materials, & Chemicals

Tariffs may make key products or components unavailable or more expensive. While they may satisfy the business issues, the substitutes and replacements your company relies on may be less safe than what you use now. Thus, substitute chemicals may pose different hazards, substitute components may may require different guarding or handling procedures, etc.

What To Do: Significant supply substitutions should undergo OHS review before they're purchased and deployed to ensure they're "safety-equivalent," especially when they involve hazardous products subject to WHMIS requirements. Questions to ask as part of the review:

- Does the product create new or different hazards?
- Is the Safety Data Sheet (SDS) and WHMIS label current and appropriate for Canada?
- Does existing PPE provide adequate protection for the new product?
- Is current ventilation adequate?

- Do storage requirements change?
- Are current emergency procedures still appropriate?
- Do workers require additional information or training for the new product?
- Do safe-work procedures need revision?

5. Resist PPE & Safety Equipment Cost Cutting that Jeopardize Safety

Tariffs may increase the cost of PPE, respirators, fall-protection equipment, protective clothing, and other vital safety equipment. These cost pressures may induce your company to buy cheaper products that don't provide equivalent protection.

What To Do: Safety equipment changes should undergo OHS review to ensure they provide equivalent protection. As OHS director, you must make the business case against potentially dangerous PPE and other safety budget cuts. Point out that in addition to increasing workers' risk of injuries and illnesses, cutting corners can increase the company's risk of liability for violating PPE requirements under OHS laws.

6. Protect Your OHS Supply Chain

Tariffs may also affect the availability of the PPE and safety equipment essential to protect your workers. Start looking for alternatives now rather than waiting until disruptions actually occur and suppliers can't deliver the goods you need.

What To Do: Working with the purchasing department, identify your critical safety supplies and determine:

- Which products are essential to keeping operations running safely;
- Which products have long or unpredictable lead times;
- Whether there are qualified alternative suppliers you

can turn to if needed;
- Whether alternative safety products are suitable for the hazards involved;
- Whether minimum inventory levels should be established; and
- Which supplies should never be allowed to reach zero inventory?

7. Guard Against Tariff-Related Threats to Psychological Safety

There's another tariff-related OHS issue that's easy to overlook, namely, their impact on workers' psychological safety. The trade war has engendered strong feelings among Canadians about the U.S., China, and other countries that may enter the workplace through conversations about tariffs, politics, jobs and corporate decisions. The risk is that these opinions will result in workplace harassment, bullying, violence, threats, intimidation, discrimination, or conflict, especially against Americans.

What To Do: Review your existing harassment-prevention and workplace-conduct programs. Ensure you have a robust workplace harassment prevention program in place and that workers know:

- What constitutes unacceptable workplace conduct.
- How to report complaints and concerns and to whom.
- How complaints are investigated.
- That they won't suffer reprisals for reporting unacceptable conduct.
- That management will address inappropriate conduct regardless of the political or economic issue that triggered it.

Managers also need to understand that workplace conflict generated by tariff discussions should not simply be dismissed as "political disagreements."

Takeaway & 12 Questions to Ask

The takeaway from all of this is that tariffs have an impact on workplace safety. Companies don’t consciously choose to reduce safety in responding to tariffs. But the decisions they make to cut costs, protect margins, maintain production, and keep customers supplied forces often have an impact on the hazards of their workplace and how they’re managed. It’s crucial for OHS directors to ensure that company leaders understand and consider these safety ramifications when making these tariff-related business decisions.

The question to ask: Is this proposed measure likely to compromise workers’ safety? The answer is more likely YES if the action involves:

- Staffing level reductions.
- Assignment of work that was previously performed by other workers, in or outside the company.
- Extended work hours.
- Increases to production quotas.
- Compressed schedules or shorter deadlines.
- Changes to productivity standards or expectations.
- Changes to supplies, materials, tools, or equipment.

If the proposed measure does have safety ramifications, OHS directors must ensure that:

- The hazard assessment is revised in accordance with the changed conditions.
- Current engineering controls, training, work procedures, PPE, and other safety measures are adequate to control the newly identified hazards.
- Substitute safety equipment is at least equivalent to what it’s replacing.
- Measures are in place to guard against fatigue, mental stress, and threats to psychological safety.