

Study unit 1: Preface/ Introduction of occupational health and labor laws

Introduction

Occupational health and safety is a cross-disciplinary area and it interacts with other disciplines such as occupational medicine, occupational or industrial hygiene, public health, safety engineering, ergonomics, toxicology, epidemiology, health physics, environmental health, industrial relations, public policy, industrial sociology, medical sociology, social law, labor law, and occupation health psychology. Although the urgency to address the occupational (industrial) health and safety issues emerged during the Industrial Revolution, it becomes much more crucial to address the issue at present with the tremendous expansion of cities across the world, further resulting in wide spread industrialization and growth of population. Issues of health, hygiene and hazard control are essential and have to be dealt with by state governments and other bodies responsible for ensuring the safety and well-being of all workers, by ensuring that there are health and safety policies, systems in every workplace and that these are implemented in the best possible manner.

Learning Outcomes of Study Unit 1

By the end of this topic you should be able to:

- 1.1 Explain the historical development of modern OSH
- 1.2 Define the concept of Occupational health and safety
- 1.3 Discuss the objectives of Occupational Health and Safety
- 1.4 State the principles of Occupational Health and Safety
- 1.5 Justify the roles of OHS

1.1 Historical development of modern OHS

The research and regulation of occupational safety and health are a relatively recent phenomenon. As labor movements arose in response to worker concerns in the wake of the industrial revolution, worker's health entered consideration as a labor-related issue.

In the United_Kingdom, the Factory Acts of the early nineteenth century (from 1802 onwards) arose out of concerns about the poor health of children working in cotton mills: the Act of 1833 created a dedicated professional Factory_Inspectorate. The initial remit of the Inspectorate was to police restrictions on the working hours in the textile industry of children and young persons (introduced to prevent chronic overwork, identified as leading directly to ill-health and deformation, and indirectly to a high accident rate). However, on the urging of the Factory Inspectorate, a further Act in 1844 giving similar restrictions on working hours for women in the textile industry introduced a requirement for machinery guarding (but only in the textile industry, and only in areas that might be accessed by women or children).

In 1840 a Royal Commission published its findings on the state of conditions for the workers of the mining industry that documented the appallingly dangerous environment that they had to work in and the high frequency of accidents. The commission sparked public outrage which resulted in the Mines Act of 1842. The act set up an inspectorate for mines and collieries which resulted in many prosecutions and safety improvements, and by 1850, inspectors were able to enter and inspect premises at their discretion.

Otto von Bismarck inaugurated the first social insurance legislation in 1883 and the first worker's compensation law in 1884 – the first of their kind in the Western world. Similar acts followed in other countries, partly in response to labor unrest

Define the concept of Occupational health and safety

Safety is the state of being "safe", the condition of being protected from harm or other non-desirable outcomes. Safety can also refer to the control of recognized hazards in order to achieve an acceptable level of risk.

Occupational health refers to the identification and control of the risks arising from physical, chemical, and other workplace hazards in order to establish and maintain a safe and healthy working environment.

Occupational health deals with all aspects of health and safety in the workplace and has a strong focus on primary prevention of hazards." *Health has been defined as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.* "Occupational health is a multidisciplinary field of healthcare concerned with enabling an individual to undertake their occupation, in the way that causes least harm to their health. Health has been defined as It contrasts, for example, with the promotion of health and safety at work, which is concerned with preventing harm from any incidental hazards, arising in the workplace. The health of the workers has several determinants, including risk factors at the workplace leading to cancers, accidents, musculoskeletal diseases, respiratory diseases, hearing loss, circulatory diseases, stress related disorders and communicable diseases and others.

Occupational health and safety is the discipline concerned with preserving and protecting human resources in the workplace. As per the definition adopted by the Joint ILO/WHO Committee on Occupational Health (1950), occupational health is the adaptation of work to man and of each man to his job. It has the following components.

- Promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of physical, mental and social wellbeing of workers in all occupations
- Prevention among workers of departments from health caused by their working conditions
- Protection of workers in their employment from risks resulting from factors adverse to health
- Placing and maintenance of a worker in an occupational environment adapted to his physiological and psychological wellbeing

Box 1.1: Occupation Health and Safety

Occupational health and safety encompass the social, mental and physical well-being of workers that is the “whole person”.

1.2 Objectives of Occupational Health and Safety

The prime objective of OHS at a global level *is to ensure that health and safety is accessible to every worker employed in any sector across the economy*. The World Health Organization (WHO) since its inception has included elements of occupational health in its policy. The need to protect the worker from occupational health hazards and promote safety of all at the workplace has been emphasized in key documents of WHO -the Constitution of the WHO, Declarations of Alma Ata Declaration, Global Strategy on Occupational Health for All, WHO General Programmes of Work and several resolutions of the World Health Assembly

According to the document, Global Strategy on Occupational Health for All, the ten high priority objectives proposed by the strategy are as follows:

- ✓ Strengthening of international and national policies for health at work and developing the necessary policy tools
- ✓ Development of healthy work environment
- ✓ Development of healthy work practices and promotion of health at work
- ✓ Strengthening of OHS
- ✓ Establishing of support services for occupational health
- ✓ Development of occupational health standards based on scientific risk assessment

- ✓ Development of human resources for occupational health
- ✓ Establishment of registration and data systems, development of information services for experts, effective transmission of data and raising of public awareness through public information
- ✓ Strengthening of research
- ✓ Development of collaboration in occupational health and with other activities and services.

According to the Global Strategy on Occupational Health for All document the objectives stated above stress upon the significance of “primary prevention” and lays emphasis on creating policies, structures, systems and activities for addressing OHS needs at the workplace. It highlights the need for adequate support services and human resources for implementing the new strategy.

1.3 Principles of Occupational Health and Safety

Occupational health and safety is a multi-disciplinary field, covering issues related to law, medicine, technology, economics and industry specific concerns. The core occupational health and safety principles put forth by the ILO are as follows:

1. *All workers have rights.* Workers, as well as employees and government, must ensure that these rights are protected and foster decent conditions of labour. As the International Labour Conference stated in 1984:

-Work should take place in a safe healthy environment

-Conditions of work should be consistent with workers’ well-being and human dignity;

-Work should offer real possibilities for personal achievement, self-fulfillment and service society

2. *Occupational health and safety policies must be established.* Such policies must be implemented at both the governmental and enterprise levels. They must be effectively communicated to all parties concerned.

3. *There is a need for consultation with the social partners (that is, employers and workers) and other stakeholders.* This should be done during the formulation, implementation and review of such policies.

4. *Prevention and protection must be the aim of occupational health and safety programmes and policies.* Efforts must be focused on primary prevention at the workplace level. Workplaces and working environment should be planned and designed to be safe and healthy.

5. *Information is vital for the development and implementation of effective programmes and policies.* The collection and dissemination of accurate information on hazards and hazardous materials, surveillance of workplaces, monitoring of compliance with policies and good practices, and other related activities are central to the establishment and the enforcement of effective policies.

6. *Health promotion is a central element of occupational health practice.* Efforts must be made to enhance workers' physical, mental and social well-being.

7. *Occupational health services covering all workers should be established.* Ideally all workers in all categories of economic activity should have access to such services, which aim to protect and promote workers' health and improve working conditions.

8. *Compensation, rehabilitation and curative services must be made available to workers who suffer occupational injuries, accidents and work-related diseases.* Action must be taken to minimize the consequences of occupational hazards.

9. *Education and training are vital components of safe, healthy working environments.* Workers and employers must be made aware of the importance and the means of establishing safe working procedures. Trainers must be trained in areas of special relevance to different industries, which have specific OH concerns.

10. *Workers, employers and competent authorities have certain responsibilities, duties and obligations.* For example, workers must follow established safety procedures; employers must provide safe workplaces and ensure access to first aid; and the competent authorities must devise, communicate and periodically review and update occupational health and safety policies.

11. *Policies must be enforced.* A system of inspection must be in place to secure compliance with occupational health and safety and other labor legislation

Implementation of such principles requires appropriate legal provisions, administrative enforcement and service systems for occupational safety and health and occupational health services.

1.4 Importance of Occupational Health and Safety

An organization whose management has managed to put in place and maintain desirable physical, social and psychological conditions can be assured of a number of benefits. They include the following;

1. Safety programs create productive work environments i.e properly managed safety programs show commitment to safety by the management in turn creating a great safety culture where everyone 'wants' to be safe.
2. Absenteeism drops when effective safety programs are introduced i.e Workers want to work in a safe environment; absenteeism drops when effective safety programs are introduced.
3. Work premises are kept to higher standards i.e work premises are kept to higher standards for safety, cleanliness, and housekeeping
4. Safety programs enable a company to win and retain business customers
5. Creation of morale among employees of an organization which in turn affects the quantity and quality of a firm's products and services positively, besides creation of favorable occupational attitudes amongst such employees.
6. The public image of a firm will also be improved for the better if systematic employee health and safety programs have established and modified over time. E.g. highly qualified personnel will be willing to work for such a firm or maintenance of a reasonable market share.
7. The employee will as well be considered to be operating within law if the working environment facilitates employee health and safety during their day to day activities that are aimed at achieving the goals and objectives of a firm.
8. An organization will also be assured of less work stoppage if any, that are normally caused by accidents and illness among employees. This implies that activities will be accomplished in time there by maintaining the profitability base of such a firm among other advantages

9. Unnecessary costs that may negatively affect the budget of a firm are also minimized in case of systematic employee health and safety measures at the work place. Such costs may be in terms of replacement of injured employees, compensation, investigations, replacement of damaged equipment's and legal suits among others

10. Good employee safety and health measures can as well be useful tool towards better employer-employee relations with in an organization. A mutual employer-employee relationship is advantageous to firms in a number of ways such as effective flow of information, timely grievance and conflict handling etc.

11. Well established health and safety measures help to reduce the rate at which employees enter and leave the organization, i.e a stable work force is established implying that several programs of the organization can be carried out with less or no interruptions.