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Drafting a Modern OHS Management System Standard

Implications of the Changing Nature of Work

BY THEA DUNMIRE

At the PC 283 meeting in Morocco in April 2014, one of the delegates remarked that, in drafting ISO 45001, we should make an attempt to develop a “modern standard.”

Since then I have been considering the question: “What is a modern OHS management system standard?”

It strikes me that a “modern” standard would be one that not only takes into account advances in safety technology but also considers changes in the nature of work. There are three significant changes to be considered in defining the individuals an OHS management system needs to address. These are changes in what work is performed and where work is done, as well as changes in the relationship between workers and organizations.

NEW TASKS

First, the tasks workers perform have changed. The work of today is not the same as the work of yesterday.

Although there are still traditional manufacturing jobs, in many countries the majority of workers are service workers. In addition, much of the employment growth is projected to be in service-providing industries. According to a December 2013 news release of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, most of the 10.8 percent employment growth projected in the United States will be service sector jobs (see

Figure 1). The press release is available at <http://bit.ly/blsemployment>.

The jobs of the future will no longer primarily be for blue-collar workers. Instead, many of the jobs of the future will be for “pink-collar” and “white-collar” workers. They will be for health care workers, not production line workers. They will be for telemarketers and computer programmers instead of line supervisors and middle managers.

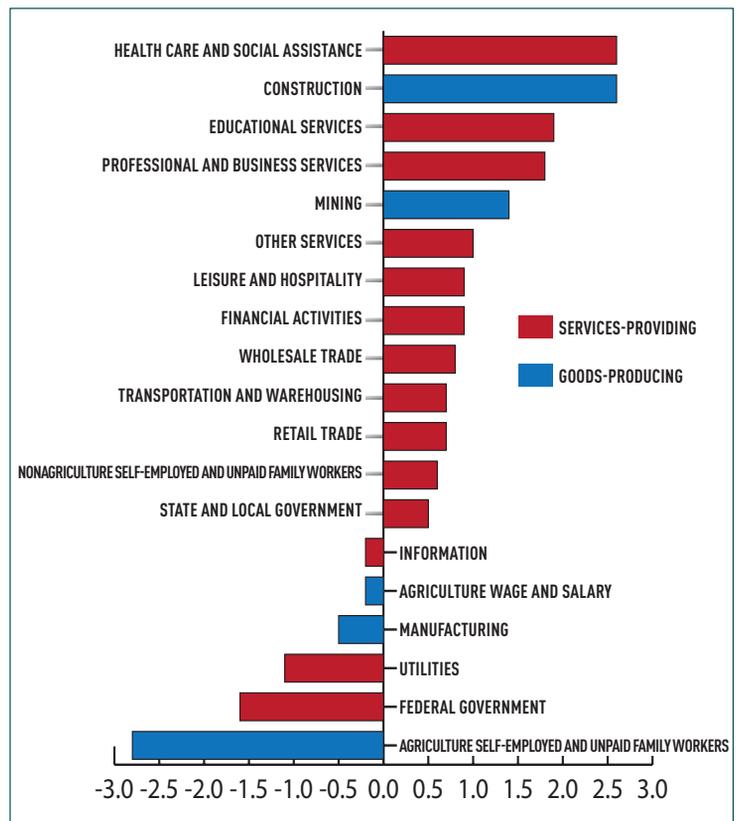
Part of this change is technology driven. The Mars Rover has replaced

the Man on the Moon. Drones have replaced pilots. Software has replaced accountants. Robots have replaced welders and painters.

Increasingly, the new role for workers is to make sure technology—robots and software and drones—works appropriately. Even in countries where manufacturing jobs still predominate, technology is fueling the rapid pace of automation.

This change in the nature of work is significant for an OHS management system because the “workplace” of

Figure 1. Projected Annual Employment Rate of Change by Major Industry Sector, 2012–2022



Source: BLS

For many workers there is no direct connection between who is paying them for their work and the place where they do their work.

today is often very different from that contemplated when many of the OHS regulatory frameworks in place today were originally developed.

Many OSHA regulations focus on addressing the hazards of 50 years ago. They address the hazards of punch presses and grinding wheels, but not robotics. They deal with emissions from coke ovens and cotton dust, but not exposure to nanoparticles.

Often lacking are adequate standards for addressing the hazards of the jobs of today—and tomorrow.

NEW WORKPLACES

Second, where workers perform their tasks has changed.

For thousands of years there was no separate workplace. People worked primarily to survive, and there was little or no distinction between where they lived and where they worked. Everyone worked to contribute to the well-being of the family—men and women, boys and girls.

The nature of work changed with the industrial revolution when individuals went to specific places to work, such as factories. The workplace was separate from the living place, or home. Work was done for payment, a salary, and workers were employees of those who owned the places where work was done. Since people went to specific places to work, the focus of occupational health and safety was on creating and maintaining safe workplaces.

Where people work is once again undergoing significant change.

In a service economy, there often is no work station or assembly line. Work activities are performed where they are needed. In many instances,

there is not even a designated “workplace.”

What is the workplace for a home health worker, delivery driver, service technician or remodeling contractor?

In a knowledge economy, the link between work and a specific location is even more tenuous. Work is virtual. There is no place component at all. It is anywhere and everywhere.

Even in those instances where there is a specific place of work, it may not be at a facility owned or controlled by a worker’s employer.

It may be at a customer’s facility. It may be in the worker’s home.

It may be in one’s car or truck—or an airplane.

It may be on the other side of the world.

Today’s workers are often mobile workers who go where their work takes them. This includes both road warriors and migrant workers. It includes film crews and construction workers. It includes health care workers and, yes, even OHS consultants.

TEMPORARY EMPLOYMENT

Third, the relationship between workers and organizations has changed.

For many workers there is no direct connection between who is paying them for their work and the place where they do their work. This would include contract workers, temporary workers, interns, apprentices, and employees working for contractors. It includes workers at construction sites and service workers such as cleaners, warehouse support and maintenance workers. It would also include the vast group of contingent workers (software designers and consultants among them).

SUGGESTED READINGS

- “Occupational Injury and Illness Surveillance: Conceptual Filters Explain Underreporting.” *American Journal of Public Health*, <http://bit.ly/ajphsurveillance>, Sept. 2002.
- “A Job Is a Dying Concept.” OHSAS 18001 Expert, <http://bit.ly/ohsasexpertblog>, June 28, 2012.



The growth in temporary work is vastly outstripping the growth in “long-term” employment. The website for Kelly Services in India calls the concept of “a job for life” a quaint tradition of a bygone era (<http://bit.ly/kellyindia>). Throughout the United States, the vast majority of jobs being added to the economy are temporary jobs, according to a June 2013 article published on the website of Economic Modeling Specialists Intl. (<http://bit.ly/emsitemp>). Of even more significance, these temporary jobs are not turning into permanent employment.

Term jobs are the new permanent jobs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OHS MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

In his keynote address at AIHce 2012, Dr. John Howard, the director of NIOSH, focused on seven trends that he believed will define the future of occupational health and safety. In discussing the trends associated with employment, Dr. Howard noted work is increasingly contingent and less secure. “There is no promise of continuous employment, or, in a great many work situations, of even being considered an employee,” Howard said. He concluded that within the current legal structures governing worker protection, including safety and health, non-employee workers are often

unrecognized and unprotected.

This is the same conclusion reached in a 2013 study of the health and safety risks to temporary workers in four industries—farming, construction, warehousing, and hotels. This study, *At the Company’s Mercy: Protecting Contingent Workers from Unsafe Working Conditions*, concluded that temporary workers in these industries were not adequately protected by the existing occupational health and safety laws. In addition, this report concluded, as have other studies, that many temporary workers do not report injuries or illness because they fear they will lose their job. The full report is available at <http://bit.ly/contingentworkers>.

These three changes in the nature of work mean we, as OHS professionals, need to shift our focus when it comes to addressing workplace hazards.

If we want to craft a modern OHS management system standard, it will also need to address changes in the nature of work. We cannot simply focus on providing a safe workplace for employees. A modern standard needs to adequately address the OHS hazards encountered by all those who are performing work activities under the control of an organization, wherever it is done and whatever their employment status may be. 5