

Optimize Your OSH STAFFING PROCESS

By David Stumbo and Troy A. Rawlins

This article aims to help OSH managers whose responsibilities include the supervision of OSH professionals by focusing on the essential elements of the staffing process: recruitment, selection and onboarding.

For clarity, this article will use the term “OSH manager” to reference those who supervise a staff of one or more OSH professionals. Survey data from a group of occupational safety students are provided to give a glimpse at one applicant pool and illustrate how demographic information can be utilized by the OSH manager to optimize the staffing process. The efficacy of the OSH manager can hinge upon the quality of the OSH staff, and the OSH manager should be closely involved in the recruitment, selection and onboarding of OSH staff. The demographics of the OSH applicant pool should be used to inform the OSH staffing processes.

The OSH Professional as Manager

Two lines of career evolution appear to exist for the OSH professional: 1. the development of a technical specialization; and 2. the progression into a management role such as department head (Wybo & Van Wassenhove, 2016). For those who pursue the latter, formal job title and position within the organizational hierarchy can vary widely. Data from BCSP and National Safety Council (NSC) indicate that 66% of respondents identified their job titles as director/manager/chief/department head or branch/division/area/regional manager/supervisor (BCSP & NSC, 2020). It is not clear whether these managers should be considered middle managers, described as a level of administrator below upper manager but to whom supervisors and department managers report (Haneberg, 2010). Many OSH managers have a staff of OSH professionals who are subordinate to them, as the BCSP and NSC (2020) data indicate that 46% of respondents directly supervise other staff.

The OSH manager’s job duties likely include typical management responsibilities such as strategic planning, budgeting, communications and supervision (Cohen & Eimicke, 2020). Magill (2002) discusses OSH manager duties that include oversight of training activities, audit reviews and compliance-related

activities, as well as supervision of several OSH staff members. The OSH manager’s performance appraisal is likely based largely on the success of the organization’s occupational health and safety management system (OHSMS). Because the efficacy of the organization’s OHSMS is substantially dependent on the OSH department, the OSH manager must be focused on the quality of staff members.

Human Resources & OSH

The purpose of the human resources (HR) component within an organization is described as “acquiring, developing, motivating and retaining people” (Berman et al., 2006, p. 9). In terms of optimization, HR-centered strategies have been recognized as a key method for realizing organizational improvement (Parmenter, 2007). The OSH manager should understand that the HR element of the OSH department is essential to its functionality.

Although OSHA’s (1989) Safety and Health Program Management Guidelines does not mention HR, other standards such as the International Labor Organization’s (ILO, 2001) Guidelines on Occupational Safety and Health Management Systems specify the need for adequate HR as part of a systematic planning function, in Section 3.8.2(d). Similarly, Manuele’s (2014) analysis of ANSI Z10 held that management was to provide the HR necessary to realize an effective OHSMS.

Proponents of safety culture have called for the complete support of HR (ACHE et al., 2017), but that may not be the case at some organizations due to competing priorities and limited resources. Equally, an organization’s HR department may have a limited understanding of the OSH function. A common HR mistake occurs when an applicant’s related experience is incorrectly assessed during the assessment of job

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applicants (Lucas & Grant, 2018). Within OSH staffing, this can be seen in applicants who have received substantial OSH training (e.g., OSHA 30-hour course) but who do not possess preferred OSH skills (e.g., auditing).

In many organizations, an HR department is responsible for the selection, training and placement of new and transferred employees (Hagan et al., 2001). However, the OSH manager must be closely involved in HR functions such as interviewing candidates (Arnold & Pulich, 2007) and the selection of those hired into the OSH staff (Stranks, 2016). The rationale for having a high-performing staff should not require much explanation. Lynch (2008) reminds us about the 80/20 rule: that 80% of a manager's time can be spent on a problematic 20% of employees. More broadly, the performance of the safety function within the organization is dependent on the efficacy of OSH staff.

Turnover

Reaching optimal OSH staffing is challenged by the drain of turnover. Turnover can be categorized as either voluntary, when the employee chooses to leave, or involuntary, when the employer acts to cause the separation (Fox, 2012). Voluntary turnover includes retirement and resignation. Retirement associated with the aging population of OSH professionals is substantial, referred to as the "silver tsunami" (IOMA, 2016, p. 10). ASSP has warned that a tipping point for the organization's member-age scale might soon be reached (Belcher, 2015), and recent survey data indicate that 15% of respondents were age 60 or older (BCSP & NSC, 2020).

Other than retirement, reasons for employee resignation include issues related to career development, work/life

balance, manager behaviors, job characteristics (e.g., workload), compensation and benefits, and work environment (Work Institute, 2020). Agovino (2019) notes that an estimated 41 million workers voluntarily quit their jobs, while Yildirmaz et al. (2019) report a monthly rate of 1.8% workers leaving for voluntary reasons, across all industries. To keep the OSH department viable, OSH managers must be prepared to replace staff who leave.

The driving reason for knowing about potential new hires is so the OSH manager can ensure that the staffing process is tailored to them.

Recruitment

Recruitment is fundamental to addressing turnover, but adequate planning must be conducted. Talent acquisition specialists are advised to prepare for hiring as far as 12 to 36 months in advance of actual need (Yandrick, 2020). Some organizations have in-house recruiters to help identify and attract high-quality applicants. Other organizations may instead contract recruiting to specialty firms referred to as recruiting process outsourcing providers (Gale, 2020). These firms handle "the entire recruiting process from job profiling through the onboarding of the new hire, including the people, process and technology intervention" (Sahay, 2017, p. 261). In either case, the OSH manager should provide accurate, detailed information to recruiters so they can share it with job candidates who will likely have questions

about the organization and position (Eskenazi, 2020). Such information might include notable OSH performance metrics, the location of the OSH department within the organizational hierarchy and essential OSH functions.

A problem the OSH manager may encounter is a lackluster HR department. Lee (2016) cautions that "the bar for new hires is often 'good enough,' for smaller firms where recruitment may be carried out by an HR generalist tasked with a myriad of other duties" (p. 48). If this is the case, the OSH manager should work closely with the HR department rather than leave recruitment to chance. Reviewing job vacancies before their publication may be necessary. The OSH manager may need to participate directly in recruitment efforts to attract the best applicants. Recruitment methods include the use of social media outlets, free and paid job boards, the organization's website and university job fairs (Lauby, 2018). Offering internships to college students has been identified as a good way to distinguish an organization from its competitors (Bane, 2018; Greene, 2014). Bickham (2016) states, "Hiring students right out of college can be a hit or miss proposition, but you improve your odds of making a great hire when you bring them in first as interns and use their internship to assess their capabilities and interests" (p. 25). Another benefit to internships is that they can help with reducing turnover. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (2019) reports a substantial contrast between the 5-year retention rate of intern hires (43.9%) versus hires with no internship experience (27.8%).

One particularly effective method of recruitment is the use of referrals, a process in which existing employees recommend candidates they consider well-suited for vacancies in their organization (Pathak, 2014). This method has been described as advantageous by several authors (see Burks et al., 2015). Some firms encourage the use of employee referrals by offering incentives in the form of bonuses (Stockman et al., 2020). Networking is another viable method for recruitment. In the author's experience, networking through OSH-related professional organizations is a viable way to find quality applicants. Networking has been recommended to bolster an organization's name recognition among potential recruits even when the organization is not actively recruiting (Human Capital Media, 2014).

TABLE 1
RESPONDENTS BY AGE AT TIME OF SURVEY

Age	Percentage	Birth year	Generation
17 to 18	8.2%	2000 to 2001	Generation Z
19 to 21	26.9%	1997 to 1999	Generation Z
22 to 25	9.7%	1993 to 1996	Millennial (1993 to 1996)
26 or older	55.2%	Before 1992	Millennial (1992 to 1981), Generation X (1965 to 1980) and earlier generations (1964 and prior)

(n = 134)

Interviews & Selection

Selection criteria should be developed during the planning phase of the staffing process (Klingner & Nalbandian, 2003). Selection criteria are the explicit knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) that are needed in future hires, such as communicating, working with others and time management (Ferrante, 2006). The OSH manager should ensure that selection criteria conform to the needs of the OSH department. KSAs for OSH staff, such as the ability to design, deliver and evaluate training, have been described in progressive levels of professional development by Pryor et al. (2019), with higher-level KSAs allocated to employees who have progressed along the career path.

Also, how applications will be assessed should be determined during the planning phase. Assessment methods may include résumé reviews, interviews, personality or skills assessments, background and references checks, as well as simulations of the performance of job duties (Phillips & Gully, 2010). Applications and applicants' résumés are often screened before being subjected to a more thorough assessment process (Stout & Olson-Buchanan, 2018). This can allow an employer to eliminate applicants who are not close to fitting the KSAs of the vacant position.

The OSH manager should serve as a member of an interview panel when interviews are conducted. This allows for the division of interview questions by the "asker's talent and experience" (LaBelle, 2010, p. 42). The OSH manager should pose questions and guide relevant follow-up discussions regarding OSH-related topics, allowing for a more thorough assessment of applicant KSAs. Other panelists, such as an HR representative, can be relegated to more generalized topics, as well as the responsibility for ensuring that the interview complies with the organization's interview policies and applicable legal requirements.

Performance-simulation tests comprised of work sampling (a small-scale replica of actual job duties) are recognized as good predictors of employee success (Robbins et al., 2020). These are well-suited for the assessment of OSH applicants, as they may be constructed to include the use of jobsite photos to assess an applicant's hazard recognition skills, use of videos to assess aptitude for observing unsafe behaviors, demonstration of instrumentation use and other job-related duties.

TABLE 2
RESPONDENTS'
PLANNED LEARNING
METHOD

Respondents' planned learning method for major degree program.

Planned learning method	Percentage
Online (internet)	64.2%
Traditional (on campus)	35.8%

(n = 134)

TABLE 3
RESPONDENTS'
SCHOOL RANK

Rank	Percentage
Freshman	22.0%
Sophomore	28.8%
Junior	25.8%
Senior	23.5%

(n = 132)

Although the decision to select an individual to hire occurs near the end of the staffing process, how the decision will be made should be determined during planning. Methods for decision-making are categorized as mechanical (e.g., ranking, grading, matrices) or judgmental (e.g., gut instinct). Mechanical methods have been shown to be far superior in terms of reliability and validity (O'Meara & Petzall, 2013). In practical terms, the ranking of applicants may be accomplished by assigning point values to each KSA assessed. For example, training experience may be assessed on a range of zero to three points, with zero points for no experience, one point for up to 1 year of experience, two points for 2 years of experience, and three points for 3 or more years of experience. This provides for the quantification of each KSA and a quick totaling to determine which applicant scores the highest. To target KSAs that are of greater importance, the OSH manager may weigh some selection criteria more heavily than others. For example, if the OSH department needs expertise in a particular area (e.g., fall protection), then the assessment may be tailored to provide more points for that area.

The Staffing Process Is Not Over: Onboarding

With so much work required during recruitment, assessment and selection, the OSH manager must not overlook the importance of properly onboarding newly hired OSH staff. With roots in the 1970s-era term "organizational socialization," the more recent term "onboarding" has been defined as an endeavor that "helps employees become productive in the most effective and efficient means possible" (Lauby, 2016, p. 11). Onboarding has been identified as a critical means for connecting new hires to an organization's culture and their new roles (Dávila & Pina-Ramirez, 2018) and a potent means of reducing turnover (Bauer, 2010; Selden & Sowa, 2015; Storey, 2020).

Onboarding should be integrated into the overall hiring process, provide an onboarding period that extends at least over the first 6 months of the new hire's tenure, utilize processes that are automated with technology, and include activities designed from the perspective of the new hire (Dai & De Meuse, 2007). Tailored onboarding programs have been regarded as more effective than more generic ones (Klein et al., 2015; Kurnat-Thoma et al., 2017). While information on the onboarding practices utilized for OSH staff appears to be rare, a study of newly hired OSH professionals reported that mentoring during onboarding positively influenced the employees' intentions of staying in their current positions (Minnick et al., 2014).

Who Are Your Potential New Hires?

The driving reason for knowing about potential new hires is so the OSH manager can ensure that the staffing process is tailored to them. For instance, the millennial generation, born 1981 to 1996 (Gerhold & Whiting, 2020), prefers digital media with a high-quality user interface rather than repetitive data entry (Franceski, 2017). This group of potential applicants may be turned off by applications that require slogging through multiple pages and forms, prompting them to instead complete a competitor's more streamlined application. Thus, the OSH manager should review all such outward-facing forms that applicants may encounter.

Information on potential applicants (those who have not yet filled out an application) can be difficult to obtain. However, survey data have shown that a large portion of OSH professionals has com-

pleted a college degree, with 79% having earned a bachelor's degree or higher (BCSP & NSC, 2020). Thus, an indication of applicant demographic data can be gleaned from students currently enrolled in OSH-related degree programs.

About the Study

Demographic data concerning age, degree delivery method and rank in school was collected from undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory occupational safety course at Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond, KY. The course was requisite for occupational safety majors and open to nonmajors, and was delivered both on campus and online. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous, with students invited to participate via email with an announcement posted in the Blackboard shell for the course. Informed consent was obtained before students could access a hyperlink to a Qualtrics electronic survey instrument. The study data were gathered from the 2018 summer term through the fall 2019 semester. Responses were provided by 134 students, although a few did not respond to all questions. The response rate to the survey was approximately 30%. A limitation of the study includes a lack of generalizability, as data were collected from a convenience sample of students, so they may not be representative of all students enrolled in OSH-related degree programs.

Findings & Implications

Relative to age, the largest group of students was 26 years and older (55.2%). This included generational groups referred to as Generation X, born 1965 to 1980 (Gerhold & Whiting, 2020) and earlier generations, and a portion of millennials, born 1981 to 1996 (Table 1, p. 20). More significant to this discussion, 44.8% of students were found to belong to Generation Z, born 1997 to 2001, or the other portion of the millennial generation, age 22 to 25 at the time of the study. In considering the substantial proportion of millennials and Generation Z students, the OSH manager should expect most job applicants to be digital natives, who have known only constant access to technology (Moran, 2016).

The survey also indicated that most students (64.2%) planned on completing their degree via an online delivery method (Table 2, p. 21). This may be indicative of

Generation Z's and millennials' comfort with technology. Online degree programs also allow older students, already in the workforce, to pursue higher education. Finally, rank in school data was included to provide the OSH manager with an indication of where the survey group of students would be in relation to graduation and entry into the applicant pool. Respondents reported a distribution that was roughly even between freshman (22%), sophomore (28.8%), junior (25.8%) and senior (23.5%) class ranks (Table 3, p. 21).

The OSH manager must ensure that an organization effectively administers the staffing process for the OSH department.

To account for millennials and Generation Z, the OSH manager should ensure that current technology is utilized throughout the staffing process. For recruiting, Johnson (2019) recommends that videos, even if self-produced, be posted on social media outlets to provide potential applicants an "insider's view of what it is really like to work at your company" (p. 4). Concerning OSH staff positions, videos should include short vignettes from production areas, OSH training sessions, employees using PPE and similar activities, and should be posted to the organization's website, YouTube and other outlets. Smeak (2020) notes that digital natives tend to be visual learners and prefer watching videos over reading, so onboarding content should be delivered accordingly. Microlearning, brief training sessions that can be accessed via smartphone, is an ideal fit because it can provide onboarding content in 2- to -5-minute sessions over preset intervals (Epstein, 2017). Some members of the organization may balk at the costs incurred to provide higher-end digital content, but the OSH manager must make the case that quality OSH staffing is necessary for the success of the OHSMS.

Conclusion

The OSH manager must ensure that an organization effectively administers the staffing process for the OSH department. This may necessitate the direct participation of the OSH manager in what may be

thought of as traditionally HR activities. Because ensuring an adequate supply of quality safety professionals can be a challenge, the OSH manager should seek out information on the applicant pool, most likely to be enrolled in or alumni of OSH-related degree programs. The OSH manager faced with these tasks could be aided by further research into how the staffing process, specific to OSH professionals, could be improved as well as research that provides more data regarding the demographic characteristics of students enrolled in OSH-related degree programs. **PSJ**

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