

A labour shortage happens when there are not enough qualified workers to fill available job vacancies. A shortage can be caused by many different reasons, including an aging population, lower birth rates, increased caregiving responsibilities, housing shortages, economic impacts of a pandemic, changes to immigration patterns or fewer people applying for work. Whatever the cause, not having enough qualified workers doesn't only affect a workplace's productivity, it also increases the risk of illness and injury.

What factors increase the risk of workplace injuries during a worker shortage?

Some factors are more obvious than others. Below are some examples that could increase the risk of injuries or illnesses during a worker shortage. Which could occur in your workplace? Are there any others?

Factors that increase the risk of workplace injuries include:

- overworked and fatigued workers
- monitoring and enforcing workplace safety protocols can be more difficult when there are fewer supervisors
- less time for training and instruction when there are fewer supervisors
- new supervisors with no or limited experience
- pressure to get more done in less time
- understaffed shifts
- increased amount of working alone
- workers new to workplace or returning after time away
- hiring inexperienced or underqualified workers
- pressure on new, young or inexperienced workers to work extra hours

What are the possible effects?

For individuals, the effects can include:

- increased physical injuries due to fatigue or rushing
- repetitive strain injuries
- aggressive or disrespectful behaviour
- increased stress/anxiety
- sleep difficulties
- mental exhaustion
- psychological injuries
- physical exhaustion

For organizations, the effects can include:

- lower workforce morale
- lower retention
- loss of productivity
- slow or no growth
- increased absenteeism
- increased recruitment costs
- high costs to replace injured workers

Talk leader instructions:

- This is background information ONLY.
- Be sure to customize to your organization.
- Consider printing copies of this sheet for yourself and each participant.
- Lead a discussion with your workers about the materials on this sheet.
- Be sure to give real life examples whenever possible. Be open to questions.
- Conclude with a brief review of the main points or a summary based on the discussion.
- Fill in the name of your organization, location and the date on your sheet. Have each worker sign your sheet to confirm their attendance.
- File your sheet in your worker records to document the Safety Talk.

What can be done to mitigate the hazards caused by worker shortages?

Employers, supervisors and workers all benefit when a workplace is able to effectively manage a worker shortage. Below are some examples of steps that must be taken.

Required by law:

- employers must provide qualified supervision
- employers must do hazard assessments and identify any hazards in their workplaces, including hazards associated with labour shortage
- employers must have safe work procedures for actual and potential hazards that cannot be eliminated
- employers must train employees on safe work procedures for all hazards that require mitigation
- employers must have procedures for reporting, investigating, and documenting incidents and injuries, and provide training to employees on those procedures

There are many additional steps that **supervisors** can take to help keep workers safe during a labour shortage. Which of these would be possible in your workplace? Are there any others that may be relevant?

- assess human resources accurately to decide if and how much work can be done safely
- cross-train workers to carry out different roles as needed, so work can be done safely
- improve worker mental health and workplace retention by creating a respectful workplace culture
- lead by example by using your safety equipment and participating in the safety protocols
- make health and safety concerns a priority and respond quickly
- acknowledge that there may be competency gaps among new or vulnerable workers and develop a plan to bridge skill gaps and build confidence

There are also many steps **workers** can take to help themselves keep safe. Which of these would be possible in your workplace? Are there any others that may be relevant in your workplace?

- take your rest and meal breaks
- stay hydrated
- ask your supervisor for help if you are feeling tired or overwhelmed
- use your safety equipment and follow the safety protocols
- get enough sleep and eat a healthy diet

Discussion questions:

1. How can your workplace hazard assessments take into account a shortage of workers?
2. Are your safe work practices still relevant with fewer workers or do they need to be changed?
3. Is your input included during discussions about workplace safety?

More information:

If you have more questions or concerns about workplace safety, please contact:

- Workers' Safety and Compensation Board, 867-667-5450 or 1-800-661-0443 or work.safe@wcb.yk.ca

Disclaimer

This resource has been prepared to help workplaces understand and comply with workplace health and safety laws. It is not legal advice and is not intended to replace the *Workers' Safety and Compensation Act, S.Y. 2021, c.11* and *Workplace Health and Safety Regulations*.

Safety Talk record:

Print and complete this page or fill in electronically, then save as a record of your Safety Talk.

Comments/suggestions

Organization name

Safety Talk leader

Date

Safety Talk participants

print name

signature
