

THE ENTREPRENEURIAL ROLE OF AN OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH NURSE IN THE WORKPLACE

By Tamara Keenan and Liz Scott

Occupational health nurses (OHN) play a crucial role in ensuring the health, safety, and wellness of employees within the workplace. Traditionally, their responsibilities have focused on preventing work-related injuries, promoting health, and managing workplace illnesses. In today's dynamic and evolving work environment, there are even more opportunities for OHNs to step into entrepreneurial roles, expanding their influence and creating new business opportunities.

Workplace Needs

One of the first steps an OHN can take toward entrepreneurship is identifying unmet needs within the workplace or the workplace community. This could involve assessing gaps in current health and safety programs, recognizing emerging health trends, or identifying areas where companies can improve employee wellness. For example, with the rise of remote work, there is a growing demand for ergonomic assessments and mental health support tailored to home office environments. By identifying these needs, OHNs can develop specialized services to address them.

OHNs are well-positioned to identify and address various workplace needs to improve employee health, safety, and well-being. These include ergonomic assessments, mental health supports, health surveillance and monitoring, workplace safety training, chronic disease management, substance abuse prevention, infectious disease control, workplace

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culture and wellness, occupational health compliance, emergency preparedness, and others.

Some workplaces lack proper ergonomic setups, which may lead to musculoskeletal repetitive strain disorders among employees. OHNs can identify the need for ergonomic assessments and provide recommendations for improving workstations.

Given the reported increasing levels of workplace stress, anxiety, and burnout in many organizations (Lagrosen, 2020), OHNs can develop mental health programs, such as stress management workshops, mindfulness sessions, and access to counseling services, to support employees' psychological well-being.

Certain industries require ongoing health surveillance to monitor for occupational illnesses, such as respiratory issues in construction or chemical exposure in manufacturing. OHNs can establish regular health monitoring programs, including early detection screenings for work-related health issues, ensuring compliance with industry regulations (Kirkbride, 2024).

There may be gaps in employee knowledge of safety procedures, leading to an increased risk of accidents and injuries. OHNs can

design and deliver tailored safety training programs that address specific risks associated with the workplace, such as handling hazardous materials or operating machinery safely.

With the rise of chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and obesity, workplaces may need support in managing these conditions among their employee group (Statistics Canada, 2023). OHNs can create workplace wellness programs that include health screenings, educational sessions, and personalized plans to help employees manage their conditions effectively.

Abuse of any substance has the potential to negatively impact workplace safety, productivity, and employee health (WorkSafeBC, 2018). When OHNs implement substance abuse prevention programs, they can ensure that individuals struggling with addiction have the support they require to recover.

The most recent pandemic highlighted the importance of infectious disease control in the workplace, but other infectious diseases, like influenza, also pose ongoing risks. OHNs play an integral role in establishing infection control protocols, vaccination

campaigns, and educational initiatives to minimize the spread of diseases in the workplace.

A positive workplace culture that promotes well-being can be lacking, leading to low morale, high turnover rates, and reduced productivity. The OHN can help foster a healthier workplace culture by advocating for policies that support work-life balance, recognition programs, and wellness initiatives such as fitness challenges or healthy eating programs.

Companies must comply with various occupational health regulations, but some may struggle with understanding or implementing these requirements. If OHNs provide consulting services, they can ensure that workplaces meet all relevant health and safety regulations, which reduces the risk of legal issues and penalties.

Many workplaces are not adequately prepared for emergencies such as natural disasters, fires, or medical emergencies. Developing and conducting emergency preparedness training ensures that employees are ready to respond effectively in a crisis.

How to Start the Continuous Learning Journey

Becoming an entrepreneur requires serious thought and a solid business plan. The dedication and commitment of being an entrepreneur involves a recognition of the commitment and hard work it will take to accomplish the entrepreneurial dream. To quote Apple's co-founder, Steve Jobs, "Entrepreneurship is for those willing to take risks and give up things more than many would. I'm convinced that about half of what separates the successful entrepreneurs from the non-successful ones is pure perseverance."

It is important before getting started to define what it is you

want and what you are willing to sacrifice to achieve it. On a personal note, many lessons have been learned over the past 22 years as an entrepreneur. The most important part of starting on the journey is defining what type of business you want to have and partially what the reasons for heading down this path are, as it will help define your business plan. Perhaps you want to be a sole entrepreneur that has projects and not be locked in a corporate job; maybe you want to build a small business; or possibly you want to grow a large thriving business. In each of these scenarios you also must understand what it may take and be willing to commit. Microsoft founder, Bill Gates shared, "I never took a day off in my twenties. Not one."

Once you decide what you want to do and what type of entrepreneur you want to be, or to put it another way -- "What is your dream?" -- the next step is to start. Putting together a plan and a path is vital to success. Writing down the business and the business plan will help bring clarity and will also keep you on track (Rittenberg & Watts, 2024). There are many resources for small business owners. Check any book list and you will find advice on becoming an entrepreneur and starting a business. Invest the time in this research.

In order to excel as an entrepreneur you need something that people/companies want to buy. Being a thought leader in your area of expertise is also essential. The healthcare industry is constantly evolving, and successful entrepreneurs must stay ahead of the curve. OHNs should invest in continuous learning, whether through certifications, workshops, or industry conferences. Remaining current with industry developments, evolving regulations,

and emerging best practices will help with your success. Staying informed about the latest trends and best practices in occupational health will allow OHNs to adapt their services to meet changing demands and remain competitive in the marketplace.

The OHN should set specific learning goals that align with their career objectives on an annual basis such as, earning a certification, mastering a particular skill, and/or staying updated on the latest occupational health trends. Accredited continuing education requirements support ongoing learning, ensures licensure requirements are met, and keeps the OHN informed about new developments in the field, so using these requirements to upskill and stay current is recommended. The OHN can find courses and learning opportunities listed online within the regulated professional bodies such as <https://oohna.on.ca/education-and-events/> and <https://www.cna-aic.ca/en/nursing/continuing-education>. Consideration can be given for further education such as a master's degree in occupational health or a related field to enhance your knowledge base and credentials.

Industry networking is also an excellent way to stay current. Whether attending conferences and workshops or joining professional organizations, collaborating, and learning from industry peers is advantageous. Try to attend at least one major occupational health or nursing conference annually. These conferences are rich sources of learning, networking, and exposure to the latest industry innovations. There may also be local or regional workshops, and attending those can help the OHN stay connected with peers and learn about issues specific to their geographical area or occupational

health nursing practice.

Being an active member of professional organizations offers access to the latest research, continuing education opportunities, and professional development resources. Many organizations also have mentorship programs to learn from more experienced professionals or to mentor others, both of which provide fresh perspectives and new learning experiences.

It's always important to self-reflect and assess. After completing projects or client engagements, take the time to pause and reflect on what went well, what challenges were faced, and what learnings can be gained from the experience, which encourages continuous improvement. Keeping these reflections written down through maintaining a journal where learning experiences, new insights, and areas for improvement are documented helps reinforce learning and tracks growth and progress.

As an entrepreneur, it's important that the OHN adapt to market and industry changes by staying informed about regulatory changes through monitoring legislation to keep up with changes in Occupational Health regulations, standards, and guidelines by subscribing to updates from relevant regulatory bodies and attending legal briefings or webinars that cover new or upcoming legislation affecting occupational health practices. This helps OHNs stay compliant and adapt their services accordingly.

If you are exhausted just by thinking about the start up business plan, the significant personal and professional commitment, and the effort it takes to cultivate and maintain a growth mindset, it is important to reflect on your next steps. Viewing challenges and setbacks as opportunities for growth is crucial for the entre-

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preneur's mindset and continuous improvement. By embracing a growth mindset, the OHN is more willing to learn from failures providing opportunities to adapt to new circumstances. While maintaining a sense of curiosity and a willingness to explore new ideas, technologies, and methodologies, the OHN's practice will continue to improve.

Entrepreneurs often sacrifice to achieve their goals. The goal is always on their mind.

Impact

Entrepreneurial OHNs have the unique opportunity to make a significant social impact by improving workplace health and safety on a broader scale. By offering innovative solutions and raising awareness about occupational health issues, they can contribute to healthier work environments, reduce the incidence of workplace-related illnesses, and enhance the overall well-being of employees (Coelho, 2009; Kirkbride, 2024). This not only benefits individual companies but also contributes to the broader public health landscape. With a unique opportunity to make a significant social impact by promoting healthier workplaces, advocating for employee well-being, and driving initiatives that benefit communities, OHNs can extend their influence beyond the confines of traditional healthcare.

Implementing comprehensive wellness programs with a holistic approach addresses not only physical health but also mental, emotional, and social well-being. These programs can include stress

management workshops, mental health resources, and physical fitness initiatives. They encourage active participation by the employees by making programs accessible, engaging, and relevant to their needs. Using incentives, challenges, and recognition motivates employees to take part (Lee & Kim, 2024).

The OHN also has the opportunity to address workplace inequities ensuring that health and wellness programs are accessible to all employees, regardless of their position, location, or socioeconomic status. Programs can be tailored to meet the needs of diverse employee groups, including those with disabilities or those from marginalized communities.

The OHN has the opportunity to promote occupational health and safety initiatives and workplace policies by fostering a culture of safety within organizations (Lee & Kim, 2024). By conducting regular safety training, promoting safe work practices, and ensuring compliance with occupational health and safety regulations, they contribute to a safe and healthy workplace.

OHNs can have a profound social impact on educating and empowering employees' health and well-being in the workplace by ensuring safe and ethical practices, engaging in community outreach, and influencing policy changes. Health literacy is so important for the employee population.

By empowering employees, fostering sustainable practices, and continuously measuring the impact of their efforts, OHNs can drive meaningful change that benefits

not only individual workers but also the broader community and society as a whole. When employees are involved in the development and implementation of health and safety initiatives, they're not only empowered but involvement also ensures that the programs are relevant and effective.

Like every project or initiative, it's always important to regularly assess the impact. The OHN can use metrics such as reduced injury rates, improved mental health outcomes, decreased health related absences, and increased employee satisfaction to measure success. Based on the results, the OHN has an opportunity to refine and improve programs, ensuring they remain effective and relevant.

Publicize the positive impact that the initiatives had with the wider community, including

through social media, company newsletters, and public reports. Highlighting success stories may inspire others and garner support for their aligned efforts. If possible, seek recognition for impactful work through awards and certifications that highlight the social impact of occupational health initiatives. This not only boosts credibility but also encourages others to follow suit leading to broader change and overall improvements.

The role of an occupational health nurse is no longer confined to traditional workplace settings. By embracing entrepreneurship, OHNs can expand their influence, create new opportunities, and make a lasting impact on workplace health and safety. With the right mindset, skills, and strategies, an OHN can successfully transition from a healthcare

provider to a business health-care partner, shaping the future of occupational health in innovative and meaningful ways.

Tamara Keenan (tamarak@orgsoln.com), Director of Learning & Development at Organizational Solutions, has worked in the disability management field for 18 years. Her education includes a Bachelor and Master in Education, Paralegal licensure with the Law Society of Ontario, and Certification in Rapid Transformational Therapy.

Liz R. Scott, PhD, CEO Organizational Solutions Inc. (lscott@orgsoln.com) is an accomplished consultant recognized for award winning cost reduction results, "best practice" program designs, and ability to solve a complex variety of organizational health and disability concerns. Her education includes a PhD in Psychology, a Master of Engineering, an MBA, a Master of Science, and Certification in Nursing and Safety Management.



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