

# Occupational Health and Safety standards and employee performance in Nigeria: A Theoretical Exposition

**Olanipekun, Lateef Okikiola**

Doctoral student, Department of Employment Relations and Human Resource Management,  
Lagos State University,  
Ojo, Nigeria

**Jiboku, Joseph Olutoyin (Phd)**

Department of Industrial Relations and Personnel Management,  
Olabisi Onabanjo University,  
Ago-Iwoye, Ogun state, Nigeria

**Abstract:** This paper examined the effects of occupational health and safety standards on employees' performance in the Nigerian work environment. Occupational health and safety is a process of ensuring that people stay safe and healthy in the workplace in order to increase their capacity to perform optimally. The workplace has become an integral part to the viability of business for employers, labour union, society and government. Therefore, the quality of workplace environment with respect to its health and safety standards invariably affects the level of employee motivation which invariably affects their performance. Health and safety standards aim at promoting and maintaining the highest degree of physical, mental and social well-being of employees in their respective workplaces for optimal performance.

The paper concluded that there are still inadequate preventive measures for reduction of occupational safety and illness in organisations in Nigeria which adversely affects employees' performance. It is hoped that this paper will inform HR practitioners, management of construction companies, organisations and employees on the importance and relevance of having and putting in place a standard occupational health and safety policies in to enable their employees perform optimally.

**Keywords:** Occupational Health and Safety Standard, Employees, Performance and Management, Nigeria

## 1. Introduction

Occupational safety and health is a discipline dealing with prevention of work related injuries and diseases, and the protection and promotion of healthy workers. It aims at the improvement of working conditions and environment. Occupational health entails the promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of physical and mental health and social well-being of workers in all occupations). Occupational Safety and Health has recently become a much higher priority in light of the growing evidence of great loss and suffering caused by occupational diseases and ill-health across many different employment sectors, and is of concern to managers at least partly because of increasing number of deaths and accidents occurring at work. Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) is a complex area which interacts widely with a broader spectrum of business interests and concerns. To date OHS has been confined to the periphery of Human Resource Management (HRM), where its role, influence and importance have been overlooked.

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Naidoo & Willis (2002) identify a number of benefits to the organization from promotion of health and safety workplace as improvements of performance as a result of reduced sickness absence, enhanced corporate image and staff turnover. Safety measures prevent accidents and ensure regular flow of work which helps to improve the morale and performance of workers. It also contributes to team work and a sense of belonging to employees.

On the other hand Boyd (2003) argues that when employee performance increase, it will lead to organisational effectiveness. Among the positive consequences of safe and healthy workplaces are: higher performance and productivity owing to few lost workdays, increased efficiency, quality from healthier workforce, reduced medical and insurance costs, lower workers' compensation rates and direct payments because of few claims being filed, and improved reputation. According to McCunney (2001), the primary beneficial impact of occupational health and safety on performance is reduced absenteeism.

The challenge of organizations today is how to enlist the hearts and minds of all their employees. Occupational exposures versus ergonomic, physiological and psychosocial factors are found in today's work environment. Such factors, individually or in several complex combinations, threaten workers' safety and health and reduce well-being and performance (Health and Safety Executive, 2008). World Health Organization (2013) estimates that over 160 million of new cases of work related illnesses occur every year.

International Labour Organization estimates that 2.2 million workers die every year as a result of work related ill-health and injury, 350 thousand of these deaths are due to accidents and the rest due to occupational illness and accidents. On top of these International Labour Organization estimates that there are 264 million non-fatal accidents occur each year that result in more than three (3) days absence from work and 160 million people suffer from work-related diseases. In economic terms, the ILO has estimated that 4% of the world's annual GDP is lost as a consequence of occupational diseases and accidents (ILO, 2013). In past one year slightly more three (3) million US workers suffered from occupational injuries and illnesses resulting from accidents at work number of fatal accidents. This statistics results in an incidence rate of 3.3 cases per 100 equivalents to full time workers (Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2013).

In Africa the issue of Occupational health and safety practices has been ignored by most countries and organizations. The ILO reported that 63,900 work deaths occurred in the 54 African countries and that an estimated 1,560,000 disabling work injuries occurred (ILO, 2010). The fundamental perspective on why majority of African countries and organizations struggle to foster an effective occupational health and safety workplace is that most employers put greater emphasis on productivity and profitability while compromising health and safety standards, procedures, policies and programmes.

In Nigeria, the status of occupational safety and health situation/conditions is an issue of growing concern by the employers, government, managers, industrialists, workers and other stakeholders. Health and safety has not been given increasing emphasis by managers, employers, employees, trade unions, employers' associations and other stakeholders in recent years (Nyakang'o, 2009). The above understanding coupled with the fact that at the core of every business is man whose output is partially dependent on his/her state of health, an appreciation of the concept of occupational health and safety becomes imperative to the success of any organisation.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objective of the study is to establish the effects of occupational safety and health standards on employee performance with respect to the world of work in Nigeria.

### **Methodology**

This paper draws inference from previous studies using the Nigerian work terrain as a basis and two theories underlie this paper to give a lucid explanation on the subject of discourse.

## **2. Conceptual Review**

### **Concept of Occupational Safety and Health**

Occupational health and safety is a cross-disciplinary area concerned with protecting the safety, health and welfare of people engaged in work or employment. The goal of all occupational health and safety programmes is to foster a safe work environment (Amazon, 2006). Occupational health deals with ill-health

arising from working conditions/or environment that slowly accumulate to lead to deterioration of the employees' health. However occupational safety is concerned with prevention of accidents and minimizing the aspect of work environment that has the potential of causing immediate violent harm to employees (Armstrong, 2012).

According to Mejia (2010) asserts that occupational safety and health is a broad area which includes both physical and emotional well-being. Effectively managing workplace safety and health requires far more than reducing the number of job related accidents and injuries. Health and safety is a positive concept that includes social and personal resources as well as physical capabilities (Nutbeam, 1990). It has been conceptualized as the ability to have and to reach goals, meet personal needs and cope with everyday life (Raphael, Brown, Renwick & Rootman, 1997). The concept of accident proneness is now largely discredited; safety and health programmes concentrate as far as possible on ensuring that the employee is suitable for the job and that work is conducted in a safe environment (Graham and Bennet, 1995).

Jackson et.al. (2009) states that the term occupational safety and health refers to the physiological - physical and psychological conditions of a workplace that result from work environment provided by the organization. Physiological-physical conditions include diseases and accidents such as actual loss of life, repetitive motion injuries, back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome. Psychological conditions encompass symptoms of poor mental health and job burnout, including apathy, emotional exhaustion, withdrawal, confusion about roles and duties, mistrust of others, inattentiveness, irritability and a tendency to become distraught over trifles. These conditions often are responses to workplace stress and a low quality of work life.

### **Occupational Safety and Health Programmes**

Occupational safety and health programmes involve practices or activities that are undertaken by the organization in reducing unsafe conditions and unsafe acts in the workplace. Reducing unsafe conditions is always an employer's first line of defense in accident prevention (Hopkin, 2010). He further observes that in designing safe and healthy environments, employers need to pay special attention to vulnerable workers in the workplace either due to lack of education, ill-fitting personal protective equipment, physical limitations or cultural reasons.

The achievement of a healthy and safe place of work and the elimination of maximum extent of possible hazards to health and safety is the responsibility of everyone employed in an organization as well as those working under contract. The occupational safety and health programmes are designed to minimize the impact of work related illnesses and accidents arising from the work (Armstrong, 2012). Designing and implementing intervention programmes is more challenging to organizations/or companies with none operations around the world because it is more difficult to monitor progress. Related to this challenge and responsibility of Human resource professionals and organizations in managing the conditions resulting from major diseases epidemics and major disasters. Because the magnitude of the impact of diseases and disasters, organizations must be proactive in managing occurrence (Stewart and McGoldrick, 1996).

On the other hand Dessler (2008) argues that healthy and safe working environment does not just happen it has to be created. The organizations with the best reputation for safety have developed well planned, thorough health and safety programmes. Concern for safety should begin at the highest level within the organization, manager and then supervisor. If an organization takes effective safety and health measures, fewer of its employees will have short or long term ill-effects as a result of employed at that organization. Nzuve (2009) believe that organizations depend on employees as working partners and fellow members of the organization community. The achievement of a healthy and safe place of work and elimination of maximum extent of possible hazards in an organization as well as those working there under contract. By reducing the rates and severity of occupational accidents, diseases, workplace violence, stress related illness, and improving the quality of work for their employees, organizations become significantly effective.

Organizations invest in health and safety programmes in part of humanitarian reasons but also out of concern of controlling costs of many kinds, extending from times Occupational Safety and Health Act for non-compliance to health insurance premiums, to payments for non-productive labour. They also benefit from having healthy employees as some have been willing to invest for this purpose by setting wellness programmes and facilities (Miner and Crane, 1995). Many interventions can be used to improve workplace

safety and health. Among the most common are programmes designed to reduce accidents and injuries, reduce diseases, improve employees' ability to manage stress and overall health. While some of the interventions are intended to change the lifestyles and non-work behaviours of employees. All these interventions can reduce the many costs associated with employee injuries, illness and death (Werner (2009).

### **Employee Performance**

Employee Performance is the record of result which is gained from the function of certain work or certain activities in certain period of time. It is a set of behaviours that are relevant to the goals of the organization or the organizational unit in which a person works (Bernandin & Russell, 2009). Armstrong (2010) state that employee performance is a process for establishing a shared workforce understanding about what is to be achieved at an organization level. It is about aligning the organizational objectives with the employees' agreed measures, skills, competency requirements, development plans and the delivery of results. Many business organizations in this era of global competition are trying to create a high performance work culture which is incorporated of both business and corporate strategies in order to develop individual's contribution to the overall success of the organization. In recent years, many organizations are trying to create a 'performance culture', which is incorporated of several strategies in order to develop individuals' contribution to the overall success of the organization. The human resource department commonly has the responsibility for ensuring the health and safety of employees is taken care of hence high performance output (Armstrong, 2007; Boxal and Purcell, 2008; Fletcher and Williams, 1996).

Armstrong (2012) assert, the aim of managers is to establish a high performance culture in which individuals and team takes responsibility for the continuous improvement of business process and for their own skills and contributions within a framework provided effective leadership. Most of the world's largest corporations are realizing that business and work activities must no longer ignore safety and health concerns. According to (Gilley *et.al*, 2003) argues that what is required is an organization wide approach to performance improvement with workplace health and safety as critical aspects of employee performance. The desire for improved workers productivity cannot be approached in a vacuum. The benefits accrue from keeping the workplace safe must not exceed the costs incurred for occupational safety and health programmes.

According to (Pritchard, 1990) states that productivity improvement is important for the individual organization and to improve productivity it is important to measure it. Effective managers and supervisors realize that they must take an active and positive role in employee performance to ensure that goals are met. Managing employee performance is one way of empowering employees. To give the organization and its employees the opportunity to achieve high performance, managers and employees must understand their workplace safety thoroughly, in terms of both what they are doing and how they are supposed to do it. Effective managers create antecedent that achieve two purposes: they facilitate performance and stimulate employees for performance (Zeithmal, 2002). Employee performance reviews ensure that the workers are focused on their jobs and work toward reaching the company's overall goals and satisfying the organization's mission statement (Aldag, 2004).

### **Effects of occupational safety and health standards on employee performance**

Employee job performance can be negatively affected by Occupational health and safety which means if there is lack of high performance in job the organizations performance also gets affected hence also affecting the overall organization performance. For Example: If the workplace is not health hazard proof it will cause a disease among workforce hence negatively affect the employee job performance and organization performance as affirmed by Karen Danna et al (1999). A concern in principle for the health and safety of employees and encouragement of employees' self-interest and safety are obvious prerequisites. Workplace reality can be different because of perceptions that health and safety constraints operational freedom and inhibits productivity. Higher performance HR strategies recognize creating an environment where people feel physically and psychologically safe seems to a fairly fundamental demonstration that workers are valued (Pilbeam & Corbridge, 2010).

Sikpa (2011) studied an assessment of occupational health and safety practices on job performance at the Tetteh Quarshie Memorial Hospital in Ghana and found out that the current occupational health and safety practices in the hospital are inadequate, and that the management, staff, patients and other stakeholders are exposed to several risks and hazards. The study concluded that there cannot be any effective occupational safety and health practices if both the employers and employees fail to perform their respective responsibilities. Accidents are costly to the affected employees and the organization. Therefore every effort should be made in order to avoid them from happening at the workplaces.

Badakale (2012) also conducted a study that sought to determine the effects of occupational health and safety policies on employee performance in Larfage (WAPCO) PLC, Ewekoro, Ogun State in Nigeria. His study found the amount of time wasted during accident and cost that is ignorantly spent on health care is higher than the cost spent on planning and providing a safe working environment and a good safety policy. The study concluded that occupational health and safety should be given a serious attention on the shop-floor bearing in mind that it is a right for the employees and required by law.

Musyoka (2014) studied the relationship between health and safety programmes and performance of manufacturing firms in Mombasa County, Kenya. The study found out that many of the firms had taken some health and safety measures and that they had shown positive effect on work performance. Among the four factors that were being investigated, health and safety measures, social welfare programmes, accident prevention programmes and occupational health programmes. The four factors had a positive and significant correlation with employee performance. Therefore, the implementation of health and safety programmes at the work place has a positive impact on employees' performance. The study concluded that health and safety measures at work place have a positive and significant correlation to work performance therefore each and every company should practice or implement the health and safety programmes at their work place if they are to improve performance.

Jelimo (2013) did a study on the effects of occupational health and safety practices on employee productivity. The study found out that there are occupational health and safety practices that have positive relationship with productivity of employees and include; fire prevention and protection, lighting and ventilation, personal protective equipment and good housekeeping, while chairs/tables and facilities for sitting, first aid kit and medical facility and drinking water and sanitary facilities had negative relationship. The study concluded that when an organization fully implements occupational health and safety practices improves employees' productivity. It was also realized that absence of Occupational Health and Safety practices could easily result in absenteeism, high employee turnover, increased medical bill and insurance claim, injuries and frequent accidents. The study recommended continuous improvements of occupational health and safety practices as it greatly influences employee satisfaction, commitment, performance and productivity.

Occupational health and safety have great importance in the employees work environment because nowadays human resource is the most valuable asset that an organization does have and the existence of bad occupational health and safety environment greatly affect the job performance of employees. Occupational safety, health and the well-being and quality of life of working people are crucial prerequisites for productivity and are of utmost importance for overall socio-economic and sustainable development (WHO, 1994). According to Cole (2004) states that an employer has a common law duty to provide a safe place of work for his employees and is at common law for accidents caused by his employees in the course of their employment.

The achievement of the highest standards of health and safety in the workplaces is important because the elimination or at least minimization of health and safety hazards and risks is the moral as well as legal responsibility of the employers. The tangible benefits from better health and safety management include higher productivity, lower absences, avoiding the cost of accidents and litigation, meeting clients demands and improved staff morale and employee relations.

A safe work environment exists when the manager has done everything possible to establish the conditions that encourage success and to remove the causes of accidents. Safe and healthy work environment provides the organization and its employees with the opportunity to achieve high performance (Baterman, 2002). According to (Beardwell & Holden, 1993) argue that the recognition of the importance of health and safety in recent years has been heavily influenced by the intensification of competition and the

relative success of organizations where investment in employee health and safety is considerably emphasized. They add that technological developments and organizational change have gradually led some employers to the realization that success relies on the conducive work environment to their employees and this mars considerable and continuous investment on the health and safety. Increased productivity is often said to be the most important reason for safe work environment. Health and safety not only increase productivity but also to motivate and inspire workers by letting them know how important their jobs are and also how working in safe work environment is (McNamara, 1998).

### **Theoretical review**

Two theories underlie this study and they are Goal-Freedom Alertness Theory and Distractions Theory. These theories were selected because they explicitly explained the subject matter of discourse. These two theories are reviewed below.

#### **Goal-Freedom Alertness Theory**

The Goal-Freedom Alertness Theory was developed by Kerr (1950) and it states that safe work performance is the result of psychologically rewarding work environment. Under this theory, accidents are viewed as low-quality work behaviour occurring in an unrewarding psychological climate. This contributes to a lower level of alertness. According to the theory, a rewarding psychological climate is one where workers are encouraged to participate, set sustainable goals and choose methods or safety programmes to attain those safety and health goals. They must be allowed to participate in raising and solving problems.

Goal-Freedom Alertness Theory essentially states that management should let workers have well defined goals and freedom to pursue those goals. The result is a higher level of alertness and a focus on the tasks at hand. The theory suggests that managers and supervisors should try and make work more rewarding for workers. They may use a variety of managerial techniques including positive reinforcements, goal setting participative management and clear work assignments. Heinrich et.al (1980) supports the theory by stating workers will be safe in a positive work environment. They argue that safe performance is compromised by a climate that diverts the attention of workers. They confirm that hazards divert the workers attention during work hours and thus the diversion increases susceptibility to injury. Heinrich et. al (1980) suggests that managers and supervisors can actively work to alleviate hazards in the work environment. Reaction of workers to unsafe conditions depends on the fact that whether the worker identifies the unsafe condition.

#### **Distractions Theory**

The proponent of the theory is Hinze (1997) and states that safety is situational. Because mental distractions vary, the responses to them may have to differ to maintain safe performance. Additionally, hazards or physical conditions with inherent qualities that can cause harm to a person, may or may not be recognized by the worker and influence safety of the task. The theory applies to a situation in which recognized safety hazard or mental distractions exist and there is a well-defined work task to perform. In the absence of hazards there is little to prevent workers from completing their tasks. However in the presence of hazards, work is greatly complicated. The theory has two components, first dealing with hazards posed by unsafe physical conditions and the other dealing with a worker preoccupation with issues not directly related to the task being performed. The theory basically states that when a worker has lower probability of injury and higher level of task achievement. When a worker has a higher focus on a mental distraction, the worker has a higher probability of injury and a lower level of task achievement. To avoid injury and achieve high levels of productivity, workers must avoid mental distractions.

Petersen (1996) states that managers must consider human capabilities from health and safety viewpoint when assigning tasks to their employees. He argues that accidents have identifiable socio-technical cause resulting in human performance. Employers should take account of their capabilities and the level of training, knowledge and experience on health and safety in the workplaces. Petersen (1996) confirms that organizations should design human error oriented accidents prevention programmes without slowing productivity or compromise performance since accidents and incidents in workplaces are unplanned and unwanted occurrences involving movement of persons, objects or materials which may result in injury, damage or loss to property or people.

### 3. Discussions

This paper has succinctly highlighted the importance of occupational health and safety standards in relations to employees' performance in the Nigerian context using the construction industry as a basis for evaluation. Occupational safety and health programmes/standards in organisations must aim at both prevention and protection. Efforts must be focused above all on primary prevention at the workplace level. Workplaces and working environments should be planned and designed to be safe and healthy. Continuous improvement of occupational safety and health must be promoted. This is necessary to ensure that organisations' health and safety policy, regulations and technical standards to prevent occupational injuries, diseases and deaths are adapted periodically to social, technical and scientific progress and other changes in the world of work. It is best done by the development and implementation of activities that align to the Occupational Safety and Health Act. Also, education and training are vital components of safe, healthy working environments. Employees and employers must be made aware of the importance of establishing safe working procedures and of how to do so. On the final note, the fourteen Occupational Health and Safety principles should also be given cognizance to by organisations in Nigeria.

### 4. Recommendations

In Nigeria, there should be National Centre for Healthy Working people to Provide and have all data base information and advice employers and employees concerning workplace health and safety matters. The center also might provide access to data base occupational health specialists, counseling and complementary therapies should there be a need. However while it's the duties of the organisations to provide their employees "such health services as is appropriate Federal Ministry of health as well as the Ministry of Employment, Labour and Productivity, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, stakeholder in workforce and labor market should work toward establishing foundation of Occupational Health and safety. This institution in collaborating with other international organization and other partners and clients to achieve the following goals:

- i. The management of workplace hazards as a part of national practices and corporate risk management.
- ii. Innovative, invigorate healthy work communities.
- iii. Educate Nigerian employees' with the knowledge of occupational health and safety.
- iv. Data base information for promoting National occupational safety and health.
- v. Developing workplaces training, consultation and safe and easy to use workplace safety methods and tools.
- vi. Wider based campaign to focus on the issues of workplace health and safety and raise awareness of all hazards conditions, and the costs to the organisation, society and the Nigerian economy.
- vii. Involving the research group at the Nigerian Universities to develop future workplace safety and preventative strategies.
- viii. The Federal Ministry of health, Ministry of Employment, Labour and Productivity should engage with other academics and related groups to identify possible health and safety risks from new technologies, like as exposure to non-material's and implement adequate health screening procedures for the betterment of employees' at various workplaces.
- ix. The fourteen O.H.S principles should also be given cognizance to by organisations in Nigeria. These principles are as follows:
  - All workers have rights. Workers, as well as employers and governments, must ensure that these rights are protected and foster decent conditions of labour. As the International Labour Conference stated in 1984:
    - (a) Work should take place in a safe and healthy working environment;
    - (b) Conditions of work should be consistent with workers. Well-being and human dignity;
    - (c) Work should offer real possibilities for personal achievement, self-fulfillment and service to society.

- **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.
- **There is need for consultation with the social partners (that is, employers and workers) and other stakeholders:** This should be done during formulation, implementation and review of such policies.
- **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 environments should be planned and designed to be safe and healthy.
- **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 enforcement of effective policies.
- **Health promotion is a central element of occupational health practice:** Efforts must be made to enhance workers. Physical, mental and social well-being.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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 occupational health and safety concerns.
- **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.
- **Policies must be enforced:** A system of inspection must be in place to secure compliance with occupational health and safety and other labour legislation.

## 5. Conclusion

Occupational safety and health standards play vital roles in the affairs of an employee work-life pattern, it serves as the bedrock in which performance is based upon. Occupational safety and health in great extent determines employee performance but most organisations in Nigeria have put little effort in establishing some of programmes to embellish and enhance employees' performance. Occupational health and safety standards help to bring about measurable improvements in safety and health in the world of work and the applications of preventive strategies therefore offers significant human and economic benefits. Total commitment on the part of management to making safety and health a priority is essential to a successful Occupational health and safety standards in the workplace. It is only when management plays a positive role that employees view such programmes as a worthwhile and sustainable exercise.

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