Occupational hygienist

Job description

An occupational hygienist specialises in identifying risks in the workplace and advises organisations on how to avoid and resolve them. Working in a variety of locations, including building sites, offices and factories, they promote responsible practice and raise awareness of health and safety issues.

Occupational hygiene is where science and engineering meet the human element of work; it is a specialised discipline within the broad area of occupational health and safety which aims to prevent people injuring themselves or getting ill as a result of their work activities.

Occupational hygienists usually operate as part of a multi-disciplinary team that includes managers, safety practitioners, occupational physicians, therapists and employees. The routine work of a hygienist is to ensure that a workers’ environment does not cause ill health and that levels of exposure are in compliance with the statutory Occupational Exposure Limits (OELs) for chemical, physical and biological agents. Occupational Hygienists are primarily concerned with the working environment itself rather than the medical effect on the workforce; they focus on factors in the workplace, which may affect the comfort, well-being and health of the employees.

Work activities

• Studying existing equipment, materials, products, production processes and general working conditions to identify hazards present in the workplace which may impact the health or well being of the workforce and advising on how to eliminate or reduce them.
• Monitoring the potential exposure to harmful substances in the workplace and interpreting and communicating these results to the relevant people.
• Recommending control measures to minimise exposure and developing strategies which will control the hazards at the workplace.
• Participating in risk assessments and developing management strategies for eliminating or controlling the hazards.
• Communicating the legal requirements of occupational hygiene, to the workforce and management.

Work conditions

Travel: during the working day is common for those working in independent consultancy or for in-house occupational hygienists responsible for multiple sites.

Working hours: mainly office hours, Monday–Friday with occasional extra hours. May require some weekend and evening work. Those in consultancy may be required to work unpredictable hours.

Location: mainly in towns and cities throughout the country.

Opportunities for self-employment: possible.

Typical employers

• Large manufacturing organisations
• Government agencies
• Environmental monitoring organisations
• Occupational hygiene consultancies.
Occupational hygienist (continued)

Career development
Occupational hygienists can come from many backgrounds – chemists, engineers, biologists, physicists, doctors, nurses and others who have chosen to apply their skills to improving working practices and conditions. Promotion depends very much on the employing organisation. Progression may be dependent on additional qualifications, undertaking further training, or specialising in a particular area of occupational hygiene.

Opportunities to move into specialist organisations are possible as well as into independent consultancy.

Salaries
Salaries vary widely, depending on employing organisation.

Entry requirements and training
Open to graduates from a variety of disciplines. Most occupational hygienists have a science-related undergraduate degree, whether in pure maths or science, engineering or even health, medical or nursing.

Other relevant degree subjects
- Biology
- Chemistry
- Engineering
- Health science
- Mathematics
- Medical science
- Medicine
- Nursing.

Postgraduate study
A pre-entry postgraduate qualification is the norm, typically in applied sciences.

Skills and qualities
- An interest in the law and the ability to understand regulations.
- Commitment to protecting workers’ health and safety.
- Energy, enthusiasm and attention to detail at all times.
- Good communication skills to explain safety procedures and regulations clearly and excellent written communication skills to produce reports.
- Excellent decision-making skills and the ability to prioritise and multitask.
- Ability to work under pressure combined with patience and persistence to deal with resistance.
- Excellent powers of persuasion and negotiating skills to initiate action.
- An analytical and methodical approach to problem-solving.
- Ability to understand and analyse complex information and present it simply and accurately.

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