



KEY CHALLENGES FACING TODAY'S SAFETY LEADERS

Trends From ASSP's 2023 Corporate Listening Tour



AMERICAN SOCIETY OF
SAFETY PROFESSIONALS

For the third year, the American Society of Safety Professionals (ASSP) conducted a corporate listening tour in Q1 2023 to strengthen corporate relationships and better understand the ongoing safety challenges facing leaders and their organizations.

The 2023 listening tour was conducted shortly after the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) released 2021 fatality data. The BLS reported that the fatal occupational injury rate of 3.6 fatalities per 100,000 full-time equivalent workers in 2021 repre-

sented the highest annual fatality rate since 2016. ASSP continues to be disheartened by these results. This year's tour offered insights into trends impacting safety, the profession, workers and the companies they serve. With this enhanced understanding of trends, ASSP will be positioned to support occupational safety and health (OSH) professionals as they lead forward.

We categorized trends into priority topics that impact safety including the workplace, work and workforce. In addition, we indicated a level of inten-

sity representing the frequency of the trend during the interviews according to the following scale: 1) immediate focus (i.e., now); 2) mid-term focus (on the list, but not the top); and 3) long-term focus (aspiration for action).

Intensity and impact of the trend is driven by shifting expectations of customers, investors, and regulators. This framework helps ASSP focus its investment into new products and services that are likely to deliver the greatest value to the professionals we serve and the companies and workers they support.

KEY FINDINGS

- Change is constant in the business world, and this is affecting how companies operate and how they keep their employees safe.
- Organizational structure and governance, which is how companies are run, is becoming more important. This includes environmental and social responsibility (ESG) and how geopolitical issues are affecting businesses.
- Companies are struggling to find and keep good employees, which is affecting safety and health in the workplace.
- Executives expect occupational safety and health professionals to adapt to the changing needs of the modern workplace.
- Previous concerns, like the need for disaster preparedness and the role of technology in managing risks, are still relevant today.

Organizational Structure Matters

Workplace. High intensity: Requires increased attention.

Organizational structure and governance drives safety, health and sustainability. While incidences in the U.S. remain flat, several influences emerged this year, moving this topic and ESG up the list of trends affecting OSH.

We define governance to be corporate board and management structures, as well as company policies, standards, information disclosures, auditing and compliance issues. These decision-making factors influence workplace safety.

Long-term planning and governance drive action and accountability for safety at the highest level including boards of directors and the C-suite. Strategic direction sets accountability for achieving organizational mission, finances, talent and infrastructure, including safety. The decision-making process informs resource allocation, defines accountability, and drives an organization's overall culture. Because of this, it is important to understand the link between governance and safety. Executives noted the following trends and challenges during interviews.

- OSH professionals must understand an organization's structures and decision-making processes, accountability reporting and the expectations for that reporting.
- Where direct accountability is driven at the top, outcomes are achieved. Where the reporting structure to the C-suite is indirect, accountability is not clear, and the OSH function struggles to have voice and influence. The

outcome of structure impacts the ability of OSH professionals to drive change and keep workers safe.

- Corporate reporting structures influence safety, including accountability in a centralized versus decentralized structure.
 - In cross-functional OSH roles, professionals have influence but often lack direct authority. This approach can be flexible to local demands, but also creates multiple structures to account for safety.
 - In centralized roles, executives noted strong accountability, but this approach does not account for C-suite ownership at the top.
- Companies held by private equity face increased expectations to demonstrate and report on sustainability, holding companies accountable without clear internal systems to support expectations.
- Some risk exists in the market given the lack of agreement on ESG reporting and metrics. Understanding whether the driver is financial, regulatory or social impacts decision-makers and their accountability.
 - Although risk exists, these differing views and debate will elevate ESG and drive change.
- As ESG continues to influence safety in organizations, it will be important to balance global mandatory guidance to local action and culture, ensuring all companies have a path to success.

- In any structure, OSH professionals need strong influencing skills to drive operational change.
- OSH professionals are well positioned to influence the drivers of change, working internally to mobilize resources and operationalize a shared governance understanding of ESG as the market continues to evolve over the next three to five years.

Workforce Fluidity

Workforce. High intensity: Requires continued attention.

Access to talent is a top issue and will be for the foreseeable future. This trend is impacted by the access to a global workforce and talent, and policies that create business uncertainty.

- Shifting work arrangements, turnover and the lack of skilled workers increase safety risks for the world's employers. Temporary and contract workers continue to present a risk as well.
- As the workforce in some countries ages, workers may expect more from companies, such as better wages and benefits, while companies may prioritize efficiency measures. This difference presents new safety risks in how and where work will get done.
- Lack of sufficiently skilled labor is increasing employee burnout and stress. In some cases, companies are turning to AI to close the gap, introducing new risks to the workplace.
- Increased worker expectations are impacting company policy. The workforce is commanding higher salaries and safer work environments, forcing companies to rethink policies and structure, and invest in the future.
- Companies are developing and deploying a "build your own" workforce strategy for technical skills linked to employment experience for young people. For many, the approach is proving beneficial.

The Continued Evolution of the OSH Professional or a Profession at Risk

Workforce. High intensity: Requires continued attention.

OSH continues to be a profession that is evolving. OSH professionals need to understand business operations and corporate decision-making. They need to be able to translate safety across all areas of operation.

Fundamentally, the COVID-19 global pandemic has shifted safety priorities and added more pressure to already overwhelmed safety professionals. Increasing workforce fluidity is further impacting the expectations of OSH professions. Some executives report that time is now spent constantly training new workers.

As noted in previous listening tour reports, finding qualified OSH professionals with the requisite skills continues to be a challenge. The result is stress, turnover and burnout for many OSH professionals.

- While OSH professionals have the technical skills required to offer expert support, executives say that is not enough in today's fast-paced and changing work environment.
- To be credible, OSH professionals must understand the

processes and how safety controls are impacted by the changing world of work, as well as operational and business interconnectivity.

- OSH professionals must have a future-focused lens to track trends impacting safety. As they advance in their careers, they need business skills and an understanding of sustainability and regulations. They also must be able to influence organizational decision-makers.
- Many executives noted that OSH professionals are a consultant to an organization's brand. They need to drive change through influence, whether in a centralized or decentralized operation.
- OSH professionals will continue to evolve as subject-matter experts and resources to operations.
- Some executives noted that if OSH professionals remain technical experts, functions will shift into business units that drive sustainability.

Regulation, Beyond Compliance and Increased Customer Expectations

Work. Moderate intensity: Requires continued attention.

Regulation, compliance and increased customer expectations reinforce expectations that OSH professionals continue to evolve.

- Most companies are moving beyond compliance and a regulatory environment to meet increased customer contract requirements.
- Executives noted requirements for different protocols across customers and identified the challenge of managing to a single standard.
- European companies face the influence of expanded regulatory requirements and reporting.
- Several executives believe that rich intelligence and data points, if captured and aggregated, could inform predictive analytics for OSH.
- Consensus standards like ANSI/ASSP Z16, ANSI/ASSP Z10 and ISO 45001 need to be more widely adopted, shifting the focus from lagging indicators to leading indicators.

Technology and the Workplace

Work. Moderate intensity: Requires continued attention.

AI, automation, robotics, IoT and wearable technologies were all mentioned this year. Technology will continue to advance the workplace, creating both new work and new hazards. OSH professionals must become tech savvy as a result.

- Companies are prioritizing technology solutions to improve workplace safety where organizations cannot engineer out the risk in the process or the operation.
- Organizations require more data analytics and more predictive analytics for safety.
- Cyber risks emerged as a threat that OSH professionals should be aware of from a risk management perspective.
- New technologies, including energy storage and batteries, were identified as areas that will change safety protocols.

Geopolitical Uncertainty, Climate Change and Supply-Chain Disruptions

Workplace, Work and Workforce. Moderate intensity: Requires continued attention.

A leading theme in our 2022 listening tour was constant disruption and the need for strong continuity of operations. In 2023, geopolitical uncertainty and the economy emerged as well.

- Disaster response is constant. Emergency preparedness and business continuity continue to be significant issues facing OSH professionals and business.
- Global versus local sourcing is at an inflection point. Many companies have not recovered from the supply-chain disruptions caused by the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic.
- Supply chain and input costs, including inflation, are impacting corporate decision-making.
- The global economy, the war in Ukraine, the 2024 U.S. presidential election and tensions between the U.S. and China are impacting the supply chain and creating an environment of uncertainty that is influencing corporate decision-making.

CONCLUSION

People and Profitability

“A safe and healthy working environment” as a fundamental principle and right at work presents many challenges in creating safety, healthy working conditions, ensuring resources to support workforce resilience and building a workforce able to adapt to constant change. Many leading organizations are anchoring action in a people-centered approach.

- Progressive companies move beyond making safety and well-being a value to making people, and safety, a lens for every business decision. They invest in people as part of the triple bottom line — people, planet and prosperity.

They ensure they have psychological safety and are set up for success with team members understanding the organization cares about them.

- Workers have increased expectations, demand a healthy, safe, diverse and inclusive work environment, and have the social capital to hold companies accountable through activism and social media channels. Employees are empowered to speak up; however, without context, the voice could damage the company’s reputation, especially in safety.
- Executives agree organizational structure and governance drive safety in the workplace, work and the workforce. This demands that top leaders and boards of directors take actions to ensure workplaces are safe.
- With enhanced skills, armed with deeper understanding of the changing nature of work and the trends impacting business, OSH professionals are uniquely positioned to connect people and profitability, evolving to leaders of people, guardians of change management and influencers of decision-makers.

Opportunity in a Time of Change

As we face a time of constant change and evolution, ASSP is presented with a unique opportunity to support the advancement of OSH professionals. ASSP will:

- Support the growth, development and advancement of OSH professionals, building the skills needed to drive business outcomes.
- Create a diverse and inclusive Society, build the skills of today’s OSH professionals, and engage our future leaders to support and drive change.
- Build effective partnerships to advance our mission and solve challenges.
- Document best practices in industry consensus standards, build community and enhance corporate knowledge to keep workers, companies and the professionals we serve safe and healthy.

START A CONVERSATION WITH YOUR LEADERS

We encourage you to use the findings in this report to engage your leaders in proactive, ongoing conversations of how these trends are impacting your organization. These conversations and the answers to these questions can lead to program improvements and better understanding and integration across the organization.

Facilitation Questions

- 1) Which of these trends is affecting our company the most? Are our current measures addressing the issues effectively?
- 2) How is safety integrated into our decision-making processes? What more can we do to ensure it is prioritized and whose support do we need?
- 3) What challenges has our company faced in maintaining safety during times of high turnover? How can we overcome those challenges in the future?
- 4) How do the results in this report affect my role as an OSH leader in my company? What changes should I make to more effectively address these trends?
- 5) How can we spread awareness of these findings to other leaders in our company and get them involved in acting on safety issues? What tactics can we use to engage different departments or divisions?