

Defining and Detecting Impairment

Workplace impairment is a widely present risk in workplaces that threatens workplace safety and worker wellbeing, yet its impact on safety and health is not well-defined.

Defining Impairment for the Workplace

The National Safety Council defines workplace impairment as **a temporary negative change in a person's ability to do their work normally or safely, regardless of cause.**

Subject matter experts define impairment as:

"Something that is well below the ordinary or acceptable degree of function on the job."

"Lacking or deficiency of motor or cognitive skills to perform the task at hand in a safe manner."

"[The] ability to conduct the duties of work or to perform the tasks and make decisions related to work. When those are diminished or weakened in some way, we would consider that impairment."

Though there is a lack of consensus on the definition of impairment, the experts agree that:

- ✓ The presence of impairment contributing factors does not equal impairment
- ✓ Impairment exists on a spectrum and across a fluid range of functions
- ✓ Impairment can have a negative connotation due to victim blaming and stigmatization of the individual experiencing impairment, regardless of the cause of their impairment

Research Methodology

1. Literature Review
Articles Reviewed: 349
2. Subject Matter Expert Interviews
Experts Interviewed: 31
3. Database Review
Public Databases Reviewed: 18

93%
of employers
agree with
the NSC definition
of impairment*

Examples of contributing factors:



Chemical – chemical exposures, substance use



Physical – exposure to extreme temperatures, fatigue, improper shift scheduling, sleep deprivation



Psychosocial – violence, harassment, anxiety, depression, stress

Detecting Impairment in the Workplace

Measurement and detection tools rely on proxy measures for impairment. Primary ways to detect and measure potential impairment include:

Using risk and contributing factors	Using neurocognitive tests
Refers to workplace and worker risk and contributing factors such as substance use, fatigue and stress	Refers to testing a person's cognitive and psychomotor performance
Primarily measured through employee surveys and drug testing	Measured through employee's communication, memory, attention, processing speed, finger dexterity, balance and more
Indicates the presence of contributing factors, not their impact on the person's ability to do their job	These tests capture the person's function more objectively
Measuring potential contributing factors cannot determine what causes behavior changes	Neurocognitive tests do not provide insights into the factors impacting cognitive impairment

Workplace and Environmental Health and Safety leaders should...

- Create two-way communication with workers on safety issues
- Focus on addressing contributing factors whenever disclosed by workers
- Train front-line supervisors on identifying the signs of impairment
- Consider impairment in terms of hazard recognition and risk assessment
- Use available data sources, such as EAP usage and shareable data from occupational health providers
- Consider employee privacy, equity, legality, psychological safety and worker engagement when evaluating worker impairment
- Adopt more proactive fitness for duty assessments for safety-sensitive workers to prevent potential impairment
- Engage workers in different positions and at all levels in safety-related decision making such as impairment or drug screening policies

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