

The Future of Occupational Health and Safety

AIHA's Rebranding, NIOSH's Total Worker Health, and the Evolution of OHS

August 20, 2020

With an expressed desire to create an inclusive future out of a historic past, and with input from members and research findings, the American Industrial Hygiene Association, now known simply as AIHA™, has recently revealed a “brand evolution.” Founded in 1939 as an organization for those who work in industrial hygiene (IH), the AIHA noted that the industry has expanded its membership and reach to include environmental health and safety generalists and other practitioners that do not primarily perform IH. The organization leaders have understood for years that the term “industrial hygiene” is not well understood by the general public and non-IH colleagues. To better reflect the evolution in the industry, and the fact that educational programs are shifting from titles like “industrial hygiene” to “occupational health” (OH), “exposure science”, “occupational health and safety” (OHS), “OHS science professionals”, and “environmental and occupational health”, AIHA is changing to meet this progression. AIHA believes this brand evolution will expand and connect with future industry leaders and re-invigorate the role of OHS science professionals in business, industry, educational, and public arenas. The AIHA rebranding comes not only with a new name, but a new logo and a new tagline: “Healthier Workplaces. A Healthier World.”



The vision and tagline of the newly rebranded AIHA closely aligns with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health's (NIOSH) Total Work Health® (TWH), which maintains the focus of traditional OHS on ensuring work is safe and workers are protected from hazards arising from work and workplaces, but additionally recognizes that factors from outside of the workplace can have an impact on the health and well-being of workers in the workplace. NIOSH's TWH is a holistic approach to worker well-being, encompassing policies, programs and practices that integrate protection from work-related health and safety hazards, injury and illness prevention efforts, along with knowledge of risk factors outside of the traditional work environment that can impact work-related health. TWH acknowledges risk factors previously considered unrelated to work, including those that potentially contribute to health problems in workers. The goal of this acknowledgment is the improvement of the overall well-being of the workforce both in and outside the workplace, to the benefit of workers and employers.



The increasing availability, sophistication, and speed of technology used to obtain exposure monitoring data and control workplace exposures, along with the automation of the most hazardous job types, allows public health / OHS professional organizations look to the future of occupational health and safety and to having a greater impact on the wellbeing of workers. An example of the impact on workers can be seen in hearing-related injuries, which are among the top workplace related medical complaints. Noise exposures can be found in many workplaces as well as in the general environment. Hearing loss affects businesses, as worker performance may be impacted by communication and safety issues associated with hearing conditions, and hearing loss can have a profound effect on an individual's life both in and outside of work. With the miniaturization, decreasing price and increasing sophistication of monitoring devices, noise monitoring data can be collected 24/7, in and out of the workplace, and collated on an application on a user's individual device. In conjunction with the developing science in identifying gene variants associated with greater sensitivity to noise-induced hearing loss, noise monitoring data gives the OHS professional the tools and information needed to provide customized hearing protection to an individual. In tandem with medical professionals, genetic test data and workplace monitoring can provide OHS professionals a better understanding of individual worker sensitivities to many workplace hazards, allowing them to explore protective measures to take actions tailored to the individual's risk factors (hearing or otherwise).

The AIHA and NIOSH TWH focus on helping employees and employers understand how what happens inside and outside of work can impact workers' health and productivity in the workplace. This knowledge takes on even more importance during a pandemic, and the concepts behind AIHA's rebranding and NIOSH's TWH have more immediate relevance than ever before. The definitions of "workplace" and "work" have been shifting over time, and this has only been accelerated by COVID-19, as many workers have been suddenly thrust into work-at-home situations that may include the added roles of child-care/educator, or elder care. These circumstances are stressors and risk factors not traditionally associated with the work environment that can be compounded by other stressors such as the apprehension surrounding socializing, transport and shared living situations that may carry the potential to increase the risks of infection. Together, all of these factors impact both personal and work life. Additional focus on collaboration with geneticists, molecular biologists, computational toxicologists, and medical specialists advancing the science and medicine on total worker health may lead to a better understanding and protection for individual health outcomes. By embracing total worker health, the OHS science professional will have an integral role in the fundamental change surrounding how we assess risk and protect an individual's health, both inside and outside of the traditional workplace.

Benjamin J. Heckman, MPH, CIH
Principal, Co-founder
(717) 385-8409
bheckman@rhprisk.com

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