

The Day in a Life of a Self-Employed Occupational Health Nurse in Northern Ontario

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I have been self-employed in occupational health for almost 15 years. I graduated from the University of Western Ontario and worked in critical care and public health. I continued my pursuit of nursing, and specialized in Occupational Health after completing a certificate in occupational health and safety. This led me to initiating my own business: Health & Safety Professionals Inc. For me, prevention is the most important element in the Continuum of Healthcare.

First and foremost I have to be very organized. At any given time, I am managing up to 10 consulting projects, following up on quotations, and submitting small and large requests for proposals. The projects range from writing policies and procedures, to designing customized training programs. The policies and procedures vary from industrial, construction, health care, municipal, to First Nations communities. Each has its own needs and individual personalities. Some of the companies we have assisted consist of one person. The small company requires a program in order to bid on work. In the meantime, I get an opportunity to teach safety basics, as well as legislative requirements. Some are large corporations of over 10, 000 employees, with offices too numerous to count, throughout the province. Our goal is to overcome any client challenge in order to assist them in implementing the programs we design.

We offer approximately 15 courses to the public at our training room here in Sault Ste. Marie, and most of them are linked to Basic Certification Training, for which we have been granted approved provider status by the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB). From our training contacts, come requests for customized training programs in topic areas such as Contract Monitoring, Confined Spaces, and Workplace Inspections. We have explored online learning as well, and currently offer WHMIS online.

Why do I say "we"? It would be impossible to accomplish all of this myself. I have aligned myself with a network of individuals who possess skills that I lack. I have had the opportunity to work with two wonderful nurses; one specializing in Occupational Health; Pat, and the other in Proposal Writing and Organization; Lorena. I appreciate and value their input and support. To help out with invoicing, designing courses, marketing, and just about anything else to keep us organized, we use an Office Support agency and rely on Frieda's expertise. Jon, an industrial hygienist, consults on hygiene projects. Networking is essential in occupational health and I consider myself very fortunate to work with such a dedicated group of individuals.

Over the years, I have made the commitment to take on and mentor nursing students. On one occasion, it was for an additional two-month internship, and it was very rewarding. Health and safety is an exciting and dynamic field. I have shared my knowledge with Medical students from the Northern Ontario Medical School and have encouraged them to consider Occupational Medicine.

In 2005, I decided to pursue my Canadian Registered Safety Professional designation. After taking a preparatory course and setting aside dedicated study time, I wrote the exam and was successful in May of 2007. It was a lot of hard work, but well worth it. I learned a great deal while I was studying. It will allow me to market the business, and reassure clients that I belong to a like-minded group of individuals who are dedicated to health and safety. I like the maintenance points system as well, which shows that a health and safety professional must stay active in his/her chosen field.

Once again, I decided that I needed to add more to my practice and learn more about what strategies work in health and safety. I find myself frustrated by following up with employers on the heels of Workwell audits, Ministry of Labour orders, and the latest legislation. I want to learn how to assist them in implementing and sustaining managed systems, which will ultimately lead to healthier and safer

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workplaces. I find myself back in school, this time pursuing a Masters in Public Health, with a specialty in Occupational Health and Safety Management. I feel like my career is coming full circle, melding my public health experience with my current work in health and safety.

What do I like most about my work? It is working with clients who are truly committed to health and safety and who believe that zero injuries are attainable. I have clients who weave health and safety into all parts of their organization; hiring practices, purchasing, management meetings, as well as the typical health and safety areas like workplace inspections and accident investigations. These are employers who do not wait for the next Ministry of Labour visit before implementing safety practices.

As an RN, I feel that I have a great deal to offer the community in the emerging field of harassment and violence in the workplace. This legislation requires employers to also address domestic violence; a topic with which many employers are ill equipped to manage. Because of my nursing knowledge, I am able to assist them with training and policies, and link them to other groups within the community to assist them further.

What do I like least? Bookkeeping: a necessary evil of anyone who is self-employed. Luckily I am able to rely on my bookkeeper to remind me of important dates like the 15th of every month, or GST remittance day. He has even tracked me down on vacation to make special arrangements with the bank to get the money in on time. He was determined that I not pay any interest due to a late submission. He is another example of the dedicated people with whom I am surrounded.

Would I do anything else? No way. I am extremely fulfilled in what I do, and in the service we offer to the community. I am proud to be participating in the field of health and safety as an RN; thinking of the people we encounter, and how it affects them in their day to day lives. There is the safety manager, who wonders if he could have done more to prevent a horrendous injury in his workplace. Ten years later, it still plays on him. I simply listen; not knowing the answer to his question. I have done my part by assessing his work environment and have assisted in instrumental changes to prevent a reoccurrence.

There is the worker who ponders the question, "Is it worth taking the risk, if it means I may never see my wife and kids again?" I try to gently guide him to see that it is never worth the risk, and that ultimately what is written in the "green" book"* is a guide; what choices he makes will determine the outcome. And then there is the female in an all male work environment who is dealing with potential harassment issues. I reassure her that she is not alone, and that there are people in the community who can help. I provide her the contact information for the agencies and offer to visit her workplace. I leave her my cell number. I can do all of these things as a self-employed RN, never having to justify to the 'boss' the amount of time I spend with a client. I only answer to myself.

Respectfully submitted

Louise Caicco Tett, RN, BScN, CRSP
Sault Ste Marie
October 7, 2011

* Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA)