Adapting workplaces to climate change: Workplace safety and sustainability

South Africa's scorching summers are becoming the norm, not the exception. This changing climate is not just a weather inconvenience, but a growing threat to worker safety. To address the possible health and safety risks associated with climate change (such as heatstroke in construction or injuries during floods), health and safety committees and officers should consider incorporating climate-related hazard indicators and assess the hazard-specific vulnerability of workers, workflows, and their environments.

According to the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO), 2019 marked a decade of unusual global heat, melting ice, and rising sea levels due to human-generated greenhouse gases This isn't just a global trend – the European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service reported that the period between February 2023 and January 2024 marked the first time Earth endured 12 consecutive months of temperatures that were 1.5 degrees Celsius hotter than pre-industrial era temperatures.

While South Africa grapples with the policy considerations around the Paris Agreement and the need to implement a just transition to clean energy, there's a more immediate concern: worker safety. Existing health and safety laws address basic weather hazards, but these may not be enough. On 28 April 2024, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) will observe World Day for Safety and Health at Work by focusing on climate change and its effects on occupational health and safety.

The overlap between climate change on occupational health and safety

Climate change presents a double threat to workers: **existing problems** like droughts, heatwaves, and floods will become more severe in areas already prone to them, while **new and unexpected** dangers are

emerging. These include the spread of disease-carrying vectors to new regions and rising water temperatures creating breeding grounds for harmful organisms.

Occupational risks exacerbated by climate change include heat stress, ultraviolet radiation, poor air quality, and injuries from extreme weather are all on the rise. Additionally, exposure to climate-related disasters can lead to serious mental health consequences.

Some jobs put workers at higher risk for health problems due to climate change. These include outdoor jobs like forestry, construction, agriculture, emergency response, shipping, mining, and transportation. Even indoor jobs with hard physical labour, like manufacturing, can be impacted by a changing climate.

Beyond Legislation: Proactive Measures

South Africa's health and safety laws already consider weather hazards. However, relying solely on legislation might not be enough. Organisations should take a self-directed approach to identify and assess climate hazards as well as implement mitigation and prevention strategies to increase operational and individual resilience in the face of such hazards. This approach includes identifying potential threats like heatwaves and floods through a thorough workplace risk-based assessment. Existing risk assessments need to be updated to factor in climate change. Adapting work practices comes next, potentially involving adjustments to work hours, providing areas that assist workers to acclimate to severe or extreme weather or temperatures, and offering more frequent breaks during extreme heat. Investing in training to equip workers with the knowledge to handle climate-specific safety protocols and ensure the proper use of personal protective equipment under varying weather conditions. Finally, developing robust emergency plans that outline proactive measures to protect workers, mitigate risks, and maintain operational continuity in the face of climate-related disruptions. Ensuring competence in occupational health and safety is another important factor for managing the impacts of climate change on workers' wellbeing. We anticipate that organisations will integrate competence requirements that specifically address climate-related risks inherent to the geographic location, sector, or type of work that apply to the organisation's operations.

Climate change creates a dangerous intersection between productivity and worker well-being. Extreme heat alone is projected to cause a global loss of over 2% of working hours annually by 2030. This not only jeopardises operational productivity but also threatens workers' ability to earn a living. In this situation, safety culture could suffer as workers prioritise income over safety measures during climate-related hazards.

The question remains: will social safety nets adapt? Will governments expand unemployment benefits to accommodate disruptions caused by extreme weather and unsafe working conditions? Will there be new provisions for injuries and illnesses linked to climate change?

The answer is uncertain, but the need for action is clear. By integrating climate considerations into every aspect of workplace health and safety, from risk assessments to emergency plans, businesses can protect

their employees in a changing world.