

The health risks of being employed are changing in the US and globally

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While most large corporations take responsibility for occupational risks, many partake in transferring these risks to smaller companies and the informal sector, where health risks are unrecognized and under-reported. More than half of the workers in many developing economies work in the informal sector where there are few, or no, workplace health protections. These workers contribute to the success of the global economy and numerous brand name companies while bearing almost all workplace health risks themselves. Globally, examples of this workplace risk transfer (from large corporations down to smaller contracted companies) can be seen in the garment industry and electronic waste recycling. In the U.S., part-time, temporary and gig economy workers assume the occupational hazards traditionally carried by the employer.

Nail salons have enjoyed steady growth as an industry, peaking in 2015 at 129,682 registered salons, due in part to the attractiveness of the profession with flexible working hours, limited need for fluency in English and ease of learning. However, most employees at these salons are actually registered as independent contractors, not formal employees, which means the salon owner is not required to provide any [health](#) and safety training or monitoring of conditions.

Poor ventilation and hygiene are commonplace throughout salons which has resulted in a rise in occupational diseases such as asthma and miscarriages due exposure to harmful chemicals found in nail products. Other less discussed topics include microbial infections and ergonomic issues. Albert J. Tien, Ph.D., Workplace Health Without Borders,

references a [consumer survey](#) which reported that nail salon customers would be willing to pay one to two dollars more per treatment if nail salons provided safe and hygienic environments for workers and clients. The goal of his study, "Risk transference in nail salons," is to build awareness to the plight of nail salon workers and promote a certification process for healthy [nail salons](#) in which operators can commit to implementation of good practices.

Similar to the practice of salon owners transferring occupational risks to their contracted workers, the garment industry transfers its risks by using complex supply chains with tens of thousands of factories globally and small transitory factories domestically. Occupational hazards associated with clothing manufacturing, such as long hours, unpaid wages/overtime, cramped and nonadjustable workstations, fire and electric hazards and poor lighting and ventilation are transferred to the factories in the countries where the clothes are made (only three percent of clothing purchased in the U.S. is manufactured in the U.S.). These countries have low standards of living and weak law enforcement which allows brands to increase their profit margins.

A study, "Transferred risk in the garment industry and the changing role of consumers," conducted by Mary O'Reilly, Ph.D., CIH, CPE, SUNY School of Public Health and Workplace Health Without Borders, revealed that at least 45 percent of consumers would be willing to pay more money for clothing if they were sure the extra money would be used to protect [worker](#) health. O'Reilly's work aims to uncover how consumers could be better leveraged to protect garment workers and lessen the occupational risks they face each day.

Currently, there are an estimated 15 million temporary workers in the U.S., representing nearly 10 percent of the total workforce. Controlling the risks these workers face in their assignments can be a challenge without a shared level of responsibility between the host employer and

the staffing agency. Robert P. Deist, CIH, CET, senior vice president at Chartwell Staffing Solutions conducted a study, "A management system approach to risk within the temporary staffing industry," which explores using traditional EHS Program Management tools and techniques to create partnerships with host employers and to engage the temporary workforce.

"Developing processes and strategies to minimize the risk of incurring occupational injuries or illnesses benefits workers, their families, host and agency employers and communities," states Deist, as injuries and illnesses may occur at higher frequencies for [temporary workers](#) than the respective industry average.

Electronic waste (e-waste) recycling is a growing industry in lower-income countries as high-income countries export their waste for recycling elsewhere, therefore creating a global transfer of risk. The industry has created much needed employment opportunities, but current recycling and disposal practices expose vulnerable workers and communities to numerous health and safety problems. Rick Neitzel, Ph.D., MS, CIH, and Stephanie Saylor, University of Michigan, conducted a study titled "Global risk transfer via informal [electronic waste](#) recycling," which describes the informal e-waste practices currently employed in Ghana, Chile and Thailand. Based on the hazards identified in their research—injuries, stress, and exposures to heavy metals—interventions will be developed to minimize the health and safety risks while preserving the economic opportunities.

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