



# **GUIDANCE ON SELECTING AN OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH PROVIDER FOR YOUR ORGANISATION**

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Absence due to sickness costs around £13 billion each year. In addition to the impact on the health and well-being of individuals and their families, there is also a significant impact on productivity across the economy.

One of the best ways to attack the cost of sickness is to manage absence robustly and appropriately. Sound attendance policies, firm management and a good occupational health provider to help sort out those problems will form the basis for effective absence management.

Unfortunately, HSE-commissioned research shows that only 15 per cent of all UK organisations provided basic occupational health support, and only 3 per cent provide comprehensive support.

### **What is Occupational Health and how do you choose a good Occupational Health provider?**

Occupational health is the field of medicine that studies the effects of work on health and health on work. It concentrates on employee performance, suitability, fitness, wellbeing and safety issues linked to health at work. The World Health Organisation clarifies the objective of OH as being "*to promote and maintain the physical, mental and social wellbeing of all staff*".

The overlap between health and safety and wellness provision is enormous, but OH does not specialise in the sole provision of either; it is a specific branch of medicine, recognised and regulated.

Occupational health can nonetheless offer an informed perspective on all of the additional work-health and wellbeing initiatives available, and OH providers should be able to refer and coordinate a whole range of services complementary to their own - from counselling to wellness, according to the requirements of your organisation.

Most importantly, as with any service provision, occupational health should bring added value to a business, both direct and indirect:

- Overall reduction of absence costs
- Reduction of the claims against permanent health insurance, private medical insurance, employer's liability insurance and pension funds
- Reduction of litigation risks associated with non-compliance of health and safety legislation
- increased staff retention - saving time, money and effort recruiting, retaining and training staff
- improved productivity
- Overall increased profitability
- Recognition of Corporate and Social Responsibilities



The Process for selecting an Occupational Health provider is only as complex as you make it. It takes a fair amount of research, understanding what your requirements are and making sure that you know and communicate what your expectations are!

## 1. Consider the basic practicalities

First draw up a list of providers who can meet your very basic practical requirements, such as geography, number of employees, contact procedure etc.

Some points to consider and why:

**What size of provider do you require?**

- Local
- Large regional
- National

**How many employees do you have?  
Is there a shift pattern to cover?**

Some small providers might not be able to resource large contracts, whilst some SMEs can find that very large providers are too impersonal.

**Who will be making the contact?**

If you have lots of line managers making referrals, you might prefer a call-centre for them to contact.

However, if it is just you liaising on behalf of your organisation, you might prefer a dedicated contact.

**Do you require an onsite service and if so, can you accommodate this?**

OH provision works successfully both onsite and by sending employees to the provider.

For onsite services, a private room or office is usually all that is required.

Some providers can even offer mobile units, predominately for health surveillance.

**Top Tip – to save you time on the basics, COHPA offer a free service to help you to compile a shortlist of providers who meet your practical requirements.**



## 2. Know What You Want

- Identify your top three requirements – what risks are going to impact on your business the most? Are these core services of the provider?
- Do you have specific legislative requirements (Noise, Vibration, Radiation) – does the provider have specifically skilled competent personnel to match these requirements?
- Do they provide web based options such as online pre-employment screening?
- What other stakeholders will they need to liaise with – health & safety, HR, Legal?
- What sort of management information and feedback will you receive?
- How do they invoice – regionally, by depot, what information is provided?
- What services to they provide to smooth handovers from existing providers?

**Top Tip – talk to other stakeholders – they will all have specific expectations.**

## 3. Where to Find Them

Occupational Health organisations are not really “directory” sort of companies – no one really knows how to categorise them – health and safety, wellness, health....often makes them difficult to find.

Three top places to source occupational health providers:

- Trade Association - Since 2004 COHPA, the Commercial Occupational Health Providers Association has actively been promoting the benefits of Occupational Health. As a Not for Profit association, they offer a free and independent information service providing advice on OH and health at work issues. They can also help you to draw up a shortlist of providers that meet your requirements.

COHPA aims to enhance Industry Best Practice by regulating business standards amongst membership. COHPA members are actively involved in Advancing Occupational Health, to ensure professional development of the industry and also within their own business service.

- Personal Recommendations – there is nothing like someone giving you the “warts and all” picture.
- Human Resource Information – any organisation that is so closely linked to HR is going to be referenced in CIPD media, forums and seminars.

**Top Tip – Visit [www.cohpa.co.uk](http://www.cohpa.co.uk) for a comprehensive list of providers.**



#### **4. The Selection Process**

The range of occupational health provision is as wide as any other sector and in the main falls into three categories: commercial providers, in-house services and public sector (i.e. NHS).

The wrong provider or the wrong type of provider is not going to contribute that added value to your organisation, and in fact could cost you a lot more.

Ask each organisation to comment in writing on your main requirements, provide background information, accounts and a fee schedule.

Meet with everyone at least once – twice is better – the most cost effective provider may not be the one that you can work with. You need to make sure that you match in as many ways as possible. After all this should be a long term partnership.

Don't be afraid to ask questions including how they would deal with a specific situation.

Make sure you know what you are going to receive by way of management information – chances are, you are going to be asked to show that this is money well spent.

**Top tip – talk to more than one**

#### **5. Fees**

Fees can vary incredibly depending on service provision, who is providing the service (is this a physician or nurse based service?), specialisms, geography, and what “extras” you require.

The good news is that the range of providers available means that there is likely to be a service to suit every budget.

You need to provide accurate information on numbers, locations and past usage.

The easiest way to compare fees is to ask everyone to complete the same fee matrix. Breakdown general services into service components, (i.e. pre-employment screening can be broken down in to questionnaires, medicals, health screening).

Ask for costings on extras – i.e. is there an administration charge on disbursements?

**Top Tip – Remember: you get what you pay for and nothing is for free!**



Occupational Health is not only a benefit to the employer but to the employee. It straddles health & safety, wellness provision, mediation and medico-legal aspects. Therefore it is important that you have a provider that you can trust and that you can be open and frank with. You want a partner who will work with you and your staff to achieve the best possible outcomes.

### Top Tip – Take the time and choose wisely

#### In Summary...

1. Identify your main requirements and key criteria
2. Source potential providers
3. Longlist between 2 and 6 providers
4. Review initial proposals or pre-qualification submissions
5. Shortlist between 3-4 providers
6. Undertake the selection process
7. Make sure that you have clarified, quantified and qualified your requirements before you sign off
8. Invest in establishing the relationship from the beginning
9. Be prepared to give and receive feedback
10. Regularly review the service provision

#### Testimonials for COHPA assistance...

*“COHPA provided a very useful service starting with an initial, anonymous tender. Once we had established which companies were interested in tendering we were able to make direct contact. Without COHPA, we would have had a more difficult search.”*

**Jane Peers, Senior HR Manager, RSPCA**

*“COHPA have been really helpful, professional and competent in the advice they have given and the service they have provided in helping us – and the service was free! I couldn't recommend them enough.”*

**Jennie Cobb, HR Officer, Bourne Salads**