



Employee Safety

## Keeping Temporary Workers Safe: What You Need to Know

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With skilled laborers in short supply, many manufacturing companies are turning to temporary workers to fill vacant roles. Despite the less permanent nature of the employment, businesses still have a responsibility to provide a safe work environment. Here's what employers need to know.

Manufacturing employment has been *falling for decades*, and an *in-depth analysis of the skills gap* projects 2.4 million unfilled manufacturing jobs by 2028.

Part of the worker deficit is due to baby boomers (people born between 1946 and 1964) reaching retirement age—*about 2 million of them leave their jobs* for good every year, and in 2020 the number spiked to 3.2 million, probably boosted by pandemic-related job losses. Another issue is a young workforce that lacks the vocational training needed for today's manufacturing jobs.

## What's Causing the Skills Gap?

It's well known that skilled workers are in short supply, and the deficit is quickly increasing. The National Association for Business Economics shows in its *January 2022 Business Conditions Survey* that 57 percent of employers reported a skilled labor shortage—that's up from 24 percent in the same survey just one year earlier. But what's the reason for the growing skills gap? Here are three contributing factors:

**An aging workforce:** Nearly a quarter of the national workforce is older than 55, according to the *U.S. Census Bureau*, meaning a large portion of laborers are at or near retirement age.

**The COVID-19 pandemic:** During the pandemic, vocational and technical schools—like most learning institutions—ceased in-person education for a time. And while some skills can be mastered through online classes, many require in-person, hands-on training. Delayed education could be part of the reason employers say they're experiencing a shortage.

**Disappearing education:** According to *Bridging America's Gap*, a nonprofit addressing the skills gap in the American workforce, many high schools have deemphasized vocations since the early 2000s by dropping shop classes, where students usually learn trades and are encouraged to pursue related careers.

Many manufacturers are turning to temporary workers to fill ever-increasing staffing needs. Temporary employment status, however, does not excuse the businesses from responsibility to ensure worker safety. So, what is an employer's duty? Read on for regulations and recommendations.

**Read more: *4 Proven Methods for Filling Local Manufacturing Jobs***

## Temporary Workers' Injury Risk Is Higher

Nearly half of the nation's temporary workers are in the manufacturing industry, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. These employees—many of whom work part time or have seasonal jobs—often work with heavy-duty equipment and hazardous materials. If they are not properly trained to understand potential hazards of the worksite, they are at risk for injuries.

In fact, a *study* by Washington state's Safety & Health Assessment & Research for Prevention (SHARP) Program found that temporary workers are twice as likely as permanent employees to sustain on-the-job injuries. This is due to a reduction in—or absence of—safety training for temporary workers compared with their permanent counterparts and a lack of awareness of temporary workers to the hazards of the job.

## Employers and Agencies Share Responsibility

Temporary workers are often supplied by employment agencies to "host" employers such as

manufacturing businesses in need of additional personnel. In response to the growing number of these nonstandard employment arrangements, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) and the American Staffing Association (ASA) **launched a partnership in 2021** to focus on temporary workers' safety through the development of new safety standards and outreach to staffing companies and host employers.

**Every temporary employee should go through the same training as a full-time, permanent employee, whether it's online learning, in-person classes or on-the-job training.**

Both the staffing agency and the host employer are equally accountable for keeping temporary employees from harm, advising them of hazards and providing proper training, **according to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)**. Ensuring that all employees, regardless of their permanence, are aware of job hazards and safety best practices protects employees and keeps employers and staffing agencies in compliance with OSHA standards.

Because of this joint responsibility, clear and decisive communication between manufacturers and staffing agencies is key to keeping temporary workers safe. OSHA recommends explicitly laying out each party's role in the employment contract, so there is no question as to who is responsible for which aspects of employee safety.

## Training for a Safer Workplace

Employers have the same duty to a temporary worker's safety as they do to a permanent employee's. According to OSHA (**29 CFR 1910**), this means ensuring a safe work environment by limiting hazards and training employees in safety standards to mitigate risks. At manufacturing facilities, this might include proper handling of toxic substances, safely operating machinery and equipment, and avoiding falls.

Every temporary employee should go through the same training as a full-time, permanent employee, whether it's online learning, in-person classes or on-the-job training. Additionally, since temporary workers are placed wherever they are most needed and might fill multiple roles during their tenure, employers should offer relevant training that covers the hazards and risks of each new role to ensure the employee is continually prepared to work safely.

**Read more: *Tackling the Manufacturing Skills Gap: 5 Skills Your Company Will Need Soon***

This can amount to a lot of training. In an industry where workers are already hard to find, allocating time for training—as well as hiring knowledgeable educators or pulling permanent workers from a job to provide guidance—can be a challenge for employers. That's where online learning management systems can help. Employers can designate training plans, and workers can take courses, watch videos and assess their learning through exams. **Online training kits** can take the guesswork out of regulatory and safety readiness through video on-demand and interactive courses.

## An Open Conversation About Safety

Even well-trained employees can run into situations that they don't feel prepared to handle, such as operating new equipment or performing a new task. Some employees might simply feel as though their

safety training is out of date. For these reasons, OSHA recommends that employers seek input from employees on workplace safety.

“Workers can identify missing safety procedures, make recommendations for changes and help ensure a safe workplace,” OSHA says. “When workers have a voice in the workplace and input about how training is developed, training programs are more accurately focused on specific workplace hazards.”

Employers should encourage all workers, including temporary employees, to speak up when they see a gap in training or an opportunity for safer practices. Together, employers and employees can take steps toward a safer workplace for all.

*How have you helped temporary employees adapt to their work environment safely? Share your tips in the comments below.*

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