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Safe Work
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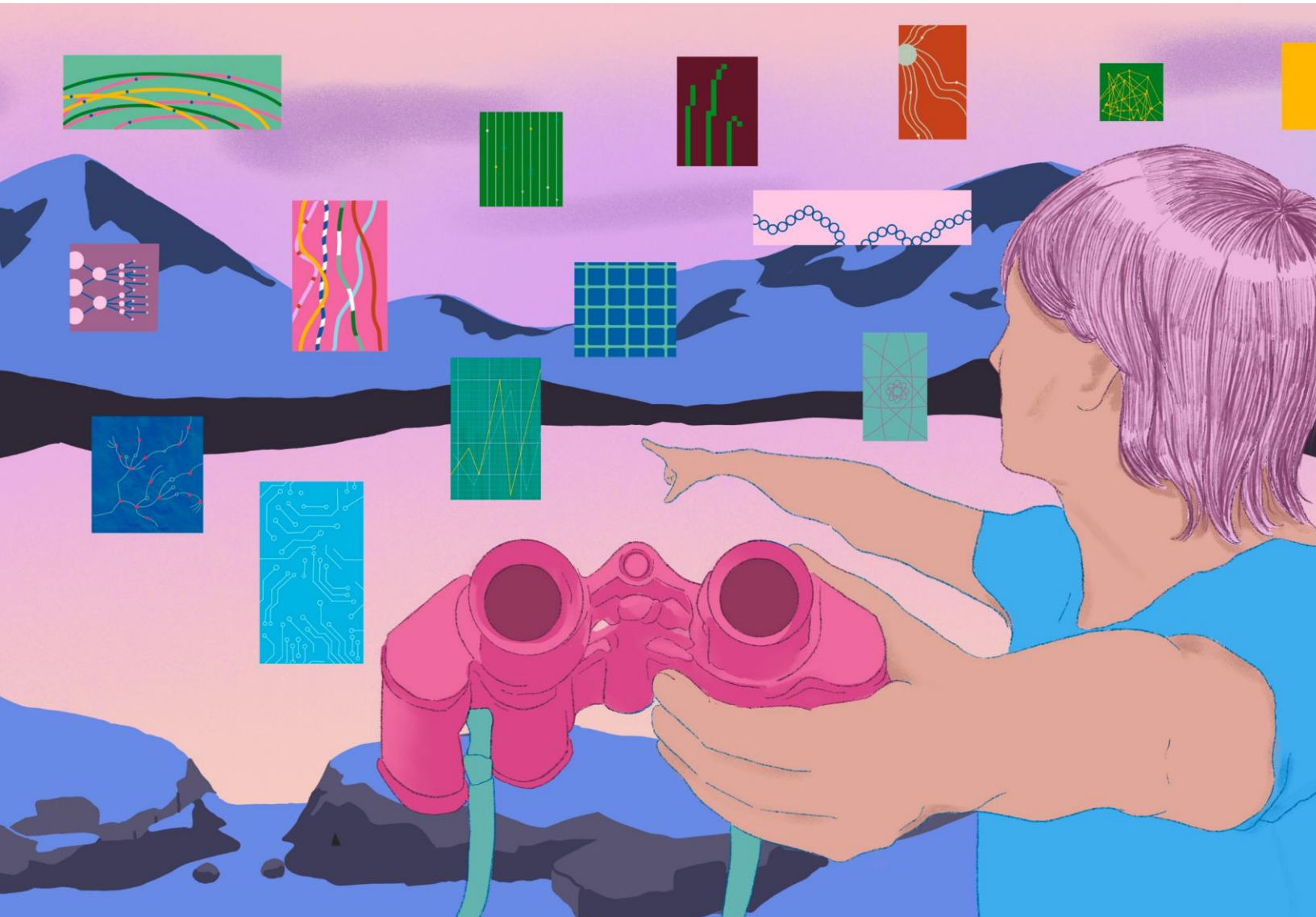
Work & health 2040:
Anticipating changes impacting the futures of occupational health and safety

Winter 2026



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The Institute operates on the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca and the Mississaugas of the Credit River.

Executive summary

By 2040, the future of work and health will be shaped by rapid transformations across technology, climate, the economy, politics and society. This evolving landscape will present both urgent challenges and critical opportunities for practitioners and policy-makers promoting the health, safety and wellbeing of the working population. This report applies strategic foresight methods to explore a wide range of plausible futures and their potential implications for workplaces and their workers. It helps to anticipate what's coming, question assumptions and build more adaptive, equitable and resilient approaches to promoting worker health, safety and wellbeing. The inherent complexity and uncertainty of different possible futures can be studied using an approach known as strategic foresight.

This work is the product of a collaborative effort led by the Institute for Work & Health and Creative Futures Studio Inc., with research contributions from a global group of 18 occupational health and safety (OHS) leaders from Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Spain. All participants engaged in six scanning sessions that were conducted over a span of four months. In each session, participants identified and discussed a range of evidence sources representing social, technological, environmental, economic, political and value-based signals of changes. Themes from the horizon scanning sessions were synthesized by the facilitators. The results are seven salient trends, each with complex dynamics of change, representing a future of work and health that has the potential to emerge by 2040. For each trend, implications for practitioners, researchers and policy-makers were identified to generate a discussion on future-focused strategies that can protect worker health and improve working conditions.

The seven trends that emerged were:

1. **Eroding institutional trust:** Public confidence in institutions, experts and traditional health systems is eroding, shifting authority toward influencers and media personalities who share personal values. This is creating new challenges for how health and safety messages are received.

2. **Increasing longevity and differences across social generations:** Aging populations, longer lifespans and delayed retirements are reshaping the workforce. Technology is playing a critical role in supporting health, safety and productivity across an extend life span. Social generations (e.g., Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, Gen Z, Gen Alpha) are differentiated from one another in their different exposures to technology and cultural changes, which can mean different expectations for work in the future.

3. **Intensified climate impacts:** The accelerating climate crisis is transforming work and health, exposing workers to new physical risks and leading to increased fears about the future. Some industries are being reshaped, as expectations grow for legal and ethical

accountability for climate-resilient approaches to safety and wellbeing.

4. **Algorithmic shifts:** As AI becomes a co-worker rather than just a tool, workplaces are redefining and reshaping jobs, relationships and risks. There is a sense of urgency to address questions about health, safety, wellbeing, equity, justice, job security, job demands and what it means to be human at work.

5. **Isolation rising**: Growing social disconnection, declining mental health, and rising polarization across society are reshaping how workers relate to one another and to institutions. This has made inclusion, resilience, and belonging critical priorities for many in the future of work and health, while spawning resistance from others.

6. **Horizons of growing hostility:** Rising geopolitical tensions, cyber threats, and resource conflicts are extending warfare into economic, digital, and environmental realms—creating volatility that directly affects worker safety, wellbeing, and trust in institutions.

7. **Expanding precarious prosperity:** Rising costs, unstable jobs, and strained public services have been making economic insecurity a defining feature of previous periods of economic, social and technological change. Precariousness will continue to be a defining feature of working life, reshaping health, wellbeing, and the conditions under which workers and employers navigate the future.

Despite technology being a prominent feature of work and health in 2040, social and political shifts, such as declining trust, growing isolation, and worker disengagement, will also impact health and wellbeing. These forces may be the start of rapidly growing and interconnected changes reshaping job structures, benefits and career trajectories, with likely health impacts.

Through the trends presented in this report, readers are encouraged to envision a changing work and health landscape and plan for a range of future possibilities in relation to human wellbeing and worker health and safety. Findings from this horizon scan underscores the importance of proactive responses: new models of hazard and risk prevention, updated regulations, climate-resilient designs, and worker-centred supports. Traditional approaches will not meet the needs of tomorrow's workers.

In an era where uncertainty is the norm, recognizing the multiple plausible drivers of change represents a critical strategy to ensure that a flexible and proactive approach is taken by OHS professionals, policy-makers and researchers. Insights generated through the horizon scanning process can be used to foster improved planning processes to address potential future changes.

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Introduction

What forces will shape the future of work and health in 2040? How will the environments, expectations, and risks facing workers evolve, and what does this mean for the health, safety, and wellbeing of the working population across among workers in high and middle-income labour market context? This report is a first step in examining these questions. It uses a strategic foresight method with the goal of generating diverse future-focused insights that can anticipate and better prepare for changes.

Research on the future of work aims to document ongoing changes to the nature of work that have the potential to substantially shape working conditions and the experiences of workers. These shifts may have profound implications for the job skills and training requirements employers demand of workers, psychosocial resources and demands within the workplace, broader environmental and cultural conditions that affect the workplace, all with the potential to alter the quality of work arrangements.

Past strategic foresight research led by the Institute for Work & Health and published in 2021 aimed to identify trends that could characterize the future of work and examined their potential impact on workers (1). Trends spanned social (e.g., Gen Zs and the work environment), technological (e.g., artificial intelligence [AI]-based automation), environmental (e.g., climate change and the green economy), economic (e.g., digital globalization) and political (e.g., rise in populism) drivers of change (2).

A major theme identified in this previous horizon scan was that the future of work can widen existing inequities in the working population. That is, trends suggested benefits for some groups of workers and harms for others. Moreover, marginalized groups may be disadvantaged by emerging trends and lack resources (e.g., opportunities for educational attainment or upskilling) that could impact their ability to navigate change (2).

Since the publication of the report, additional widespread change driven by technology and innovation, climate, geopolitics, and the economy has substantially altered the working world in Canada and abroad. Examining these shifts in greater detail can help to understand how employment may be affected by different forces that that have the potential to emerge and impact health.

The current context: work and health in 2025

Global estimates from the International Labour Organization show that occupational injuries and diseases account for up to 2.93 million fatalities each year, while non-fatal work-related injuries and illnesses impact an additional 395 million workers(3). Significant advancements in the prevention of workplace health and safety risks have taken place within labour markets over the last two decades (4-7). Yet, although some research finds that the rate of non-fatal occupational injury or illness has plateaued—in particular that of more severe injuries—while in other jurisdictions, the rate of workplace fatalities has increased.

Research continues to underscore diverse physical and psychosocial work contexts and policy factors that contribute to the health, safety and wellbeing of workers. Mental health stress (8), physical and psychological injuries stemming from workplace violence (9), exposure to infectious disease (10) and precarious forms of employment have meant that workplaces and OHS professionals continue to face complex challenges protecting workers from occupational injuries and illness. Growing inequity within the labour market has also meant that access to secure and steady employment, flexible work arrangements, and health and safety supports is limited to some, but not all, workers. Disparities related to age, gender, race or immigration status have frequently been noted. A changing labour market creates an ongoing need to identify emerging hazards and develop proactive and equitable strategies to promote the health, safety and wellbeing of workers (2).

Objectives

We had three overarching objectives:

a. Draw on diverse evidence sources to identify signals of ongoing or anticipated change to working conditions
b. Synthesize the signals of change and develop a picture of macro trends that may impact the future of work in 2040
c. Draw on key informant expertise to generate potential implications of each macro trend on workers and their health

Insights generated through the horizon scanning process can be used to foster improved planning processes that can be implemented by practitioners, researchers, and policy-makers to address potential future changes. It is important to highlight that this report isn't a declaration of inevitable trends. Rather, it highlights plausible drivers of change that have the potential to emerge over time.

Methodology

We applied a strategic foresight approach to address our objective (11). Strategic foresight is a structured and systematic way of using ideas about the future to anticipate and better prepare for change. It explores different plausible futures that could arise, and the opportunities and challenges they could present. Those ideas are intended to be used to make better decisions now.

Unlike prediction or forecasting, strategic foresight is not about anticipating a single, probable future. Instead, it explores a wide range of possible futures by examining diverse and sometimes unexpected signals of change. Foresight methods embrace the idea of *multiple futures*—each shaped by different choices, disruptions, and emerging dynamics. As such, the field intentionally uses the plural term "futures" to reflect this inherent plurality and uncertainty.

Strategic foresight also encourages exploration beyond the obvious. It values ideas that may initially seem implausible, overly provocative, or disconnected from the mainstream. This is because useful insights for the future can come from what challenges our assumptions, and not just from what confirms them. As an example, two decades ago there were arguably only weak signals that intelligent machines would soon play a predominant role in our society. Yet, we are now experiencing a growing role of AI in all aspects of life.

At the core of strategic foresight processes is horizon scanning—a structured method of gathering evidence to identify signals of change (12). Unlike a literature review or environmental scan, horizon scanning casts a wider net. It draws on conventional sources of data (e.g., academic research, government and NGO reports, mainstream media) and unconventional ones (e.g., patents, art, social media, podcasts, blogs, newsletters, non-mainstream media sources). For instance, the use of science fiction has been included as a source of weak signals by providing speculative narratives about ways sociotechnical, economic and cultural systems, and ethical norms and values might evolve under certain conditions.

The horizon scanning process was led by Creative Futures. Participants were 18 OHS researchers and practitioners from Canada, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. Between February and May 2025, the team participated in six facilitated online engagement meetings. Prior to the facilitated sessions, Creative Futures led two training sessions on strategic foresight and horizon scanning. As part of this training, participants learned about how to identify a signal of change and how a trend is a collection of signals that represents a theme with a clear directionality of change (13).

Prior to each meeting, participants collected diverse information that reflected signals of change. These were shared in an online central repository. Material drawn upon included scientific manuscripts and reports which were peer-reviewed and provided more well-established ideas. They also included news articles, blogs, podcasts, social media posts and other multimedia. Nearly 400 diverse signals of change were identified.

Also, prior to each meeting, participants selected up to three signals they believed may impact work and health outcomes by 2040; these were recorded using a shared document. In online meetings, participants presented their signals and engaged in critical discussion where team members could add their own reflections to the conversation. Creative Futures facilitated the broader group discussion which was captured in detailed meeting notes which highlighted salient work and health implications associated with each signal of change that was presented.

Using the repository of signals, shared document, and meeting notes, Creative Futures synthesized data sources to examine relationships between signals. Through this qualitative process, they examined common and distinctive thematic elements with regards to work and health, and they created the framework for an initial list of trends.

Two in-person meetings were held where Creative Futures worked in partnership with representatives from the Institute for Work & Health to discuss the initial trends and ensure they reflected insights obtained through all phases of the horizon scanning process. Ultimately seven major changes perceived as shaping the future of work and health in 2040 emerged from the conversation. Members of the broader international team reviewed the seven major trends and provided feedback, which was incorporated into the finalized trends.

Results trends shaping work and health in 2040

Seven major trends were identified as currently or likely to influence the future of work and health in 2040.

1. Eroding institutional trust
2. Increasing longevity and differences across social generations
3. Intensified climate impacts
4. Algorithmic shifts
5. Isolation rising
6. Horizons of growing hostility
7. Expanding precarious prosperity

For each major change, a longer description is provided below, as well as a selection of related trends or counter trends that demonstrate the complex dynamics underpinning the change.

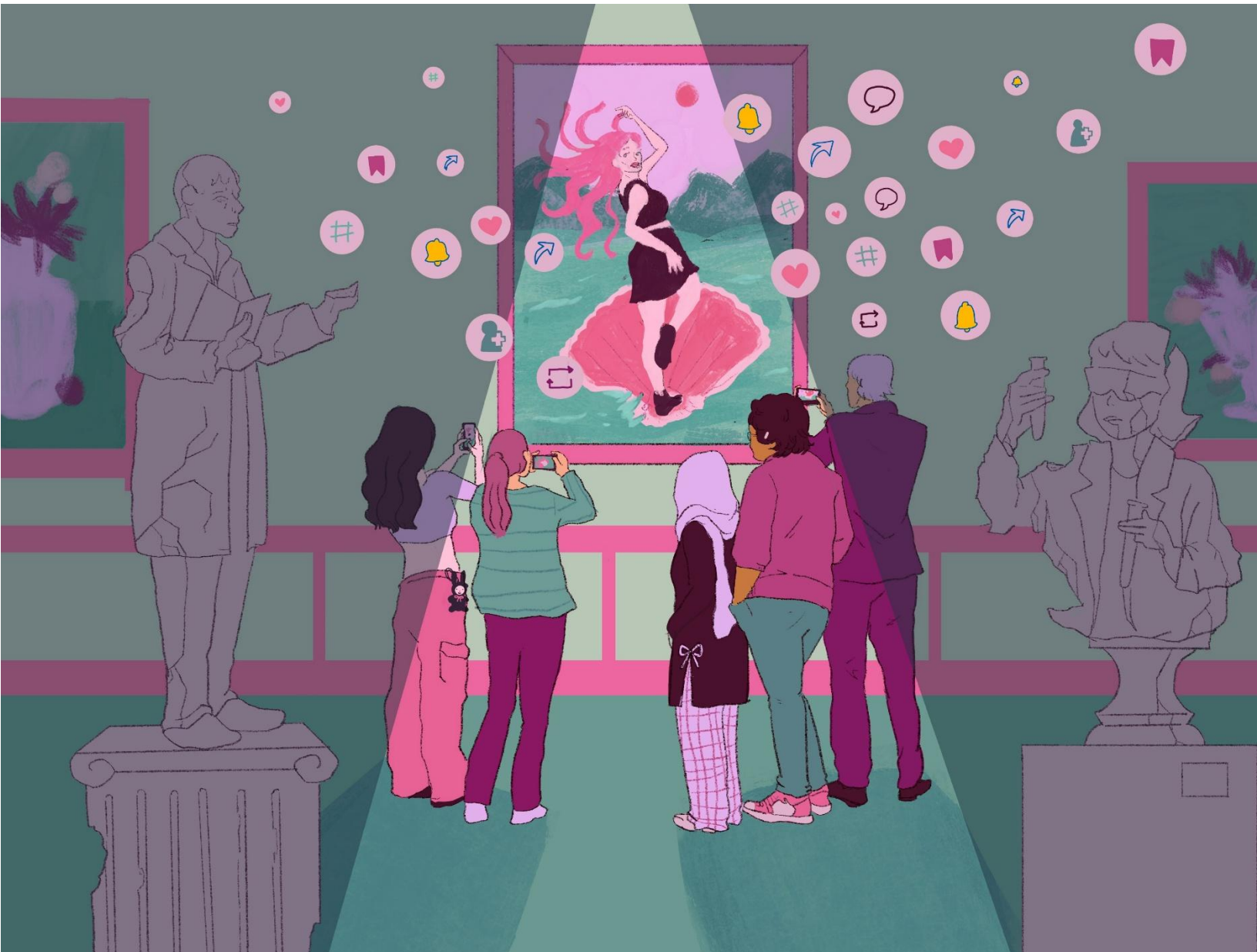
As noted, the trends are not meant to be predictive nor exhaustive of every possible change on the horizon. Instead, they highlight the complexity facing OHS professionals in the years to come.

With these descriptions, we aim to provide a foundation for OHS professionals, policy-makers and researchers to identify areas that would benefit from planning and proactive responses.

For each major trend, there are references to sources or signals of each change that offer insight into the breadth of available evidence in each area. Assessing the legitimacy or credibility of each signal is not a requirement of the horizon scanning process. Given the mixture of peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed sources uncovered in the horizon scanning process, the inclusion of these signals should not be taken as endorsement of the quality of evidence. Rather, the objective in sharing evidence sources is to be open to ideas from inside academia and outside of academia. For transparency, footnotes for the sources of the various signals included in this report are provided, so that interested readers can determine the quality of the evidence.

Major change 1: Eroding institutional trust

In 2025, more than 60 per cent of Canadians believed government and business leaders mislead the public (14). By 2040, a shift in public trust may transform how individuals relate to health systems, governments, and other traditional sources of authority. For the OHS community, this erosion of trust could represent a structural challenge that impacts the ways in which workers respond to workplace safety directions and messages, OHS regulators, public health campaigns, and implementation of health interventions.



Related trends

- **In TikTok we trust:** *People are turning away from experts—and toward influencers.*
  A recent survey including participants from 16 countries found that 38 per cent of 18- to 34-year-olds (up from 26 per cent in 2024) disregard medical guidance by their primary health-care provider in favour of advice from social media (15).

- **Doctor, what's your evidence?**: *Health-care systems are no longer viewed as neutral or trustworthy***.**
  In 2025, 47 per cent of 18- to 34-year-olds reported they may not trust the advice of health-care providers, or may even stop seeing them altogether, unless they share similar political beliefs (15). Polarizing media environments make it harder to establish consensus on health advice (16).

- **Science under siege:** *Shifting political agendas, rising distrust, and related funding cuts threaten scientific progress.*
  While trust in scientists among Canadians remains relatively strong at 78 per cent, this is not the case in all other countries (14). Health research programs and funding are declining, which may reduce access to specialist scholarship and information for legislative development (17).

- **The watched workplace:** *Worker surveillance is expanding in scope and sophistication, reshaping how employers monitor and manage their workforce.*
  The majority of large U.S. employers now use some form of surveillance, both in physical spaces—such as offices and meeting rooms—and in digital or remote environments (18). Worker surveillance is permeating a range of occupations including those with diverse physical and cognitive demands.

Implications for work and health in 2040

- The increasing volume and sources of information create challenges in discerning which sources and what information are trustworthy. For the OHS field, this may undermine trust in evidence-based protocols and increase resistance to OHS initiatives, from workplace vaccination campaigns to organizational climate adaptation strategies.
- OHS research programs may face significant cutbacks that impact the development of OSH policies and legislation.
- Increased polarization may push workers to seek out work environments or shape their existing work environments to those that share their personal values. This may lead to new workplace conflicts and reduced productivity across work teams.

- Greater distrust of regulators may result in reduced compliance with health and safety protocols, and less protection from physical and psychosocial risks in the workplace.
- With declining trust, employers may increase worker surveillance to monitor work performance. This may enable workplaces to recognize high-performing employees and learn from them. It may also increase worker stress and distrust, and behaviours to circumvent surveillance.

Important questions for practitioners, policy-makers and researchers:

- How can trust be strengthened in occupational health and safety (OHS) guidance when traditional sources of authority are questioned or ignored? What new communication channels could be used to reach target groups?
- What new occupational health and safety-focused strategies are needed to counter misinformation and communicate effectively? How can we influence the influencer?
- How can workplaces address growing polarization of personal values that may undermine team cohesion and compliance and shape worker health and equity?
- What role can OHS professionals play in strengthening institutional credibility while remaining evidence-based and inclusive?
- How will privacy and autonomy be protected by workplaces in increasingly monitored environments?

Major change 2: Increasing longevity and difference across social generations

Aging populations (19) and declining fertility rates (20) are transforming the makeup of the labour force, while immigration will play a critical role in population growth and economic sustainability. Social generations (e.g., Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, Gen Z, Gen Alpha) are differentiated from one another in their different exposures to technology and cultural changes, which can mean different expectations for work in the future.

Related trends

- **Gray horizons:** *Super aging countries are growing.*
  By 2040, all but four G20 countries will be classified as "super-aging", with more than 20 per cent of their populations over 65 years old (21).

- **Hello, centenarians:** *Humans may live longer than ever before.*
  Some people are predicting that humans will be able to live well past 120 years with nanotechnology developments that include a combination of AI and biotech to repair damage from aging (22).

- **Five social generations, one workplace:** *From Baby Boomers to Gen Alpha, social generations can bring distinct values, communication styles, and workplace expectations.*
  The workforce of 2040 will need to be more age-inclusive, adaptive, and responsive to intergenerational needs. Employers will be challenged to rethink everything from benefits and career pathways to workplace design, group dynamics and technology, as they navigate a more diverse workforce.

- **Robots to the rescue:** *As the workforce ages, automation is accelerating to meet rising needs***.**
  Researchers note that as the workforce ages, the automation of various occupations is accelerating to fill gaps in manual labour, especially where younger or middle-aged workers are in short supply (23).

- **Tech-enabled longevity:** *An AI-enabled older workforce is increasing.*
  As populations age, cognitive decline remains a concern for OHS, with early-onset dementia projected to rise by 59 per cent by 2050 (24). Research shows that older adults who regularly use digital devices, such as smartphones, experience slower rates of cognitive decline (25).

Implications for work and health in 2040

- With life expectancy increasing by up to 40 years, working lives will also need to extend. Entering new careers can be associated with elevated risk of an occupational injury(26). Ongoing career changes over an extended working life create a need for OHS training alongside reskilling.
- Dementia-friendly workforce accommodations may be needed. AI and technological developments will be needed to support these accommodations and facilitate OHS.

- The number of injuries might rise due to an increasing proportion of older workers who may be newer to their jobs and /or experiencing cognitive decline.

Important questions for practitioners, policy-makers and researchers:

- How can organizations redesign work, benefits, and career pathways to support an extended working life, while ensuring productivity, equity, safety, and worker wellbeing across all life stages?
- What kinds of OHS training will need to be developed to address worker needs across different social generations? Will different social generations have different expectations and needs?
- What role can training, tools and technology play in supporting cognitive health and dementia-friendly workplaces to maximize health and safety?
- How will OHS standards need to evolve to address injury risk in an aging, multi-career workforce working alongside robots and automation?

Major change 3: Intensified climate impacts

By 2040, the climate crisis could be one of the most significant forces shaping daily life (27) and, by extension, work and health. From direct health impacts to systemic shifts in governance, energy, and infrastructure, climate changes are fundamentally transforming working conditions, health risks, and OHS standards across sectors.

Related trends

- **Weather is the new boss:** *Weather extremes are influencing occupational health and safety needs.*
  Many countries are already experiencing a rise in climate-related health risks—from extreme heat (28) and cold to increased forest fires (29) and declining air quality (30). As a result, construction workers, agricultural labourers, emergency responders, and other outdoor workers are increasingly exposed to conditions that exceed human physical limits.

- **Future pandemics:** *Potential for an increase in animal-to-human diseases is rising***.**
  As climates shift and temperatures rise, there is an increase in animals moving between ecosystems (31), raising the chances of interspecies disease spread and future pandemics. As an example, avian flu, an infectious disease normally experienced by birds, has now been found in dairy cattle, sparking concerns of transmission to humans in future (32).

- **Ecocide:** *Legal and moral accountability is intensifying***.**
  An American woman has filed a wrongful death lawsuit against three oil companies, claiming they contributed to her mother's death during the 2021 Pacific Northwest heat wave (33). Meanwhile, a group of island nations are pushing to have ecocide (defined as the destruction of large areas of the natural environment as a consequence of human activity) recognized by the International Criminal Court (34). Both signal a possible future where employers may face stronger legal repercussions for exposing workers to climate-related harms.

- **Disaster economy:** *New climate-change response jobs are emerging***.**
  The climate crisis is giving rise to a growing industry of disaster response (35), recovery, and climate adaptation—creating both new jobs and new risks (36). From wildfire mitigation (37) to climate-resilient construction (38), these sectors will need innovation in OHS policies.

- **Clean energy breakthroughs:** *Energy transitions are shifting work environments***.**
  Innovations in clean energy, from solar energy (39), wind and geothermal energy, hydroelectric power, and bioenergy to the potential of green hydrogen and Canadian breakthroughs in fusion (40), may offer opportunities for healthier natural environments, but also create new occupational risks.

- **Sicker and sicker:** *Workers may be sicker—both physically and mentally—driven by a complex mix of environmental, lifestyle, and societal factors***.**
  Environmental factors may be undermining worker wellbeing. Some suggest a link between microplastics, now found in air, water, and food, and increased rates of depression, dementia (41), and even antibiotic resistance (42), posing new threats to both mental and physical health. The rise of persistent pollutants like "forever chemicals" (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances) adds further concern.

- **Interspecies councils:** *New forms of governance are challenging conventional paradigms.*
  Emerging ideas like interspecies councils (43), where humans consider non-human life in decision-making, reflect a deeper shift toward ecological justice. Though largely theoretical, these governance experiments may influence how policies related to land use, health equity, and labour rights are being imagined in a climate-altered world.

Implications for work and health in 2040

- Workers will likely face increased and sustained exposure to extreme heat, UV radiation, poor air quality and allergens, and climate-related trauma, as well as vector-borne diseases that may increase OHS risks.
- Climate change may compromise existing infrastructure, which in turn, may create unsafe working conditions and increased needs for infrastructure repair and climate-resilient modernization.
- There may be an increased demand for telework and remote work due to environmental impacts and/or pandemic concerns.
- New workplace risks may emerge from climate-driven sectors (e.g., disaster response, renewable energy), eco anxiety, and technologies.
- There may be heightened legal and ethical accountability for climate-related harm to workers.
- With cancer and chronic illness increasingly affecting early- and mid-career workers, organizations may need to provide new forms of leave, accommodations, and benefits to sustain workforce participation.

Important questions for practitioners, policy-makers and researchers:

- What are the OHS impacts of climate events on workers and who is most affected?
- How can employers adapt indoor and outdoor work environments to the greater needs associated with climate events?

- How can OHS systems proactively protect workers from rising climate-related risks, such as extreme heat, UV radiation, poor air quality, vector-borne diseases, and climate-induced trauma?
- What standards and infrastructure upgrades are needed to ensure workplace safety and wellbeing?
- How should OHS policies adapt to emerging legal and ethical expectations around employer responsibility for climate-related harms?
- What new supports—mental, physical, and systemic—are required as climate-driven industries and jobs expand?
- How can the exchange of information about climate-related OHS risks and prevention measures be strengthened between countries?

Major change 4: Algorithmic shifts

The emergence of Generative AI (GenAI) applications such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot and other emerging technologies are dominating discussions about the future of work (44). By 2040, GenAI may be deeply embedded in the workplace—reshaping job roles, physical and psychosocial working conditions, workplace relationships, health information flows, and trust in institutions and technology.

Related trends

- **AI in the cubicle:** *Automation is reshaping white-collar work***.**
  Generative AI is automating tasks once thought to require human judgment and capacity—report writing, diagnostics, communications, policy analysis, and even aspects of clinical care (45). This shift is reducing some cognitive workloads (46) but may also be introducing new potential risks for certain groups of workers: job insecurity (47), skill redundancy (48), and mental health strain (49) from navigating unclear roles or competing with machines.

- **When AI turns up the pressure:** *Generative AI is intensifying human work***.**
  The introduction of AI into coding activities is leading to an intensification of work in the same way that the robotisation of warehouses led to an intensification of pickers' work, particularly in logistics (50). AI is creating new workplace pressures, including the need for workers to stay on top of emerging technologies, rapid upskilling to remain competitive (51), monitoring worker productivity (52) and reviewing AI work.

- **The digital stress detective:** *AI-enabled monitoring is shifting from tracking productivity to identifying potential mental health issues.*
  While AI may be increasing workplace stress, there are AI tools being developed that are being used to support the mental health of workers by spotting stress and possible burnout (53).

- **AI on the org chart:** *AI is not just a tool, but a co-worker.*
  Business leaders are already preparing for this shift (54), with some requiring teams to justify new hires by proving AI can't do the job first. HR teams are reimagining their roles, now tasked with managing AI "employees" (55), including setting accountabilities, ethical standards, and performance metrics. This signals a shift toward hybrid human-AI teams and even AI-led organizations. At the same time, concerns about AI safety remain real, as researchers have shown how easily AI robots can be manipulated into misbehaving (56). As AI agents begin hiring other AI agents (57) and reshaping what organizations look like, the fundamental nature of work—and who or what performs it—is being redefined.

- **Wired minds:** *Brain-computer interfaces (BCIs) are moving from science fiction to emerging reality***.**
  Examples are everywhere: Companies are utilizing technology that translates thoughts into text using brain scans and AI (58), or testing new solutions that can help people with quadriplegia control devices with their minds (59). These developments provide examples that can signal a future where thought-powered interaction with devices may

become an everyday experience and require new OHS regulations.

- **Algorithmic accountability:** *AI regulation is becoming a workplace issue***.**
  Evolving AI regulations (60)—ranging from algorithmic accountability to data privacy and transparency—are directly impacting how employers can deploy technology. For example, AI tools used in hiring (57) or performance monitoring (61) may be subject to regulatory scrutiny.

- **AI's hidden footprint:** *Generative AI is not environmentally neutral***.**
  While it varies depending on the model (62), GenAI requires high levels of energy and water to be developed and sustained (63). As the climate crisis intensifies, it is possible that GenAI may experience environmental restrictions and/or public backlash.

- **AI Dr. Doolittle:** *AI is enabling interspecies communication***.**
  GenAI is being used to foster human-animal interactions. While the use of and support for therapy animals to promote accessibility and mental wellbeing continues to grow (64), it is possible that AI will enable animals to play an even greater role in the lives of workers.

- **The power of quantum:** *Quantum computing is expected to dramatically reshape the workplace***.**
  Unlike classical computers, quantum systems compute on atoms and can perform calculations in parallel, enabling breakthroughs in areas, such as drug discovery, energy innovation, and climate modeling. This technology is expected to catalyze workplace applications. Experts describe this as the next technological revolution (65), with the potential to unlock cures for diseases and solutions to global challenges, such as food scarcity. However, it comes with risks, including the potential for quantum systems to break current encryption methods, prompting the development of new post-quantum cybersecurity standards (66).

- **Counter trend: low tech work:** *Opting out of tech-driven careers.*
  A small but growing number of people may be deliberately opting out of tech-centric careers in favor of simpler, low-tech lifestyles (67). There is a growing interest in alternative paths, such as the "best jobs for going off the grid," (68) which promote living more slowly, closer to nature, and with less dependence on digital systems and its harms.

Implications for work and health in 2040

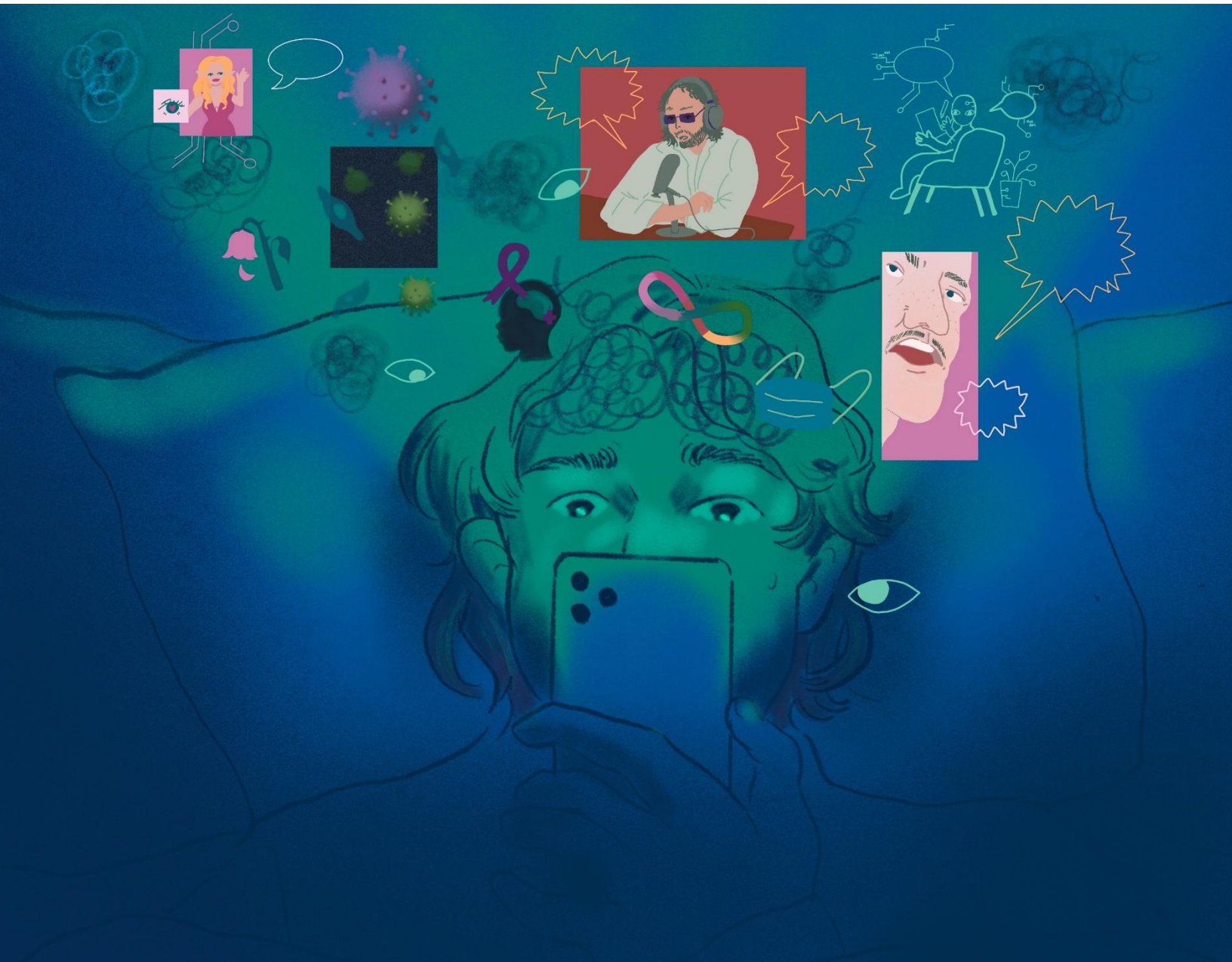
- Massive adoption of AI and automation could displace entire job categories, shrinking the human workforce, destabilizing labour markets, and reducing contributions to social programs—forcing governments and employers to rethink economic systems.
- Brain-computer interfaces and AI colleagues may blur human-machine boundaries, reshaping relationships and responsibilities with implications for safety and wellbeing. If an injury at work is caused by a human augmented by AI, who is responsible?
- Technological change risks deepening divides, with vulnerable groups pushed further behind while powerful actors consolidate advantage, intensifying social and workplace inequities.
- Digital fatigue, mental load from constant monitoring and privacy intrusions could create chronic health challenges requiring fresh approaches to worker health and safety.
- Quantum computing could both enable productivity gains and unleash new cyber threats, leaving workplaces vulnerable and necessitating innovation in security and governance.

Important questions for practitioners, policy-makers and researchers:

- What are the most prominent positive and negative changes to physical and psychosocial working conditions accompanying the adoption and use of AI systems? How do these changes impact worker health, safety, wellbeing, and equity?
- How can physical and psychological safety be promoted when workers collaborate with or compete against intelligent machines, including in high-risk or safety-critical settings?
- What approaches are most effective in mitigating the mental health impacts of AI-driven work intensification, surveillance, and role ambiguity?
- What labour standards, organizational policies, and upskilling approaches are needed to equitably support workers—including those from marginalized groups—in adapting to AI-driven change?

Major change 5: Isolation rising

In Canada, people eat on average only 8.4 meals a week with others (69). This transition to solo eating is one indicator behind why Canada received its lowest ranking to date in the World Happiness Index (70). In the EU, approximately 57 per cent of young Europeans between the ages of 18 and 35 are moderately or even severely lonely (71). By 2040, growing forms of isolation—social and political—are expected to reshape the mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing of Canada's workforce.



Related trends

- **Loneliness epidemic:** *Loneliness is a growing public health crisis***.**
  Across age groups and professions, rates of social isolation and loneliness continue to climb (72). Fewer informal connections, declining community participation, and the rise of individualized work arrangements are contributing to a widespread sense of disconnection and an increase in rates of mental health-related work disability (73).

- **Hybrid and alone:** *Remote work is here to stay, but the social fabric of the workplace is weakening.*
  Workplaces, once key sites of social interaction, are increasingly hybrid, remote, or fragmented (74). While some employers are now reinstating five-day, in-office work weeks (75), hybrid and remote work arrangements continue to grow (76), particularly among knowledge workers.

- **Men are not okay:** *There is a crisis among young men that is affecting their ability to engage in work and society***.**
  Many young men are single, lonely (77) and lacking close friendships (78). They may experience growing anger, embrace toxic masculinity fueled by online sources (79), and feel the need to blame others for this situation. The loss of social networks and a sense of purpose are contributing to what some are calling a "lost generation" of young men opting out of traditional pathways into work, family, and community.

- **Politics in the break room:** *Political polarization is increasing***.**
  Canada and Northern Europe, once perceived as relatively centrist, are facing rising political fragmentation and polarization (80) which is pushing people into the fringes and creating greater isolation. Society increasingly holds sharply divided views(81) and these in turn are reflected in the workplace. These tensions may show up on job sites (82) or health-care settings—sometimes undermining team cohesion and increasing workplace conflict (83).

- **AI romances:** *People are seeking connection—in new and unexpected places.*
  As human connection feels increasingly unreliable, some individuals are forming deep emotional ties with AI (84). Chatbots and digital companions are now filling roles once occupied by friends, mentors, or romantic partners (85). OHS professionals must consider how digital relationships may affect worker health, social functioning, and workplace communication—especially for isolated or remote workers.

- **Counter trend: embracing inclusion:** *From invisibility to inclusion at work*
  In contrast, workplaces are beginning to move toward greater recognition and support for health conditions that have long been overlooked and may impact work. As an example, among middle-aged women, there is growing awareness of the impact of attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (86), autism (87) and menopause (88) on productivity. There is also now a greater understanding of the cognitive and neurological shifts across the life course. Employers are beginning to recognize that creating supportive environments and office spaces for neurodivergent employees and for those experiencing major life-stage changes is not just about inclusion—it's a strategic advantage (89).

Implications for work and health in 2040

- Mental health may become a central workplace safety metric, reshaping OHS policies, compliance, and employer responsibilities.
- The decline in men's mental health could affect labour participation and productivity, while rising polarization among some young men may fuel unsafe behaviours, harassment, and violence at work.
- Greater research, funding, and policy attention to conditions historically ignored, including those that impact women, could lead to healthier, more inclusive, and more productive working lives.
- Employers may take on greater responsibility for promoting health and wellbeing (through lifestyle initiatives, insurance coverage, and disease management).

Important questions for practitioners, policy-makers and researchers:

- How does isolation relate to different worker OHS and equity outcomes?
- How can workplaces foster meaningful social connection and reduce loneliness among workers in remote, hybrid, and individualized work environments?
- What mental health supports are needed to address the compounded impacts of isolation, polarization, and digital dependency?
- How should OHS frameworks evolve to manage rising workplace conflict rooted in ideological divisions?
- What role can OHS professionals play in promoting inclusive and culturally responsive approaches to wellbeing at work?

Major change 6: Horizons of growing hostility

By 2040, intensifying global conflict and power struggles may create ripple effects that reach deep into workplaces, health systems, and the OHS landscape. In today's digital context, conflict is no longer limited to battlefields; it can play out in economic, digital, environmental, cultural and informational spheres.

Related trends

- **The price of tension:** *Geopolitical tensions are reshaping the global economy.*
  It is projected that just the possible threat of a hypothetical geopolitical conflict could expose the global economy to losses of US$14.5 trillion over a five-year period (90). Ongoing trade disputes and escalating tariffs are exposing the fragility of supply chains and creating economic volatility (91). These pressures are leading to job insecurity (92), and renewed interest in domestic self-sufficiency (93), all of which influence worker stress levels (94) and create new questions about an employer's obligation to protect health.

- **Cyber threats:** *Cybersecurity is a workplace safety issue.*
  According to a World Economic Forum survey (95), 42 per cent of participating organizations reported incidents of phishing and social engineering attacks in 2024. Cyber breaches not only risk data privacy but can halt operations (96), interrupt patient care (97), and lead to widespread mental distress (98) among both workers and the public.

- **Climate wars:** *Future wars will be fought over water, food, and climate resilience.*
  It is estimated that up to 1.36 billion people will be severely food insecure by 2050 due to water shortages and other climate impacts to food growing (99). Water is emerging as the next flashpoint of global conflict and access to water may be used as a weapon (100). For the OHS community, this means preparing for a world where resource scarcity and climate volatility not only drive economic instability and displacement, but also create new risks for workers in sectors ranging from agriculture to emergency response to critical infrastructure.

- **The unelected elite:** *Political power is shifting to unelected influencers***.**
  Billionaires with global platforms (101). The rise of unelected influencers has the potential to erode traditional democratic institutions and create new power dynamics in policy decisions, which may over time impact work and health standards.

- **Narrative warfare:** *Information warfare is undermining shared reality.*
  Global conflict now includes narrative warfare (102)—strategic misinformation and propaganda spread via digital channels, which may also hold specific ideological perspectives. For occupational health and safety, this erosion of shared facts may make it difficult to establish consensus on safety protocols, health guidance, or risk communications—turning once-straightforward workplace policies into ideological battlegrounds.

Implications for work and health in 2040

- Increased conflict-associated morbidity and mortality will impact workers, families and society.
- Lower labour force participation if workers are deployed to respond to conflicts.
- Workplace disruptions from cyberattacks or geopolitical instability, increasing stress and anxiety among workers and decreasing their productivity.
- Economic volatility from tariffs and resource conflicts creates financial pressure and job stress for people who work in certain industries.
- Further erosion of trust in institutions stemming from information warfare and narrative manipulation could deteriorate workers' confidence in OHS guidance that is shared to them by governmental and non-governmental organizations.
- Companies may become more agile and flexible to adapt to ongoing changes in the economic context, leading to local economic development and supply chain localization.
- Growth of conflict and defense-related industries, including personal security forces and mercenaries. The rise of non-state security actors may create new job risks and test traditional workplace relationships and regulations.

Important questions for practitioners, policy-makers and researchers:

- What direct and indirect OHS risks emerge because of geopolitical conflict?
- How can organizations build OHS strategies that promote health and safety amidst ongoing uncertainty, economic volatility, and global conflict?
- What are the OHS implications of cyberattacks and digital disruptions that impact workplace safety?
- What new policies and supports are needed to protect workers in industries vulnerable to geopolitical shocks, supply chain disruptions, or resource scarcity?

Major change 7: Expanding precarious prosperity

In Canada today, half of the population is struggling to afford day-to-day expenses (103). Nearly a quarter of Canadian residents report being unable to afford food (104), while two-thirds of residents cannot afford housing costs above $1,700 a month (105). As we look toward 2040, economic precarity could continue to be a defining challenge for workers, employers, and health systems alike. There are also signals of change that illuminate tensions and counter trends present, suggesting a complex future for this major change; despite an economically unpredictable environment for workers, some are choosing alternative career paths where financial drivers may not be at the forefront of these choices (106).

Related trends

- **Work without guarantees:** *Job precarity is expanding across all sectors***.**
  Some reports suggest nearly a quarter of Canadians are engaging in gig work to supplement their income (107). Virtual work is enabling some workers to hold multiple full time jobs at once (108). Fractional employment is also on the rise, as companies opt to access executive talent without paying a full salary (109).

- **Priced out of the city:** *Living in cities is becoming unaffordable.*
  Urban centres, long the hubs of employment and health services, are increasingly out of reach for working people. For many, even stable employment no longer guarantees economic security (110).

- **The grocery squeeze:** *A trip to the grocery store is expensive.*
  In 2025, grocery prices continued to outpace inflation(111). For occupational health and safety, this growing food insecurity may contribute to increased stress, fatigue, and malnutrition among workers—undermining physical health, productivity, and overall workplace safety.

- **Consolidation nation:** *The rise of the megacorp is reshaping the labour landscape***.**
  Corporate consolidation continues across sectors in Canada—from finance (112) to resource extraction (113) to retail (114). This can result in eroded worker protections, fewer benefits, and less workplace autonomy.

- **Public services under strain:** *Governments are under pressure and facing fiscal pressures.*
  As Canadian government debt grows (115) and budgets are stretched thin (116), public services—including health care, housing, employment supports, and funding for independent and rigorous research—may become more difficult to access.

- **Counter trend: beyond the conventional path:** *People are adjusting their expectations—and behaviours.*
  Some are choosing to live in intergenerational (117) or collective housing (118) to offset costs. Others are pursuing non-traditional careers (119), informal economies (120), or slow work (121) lifestyles that may place greater value on working at a measured paced to support wellbeing, in contrast to current fast-paced, high-pressure, productivity-at-all-costs norms. While these responses may promote resilience and autonomy, they may also reflect a loss of faith in conventional economic pathways and formal institutions.

- **Counter trend: demanding flexibility:** *Gen Z and Millennials are redefining work norms.* In contrast to economic drivers, flexibility is no longer a perk; it's a baseline expectation, especially among younger workers (122). From mini-retirements (123) and unpaid sabbaticals (124) to "teen-ternity" (125) leaves and adult gap years, more people are veering away from the traditional path and embracing careers (126) and work arrangements (127) that evolve with their passions and personal circumstances and may offer more control over time (121).

- **Counter trend: conscious unbossing:** *Gen Z is opting out of burnout and performative productivity.*
  According to some surveys, Gen Z is significantly more likely than previous generations to avoid leadership positions in order to protect their mental health—a trend described as "conscious unbossing" (128). Instead of aspiring to executive roles at any cost, they are gravitating toward slower, more sustainable career paths that align with their values, even when facing financial instability.

Implications for work and health in 2040

- Lower-income workers may face heightened risks from unsafe housing, energy insecurity and precarious jobs, widening health and social inequities.
- As work becomes more transient and non-traditional, traditional employer-sponsored health plans may disappear, driving innovations in tax, insurance and health-care coverage and potentially impacting the ability to communicate OHS information across a dispersed workforce.
- Rising costs may limit small and mid-sized employers' ability to invest in health and safety, creating uneven protections across the labour market.
- Governments and public services may downsize to respond to public demand, tariffs and other financial strains.
- With Gen Z shaping norms, four-day workweeks, individualized schedules and even burnout-prevention days may redefine productivity and balance.
- Community hubs and alternative spaces may replace traditional offices as vital sites for social connection, wellbeing and resilience.

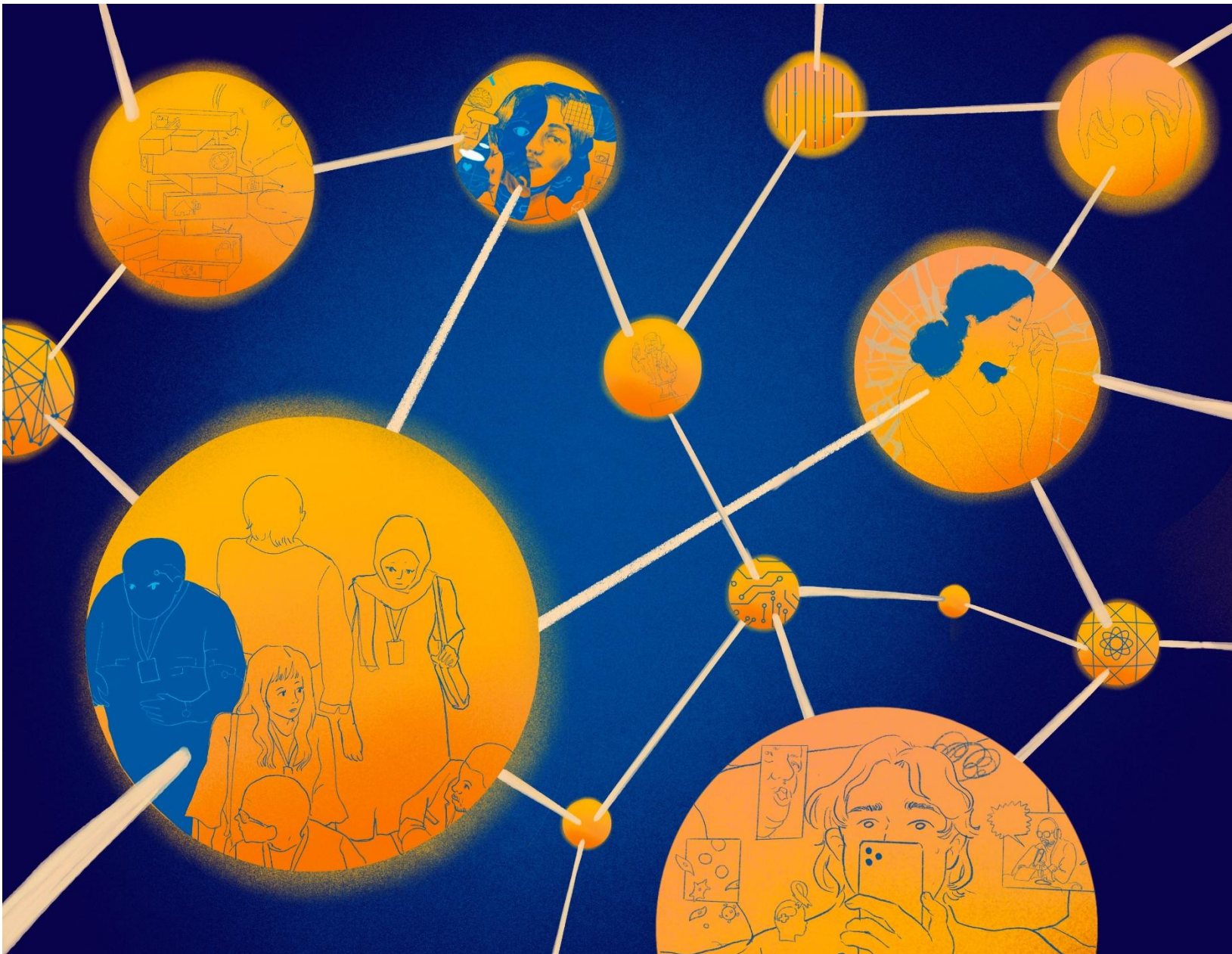
Important questions for practitioners, policy-makers and researchers are:

- How can OHS and labour systems continue to survive and thrive within an economically precarious context?
- How can OHS and labour systems adapt to serve increasingly precarious, transient and under-resourced workers across sectors to navigate emerging inequities?

- What new models of health-care or social benefit delivery are needed to address gaps left by declining access to employer-sponsored or public health programs?
- What role do workplaces have in recognizing the other social determinants of health and supporting employees through chronic financial stress, housing insecurity, or food instability?
- What strategies can help ensure equitable health protections and support for low-wage or gig workers who are disproportionately exposed to economic and environmental risk factors?
- How can organizations adapt to a workforce that values purpose, flexibility and wellbeing over traditional career norms and management structures?

Discussion and key takeaways

Looking toward 2040, the future of work and health has the potential to be shaped by profound demographic, technological, environmental and geopolitical shifts. Taken together, the key changes explored in this report highlight potential worlds where the foundations of trust, stability and wellbeing are being reshaped and where OHS professionals, policy-makers and research may be required to adapt with foresight, agility and care.



When examining the different future changes highlighted in the results section, there are several salient themes with likely important practical implications for OHS professionals, researchers and policy-makers:

- **Trust is fractured.** From the Eroding Institutional Trust to Horizons of Growing Hostility, declining faith in institutions, the rise of influencers and growing misinformation will require new approaches to communication and demonstrations of legitimacy to enhance worker engagement. A loss of trust may increase the questioning of evidence-based approaches to reduce work injury and work safety. It may make it more difficult to implement new strategies to promote health, safety and wellbeing and respond to many of the changes highlighted in this report.

- **Technology is redefining work.** The Algorithmic Shift highlights the rapid embedding of AI, automation and quantum systems into every aspect of work—reshaping roles, relationships and even identity, while creating both new opportunities for health support and new risks to safety and equity. The blurring of lines between workers and machines may completely shift our understanding of who is responsible for a workplace injury or illness. OHS professionals, policy-makers and researchers may also see these changes as opportunities for the OHS community to collaborate and evolve through digitalization, robots and AI.

- **Workforces and workplaces are transforming.** The Increasing Longevity and Differences across Social Generations could result in five social generational cohorts coming together in the workplace, while Expanding Precarious Prosperity underscores how economic insecurity and rising costs will fundamentally alter employment decisions, benefits and worker health.

- **Climate change is unavoidable.** In Intensified Climate Impacts, workers face direct health hazards from heat, smoke and extreme weather, alongside systemic disruptions to industries, infrastructure and public health systems. Climate protection, low-carbon industry and climate adaptation are central to workplace resilience.

- **Social fabric is fraying.** Isolation Rising demonstrates how loneliness, polarization and declining mental health could reshape how people connect, both inside and outside the workplace—requiring OHS systems to prioritize inclusion, resilience and belonging.

- **Global instability reaches work.** Horizons of Growing Hostility reminds us that conflict is no longer contained to distant battlefields; it is digital, economic and environmental,

with ripple effects that impact morbidity and mortality, touch supply chains, worker stress and the very conditions of safe work.

- **Hope amidst uncertainty.** There are signals of change that highlight opportunities for policy-makers and practitioners to amplify. These include inclusive workplaces, the use of technology and robots that enable greater worker safety, clean energy breakthroughs creating healthier work environments, flexibility and expectations changing work models, and the use of older workers, animals and AI companions to fill labour needs.

- **The futures of work and health are not fixed.** A single breakthrough or disruptive event, such as a climate catastrophe, global conflict, emergence of another pandemic or the rise of uncontrolled AI, could dramatically overturn the assumptions used in this report and make the projections above obsolete overnight. This uncertainty underscores the need for continuous horizon scanning, scenario planning and adaptive strategies to ensure that practitioners and policy-makers can pivot quickly, no matter how the future unfolds.

In sum, the futures of work and health outlined in this report will demand more than incremental adjustments. OHS professionals, policy-makers and researchers must prepare for a world where risks will likely become more complex, interconnected and systemic—where safeguarding worker wellbeing means not only protecting against immediate hazards, but also building resilience to the profound shifts reshaping our societies, economies and workplaces.

Conclusion and next steps

For the OHS community, this moment calls for a bold reimagining of how we define safety, support wellbeing, and design resilient systems that respond to the needs of an ever-evolving workforce.

This report offers a starting point—not a roadmap—for understanding what might lie ahead. It is possible that some of the major changes may not emerge while others may contribute to more substantial change. By exploring a wide range of signals and possible futures, this report invites researchers, practitioners and institutions to think differently, act early and collaborate more deeply.

To prepare for the futures of work and health, the following actions may be considered based on the findings of this report:

1. **Embed foresight into work and health research, strategy and planning.**
   It is recommended to establish horizon scanning and scenario analysis as regular practices within OHS research, policy and program development to account for sudden breakthroughs or shocks.

2. **Strengthen cross-sector collaboration.**
   We need to continue to build stronger partnerships between health, labour, technology, environment and education sectors to respond to interconnected future risks to health.

3. **Centre inclusion in all work and health strategies, programs and policies.**
   As demographic, technological and economic shifts accelerate, OHS policies must actively address inequities in who is most exposed to risk, who benefits from technology and who has access to safe and dignified work.

4. **Redesign workplaces for a multi-generational, more inclusive, tech-enabled future.**
   Employers, policy-makers and OHS leaders should reimagine workplace design, career pathways and safety standards to accommodate a diverse workforce.

5. **Address mental health, belonging and social resilience as core safety issues.**
   OHS frameworks must continue to expand to include psychosocial risk prevention, mental health promotion and strategies that foster connection, inclusion and trust, especially in remote and hybrid workplaces.

6. **Prepare for climate resilience and systemic disruption.**
   OHS leaders must work with employers, governments and urban planners to ensure

workplaces are climate-resilient and sustainable, with updated standards, infrastructure and emergency preparedness.

7. **Shape ethical and responsible technology adoption.**
   OHS professionals should be active participants in setting standards for algorithmic accountability, ethical data use and equitable access to technological tools that enhance, not erode, worker wellbeing.

8. **Support research and innovation on the margins.**
   Fund and amplify research on ongoing and underexplored trends that may grow in significance by 2040.

The futures of work and health in 2040 will not be defined by a single change or trend, but by the convergence of many changes. OHS practitioners, policy-makers and researchers have an opportunity to lead by anticipating risks, embracing innovation and co-creating futures that prioritize equity, resilience and human wellbeing. The task ahead is not just to protect workers from harm, but to build systems that enable all workers to thrive and adapt, no matter how uncertain, volatile, or surprising the future becomes.

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