

Selecting your health and safety partner

A guide to choosing the right level of
support for your business



Choosing the right approach to health and safety management is a significant strategic decision...

Particularly as legislation and compliance requirements evolve. On top of minimising risks across your business, the ideal safety set-up powers productivity, reduces operational friction, and boosts staff retention and engagement.

Under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, companies must 'protect the health, safety, and welfare of their employees and other people who might be affected by their business'.

The law sets out clear obligations to reduce risks and implement robust safety systems, procedures, and controls – but compliance means so much more than dealing with hazards. It's a mark of integrity, a key strand of your company culture, and a solid foundation for business growth.

However, the best route to compliance isn't always a clear-cut decision.

- Some companies opt to oversee health and safety entirely in-house, relying on internal staff to develop policies, conduct risk assessments, and drive compliance performance.
- Other organisations work with an external provider, accessing safety guidance on an ad hoc basis.
- An increasing number of employers engage in a structured partnership with a dedicated consultant delivering bespoke solutions and comprehensive, company-wide support.

As your business grows, safety challenges change. While cost, competence, and convenience are key factors when choosing health and safety support, your selection should reflect your company's present – and future – compliance needs.

This guide sets out your key considerations when selecting the most suitable provider and level of safety support for your organisation. We'll weigh up the strengths and limitations of common safety management models – including in-house options, hybrid arrangements, and collaborative full-service partnerships – to help you make the best decision for your business.

"There's a significant difference between just receiving safety advice and having a dedicated partner supporting your business and invested in your compliance. Choosing the right level of support now is far less costly than finding out you had the wrong one later."

*Ian Hatherly, Managing Director,
Opus Safety*

Four common safety management models

A guide to choosing the right level of support for your business



Under health and safety law, you're required to identify, assess, and control risks associated with your business activities. Part of this commitment is to appoint one or more competent persons with the skills, knowledge, and training to assist you in meeting your health and safety legal duties.

What's the right approach for you?

How you fulfil your safety obligations is your choice. Companies adopt a range of approaches to support their health and safety goals – often driven by organisational size, budget, and internal expertise.

The ideal model will protect employees and the public from harm, as well as deliver measurable business benefits – from reduced turnover to stronger productivity and employee engagement. Conversely, poorly managed safety programmes can increase the odds of regulatory enforcement, financial penalties, reputational damage, and operational downtime.

Businesses typically choose from four key approaches:

In-house appointments

In-house models place the responsibility for creating a safe, compliant workplace on internal staff.

Some organisations employ highly qualified safety managers and compliance professionals to lead their programmes, however this is often not a viable solution for many businesses. As a result, they often rely on operational managers or administrators to undertake essential safety tasks – such as risk assessments and policy planning – alongside the demands of their everyday roles.

While this approach may appear cost-effective in the short term, it can increase legal and operational risks if in-house safety staff lack appropriate skills, training, and resources.

Four common safety management models

What's the right approach for you?

Advantages	Limitations
Immediate control over compliance policies, processes, and controls.	Risk of outdated practices, incorrect data, and incomplete documentation due to living in an 'internal' safety bubble
Quick decision-making and approval processes.	Greater likelihood of compliance gaps or overlooked risks and lack of employee buy-in when compared to advice given from a more experienced safety person or external consultancy.
Operational managers can be agile in terms of priorities they set within the business.	Operational managers may be conflicted with regard to 'getting the product out of the door' vs safety.
In-depth organisational understanding.	Limited benchmarking and wider industry knowledge.

Ad hoc external services

Some companies strengthen in-house safety capabilities with ad hoc external support, working with a qualified advisor on a project-by-project basis.

Often triggered by safety incidents or pressing legal requirements, this arrangement typically involves engaging a health and safety consultant to complete a single activity, such as a policy review, risk assessment, or accident investigation.

Although 'one-off' support can provide targeted expertise for specific tasks, it often lacks the joined-up oversight of a trusted partner relationship.

Four common safety management models

What's the right approach for you?

Advantages	Limitations
No long-term contract or commitment.	Lack of continuity or strategic direction.
Access to specialist expertise when required.	People undertaking one-off work may have limited understanding of the organisation.
Flexible and potentially cost-effective support for standalone tasks.	Typically a reactive approach to health and safety management.
Useful for addressing specific gaps or projects.	Inconsistent recommendations and approaches if working with multiple providers.

Retained advisor

Working with a retained advisor means maintaining an ongoing relationship with a health and safety professional who offers guidance when required. This approach generally involves intermittent support, occasional visits, and telephone or email advice.

A retained arrangement provides 'on call' access to a safety specialist, backed up by periodic reviews, guidance, and documentation support. Businesses that use retained models can benefit from valuable safety support but may need more structured management to achieve consistent compliance and continuous improvement.

Advantages	Limitations
Greater continuity than ad hoc consultancy.	Support may still be largely reactive.
Reliable professional advice when issues arise.	Limited proactive monitoring or auditing, potentially leading to unexpected compliance gaps.
Improved understanding of the business's needs and challenges over time.	Client typically responsible for implementing all systems, policies, and safety controls.
More predictable cost structure than ad hoc arrangements.	Not fully embedded in the organisation's culture and business processes.

Four common safety management models

What's the right approach for you?

Competent person partner

The most comprehensive approach to compliance management is a formal partnership with a dedicated health and safety consultant. Acting as an extension of the business, the provider serves as the organisation's competent person, ensures regulatory compliance, and delivers a structured programme of audits, reviews, and risk reduction – often supported by value-added services and work-saving digital tools.

A competent person partnership offers the most robust and sustainable framework for health and safety management, blending strategic vision with day-to-day support. Featuring ongoing engagement and contractual accountability, this model helps you use proven, consistent methodologies to build an embedded and effective compliance culture.

Advantages	Limitations
Immediate access to competent person support, cross-sector expertise, and tailored safety solutions.	Not suited to organisations that only need occasional, standalone support for isolated tasks.
Contractual accountability and greater assurance of regulatory compliance.	Requires effective collaboration between the organisation and the provider.
Proactive safety management and identification of emerging issues.	
One-to-one consultancy, continuity of support, and in-depth business knowledge.	



What to look for in a safety provider

When choosing a health and safety provider, there are several key factors to consider. Lets take a further look...

Your choice of health and safety support reaches beyond basic compliance, impacting results, productivity, and worker wellbeing. Too often, the move to upgrade or formalise compliance support follows an incident or near miss – prompting a quick decision without due consideration.

However, selecting suitable safety support should be a proactive process – and an ongoing consideration. Recognising when it's time to review or expand your approach is an important step in maintaining compliance and a strong safety culture. It could be time to revisit your support model if:

- Your business is growing. If your company is adding new sites, increasing your workforce, or taking on larger projects, you may benefit from more structured support, such as regular audits, proactive guidance, and more robust safety management systems.
- You're entering new sectors. Developing different services, technologies, or operational processes can introduce unfamiliar risks. External expertise can help to identify hazards early, shape suitable control measures, and start new operations on a safe footing.
- You're subject to new laws or industry standards. It's your duty to keep pace with regulatory changes across your sector. A trusted partner can offer targeted reviews and guidance to ensure your safety activities remain aligned with current best practices.
- You've experienced an accident, near miss, or enforcement action. A higher level of support can identify root causes of compliance issues, introduce corrective action plans, and strengthen systems to prevent future incidents.
- Your internal safety staff are stretched. If your in-house competent person is struggling to dedicate the necessary time to health and safety, working with an external specialist – through ad hoc support or an ongoing partnership – can restore focus and lighten the operational load.



Does your partner fit your current and future needs?

What to look for in a safety provider

Safety management requirements vary depending on your organisation's size, risks, and long-term strategy. When choosing a health and safety provider, there are several key factors to consider:

- **Competence and credibility.** Your partner should hold the relevant qualifications, industry accreditations, and practical experience to expertly support your sector and help you stay current with changing legislation and best practices. Consider their client retention rate, if consultants are enforcement officers, and whether they view health and safety in a commercial context.
- **Flexible, comprehensive services.** Your safety needs change over time. Look for a partner you can grow with, with broad expertise to support current and future safety requirements. Key services should cover competent person support, risk assessment, occupational health, training, fire safety, and employee wellbeing. Additional support may include policy design and development, incident investigations, and strategic planning.
- **Partnership approach.** Long-term relationships create safer, more resilient companies. Align your business with a partner who earns your trust, delivers consistent support, and shapes solutions to fit your specific business goals and challenges.
- **Cultural fit.** Your partner should know your business inside and out, shaping solutions that address your unique challenges. Choose a provider that can connect and communicate with teams at all levels – from the shopfloor to the C-suite – to raise standards and embed compliance into your daily operations.



What else to consider when choosing a safety partner

Futureproof compliance, scale safety with one trusted partner.

Effective compliance support builds a safer, stronger, and more robust organisation over time. As your safety objectives evolve, the right provider will offer added-value services to suit your changing needs – from targeted staff training to streamlined processes and detailed reporting.

Factoring these additional features into your initial search will futureproof your compliance efforts, allowing you to scale your safety programme with a single trusted partner.

Do they provide a digital source of truth?

Online compliance management platform allows you to run your entire health and safety programme using a cloud-based digital tool for all documentation, data, and tasks. Safety processes are managed online, allowing key responsibilities – from daily equipment checks to annual audits – to be centrally delegated, delivered, and tracked.

Digital platforms – such as Opus Compliance Cloud – simplify reporting by analysing accident trends, highlighting recurring risks, and providing additional data to shape safety strategy and robust due diligence processes.

Is there a proactive focus on long-term employee health?

Occupational health services safeguard your team's long-term physical and mental health.



What else to consider when choosing a safety partner

Futureproof compliance, scale safety with one trusted partner.

Specialist consultancy, testing, and surveillance across key areas like hearing, lung, and musculoskeletal health allow you to treat and prevent job-related illness and injuries – and keep your workforce reliably fit and well.

Regular checks help you act on health issues before they impact your business, identifying emerging conditions that could be more costly and complex to treat down the line. Assessing risk on an ongoing basis highlights trends and recurring issues, enabling quicker intervention and reducing long-term illness and absence.

Can training keep pace with your workforce?

Compliance training ensures your workers keep step with changing requirements – and have the skills and knowledge to do their jobs safely. Your ideal provider should offer a range of learning options – spanning online and onsite courses – tailored to meet your business's health and safety needs.

Key content includes recognised credentials such as IOSH Working and Managing Safely and NEBOSH National General Certificate in Occupational Health and Safety, as well as more general topics including first aid, fire safety, mental health awareness, and health and safety fundamentals.



Is safety integrated with your people strategy?

Custom HR support helps you maximise your people's skills, potential, and performance. Look for a partner that supports the full employee lifecycle, providing tailored expertise across employment and onboarding to training, retention, and eventual exit.

Core support services cover contract support, absence management, and ACAS early conciliation for workplace disputes. Your HR partner can also play a pivotal role in strengthening staff wellbeing and engagement through bespoke Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) and employee engagement initiatives.

Competent person vs competent advice

What is the difference between the two?



Under Regulation 7 of The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, you need to appoint one or more competent persons to assist in meeting your legal health and safety requirements.

Your competent person is responsible for structuring and managing health and safety within your business. They're key to achieving operational compliance, undertaking core duties such as recognising hazards, applying controls, advising on legislative changes, and working with safety regulators.

To perform their role effectively, competent persons must possess the necessary skills, qualifications, and experience – relative to the risk levels of your business.

The competent person can be:

- **The business leader.** A director, owner, or senior manager may take on the competent person role themselves, using their business knowledge to oversee health and safety responsibilities. However, doing this successfully requires significant time, training, and resources to stay informed about legal duties and safety best practices.
- **An employee.** You can appoint an internal staff member – such as a Health and Safety Manager or Compliance Manager – to provide competent advice and coordinate safety activities. While this approach can offer strong organisational awareness, it also demands investment in upskilling, resource allocation, and organisational support to ensure the individual can properly fulfil the role.
- **An external source, such as a health and safety consultant.** You can engage an external specialist to provide competent health and safety guidance, bringing professional expertise and proven experience across different workplaces, sectors, and risk profiles.

Competent person and competent advice: What's the difference?

With thousands of health and safety consultants to choose from, appointing the right partner can be complex. Not all providers deliver the same level of service, and the scope of support varies significantly. Engaging a consultancy that provides a competent advice service without fully understanding what is – and isn't – may leave critical and costly gaps in your compliance programme. Recognising the practical and legal differences between a 'competent person' and 'competent advice' is essential for informed decision-making.

Competent person vs competent advice

What is the difference between the two?

Competent person support: Hands-on accountability

Competent person support – such as the Opus Safety Partnership solution – provides strategic oversight, bespoke service, and an experienced partner to ‘do the doing.’ As a competent person acting for a business, your consultant is contractually obliged to oversee safety and maintain compliance on your behalf.



They will typically:

- Act as an extension of your organisation, shaping ongoing safety strategy and culture.
- Conduct regular audits, identify emerging risks, and recommend achievable, commercially sensible control measures.
- Undertake all document writing and design, providing bespoke risk assessments, safety policies, and handbooks.
- Provide unlimited advice through a dedicated consultant who understands your business.
- Offer immediate, free-of-charge support in the event of a safety incident.

Standard competent advice: Off-the-shelf safety solutions

In contrast, competent advice offers a more standardised service that doesn't necessarily fulfil your legal health and safety obligations.

Following an initial audit, clients often receive generic, templated documentation for – potentially unqualified – internal staff to amend and implement. In the event of a safety breach, the competent advisors can transfer liability by stating that their guidance was not correctly followed.

Competent advice can lead to:

- Inconsistent safety practices and documentation.
- Persistent compliance issues and heightened operational risk.
- Increased exposure to enforcement action, financial penalties, and prosecution.
- Surprise charges for post-incident support.

A side-by-side comparison

What is the difference between the two?

	Competent Person Partnership	Standard Competent Advice
Legal Responsibility	Contractually meets your legal requirements as your competent person under the Management Regulations 1999.	Competent advisor not defined in law, so not fulfilling competent person requirement. Requirement would rest with the client. Accountability and delivery transferred to the client following initial audit.
Approach and Support	Personalised and ongoing support, embedded and aligned with your business.	Often standardised, off-the-shelf advice.
Strategy and oversight	Collaborative safety planning, audits, and proactive monitoring.	Often limited to initial policy, risk assessment and reactive guidance.
Documentation	Designs and writes all policies, risk assessments, and handbooks.	Templates provided for internal completion.

Speak to the Opus Safety experts

Opus's custom compliance programmes deliver everything you need for a safer workplace. Tackle daily safety requirements with our tailored standalone services or build compliance into your business plan with our ongoing partnerships.

To discuss the right level of support for your organisation, get in touch with the Opus team.



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