The Safety Shift

EHS Readiness in 2026

National Safety Council

Wolters Kluwer

Enablon

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Introduction

Environment, Health, and Safety (EHS) is at a transformational crossroads. Long viewed as primarily a set of compliance-driven functions, EHS is being reshaped by technological advancement, evolving workforce transitions, expectations, and expanding definitions of workplace risk.

Recognizing this shift, Wolters Kluwer and the National Safety Council (NSC) partnered to commission this 2026 research that examines how EHS leaders are responding to rapidly changing workforces and operating environments.

The study explores how their organizations are:

- Investigating, utilizing, and making decisions about artificial intelligence (AI) and advanced analytics for EHS
- Managing the digitalization of EHS processes and practices
- Expanding the EHS mandate to include psychosocial, mental health, and human-centered risks
- Balancing regulatory compliance with operational demands, expanded mandates, and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) expectations

Observations from this study are intended to inform EHS leadership-level decision making and support investment prioritization, capability building, governance design, and succession planning. It reveals key signals, gaps, and tensions across the EHS landscape and highlights how senior decision makers might navigate the way forward.

Methodology

A total of 1,053 EHS leaders in the United States participated in an online, 15-minute survey fielded by Wolters Kluwer Enablon and the National Safety Council (NSC) during February and March of 2026. A series of questions were asked, focusing on the topics of EHS and AI, advanced analytics and digitalization, the future of safety professionals, total worker health, safety performance and practices, and EHS and ESG strategies.

The survey targeted EHS leaders and management professionals as respondents. They were identified as:

- Those currently working in EHS operations, or risk management roles at a senior or managerial level.
- Working in organizations across industries including energy, chemicals, mining, transportation, construction, life sciences, aerospace, food and beverage, and manufacturing.

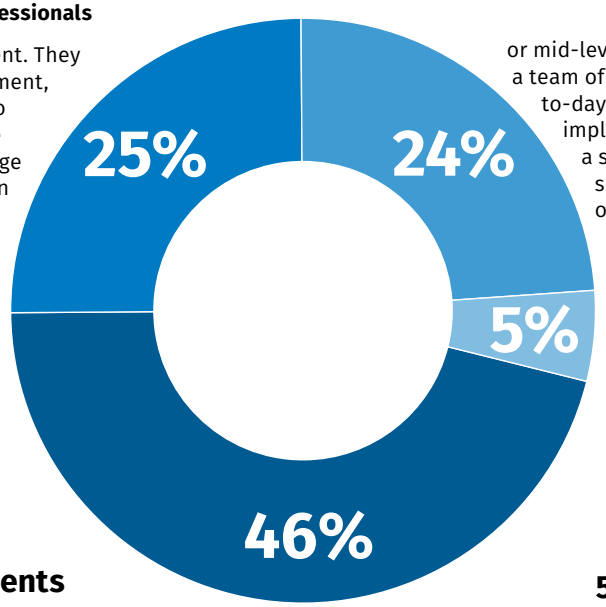
Of those who participated in the survey:

25% or 263 respondents
described themselves as
Senior-Level Operations Professionals

responsible for EHS risk management. They oversee the integration of environment, health, and safety risk controls into core operational processes, ensure compliance with regulations, manage hazard identification and mitigation strategies, and align safety initiatives with business objectives to protect people, assets, and the environment while maintaining operational efficiency.

24% or 255 respondents
described themselves as
Day-to-Day Managers of EHS

or mid-level leaders responsible for supervising a team of EHS professionals, ensuring day-to-day compliance with safety regulations, implementing EHS programs, and fostering a safe and sustainable workplace. They serve as a key link between frontline operations and senior EHS leadership.



46% or 482 respondents
described themselves as
Senior-Level EHS Professionals

with partial or complete responsibility for overseeing and guiding their organization's environmental stewardship, occupational health, and workplace safety strategies. They are tasked to ensure compliance with regulations, driving sustainability initiatives, and fostering a culture of safety across all operations.

5% or 53 respondents
described themselves as
IT Professionals

supporting EHS systems and compliance and managing technology platforms that enable EHS, risk, and sustainability programs.

Executive Summary

Among the most significant findings is that AI adoption in EHS has moved rapidly from experimentation to practical use. In fact, most organizations are already applying AI across core activities such as incident prediction, hazard identification, compliance, analytics, and reporting. Planned investment is also strong, signaling confidence in AI's value. At the same time, however, leaders draw a clear boundary around AI autonomy. Simply put, AI is expected to inform decisions and not replace human judgment.

Digitalization of EHS processes is similarly ongoing but uneven. Many organizations have digitalized foundational, compliance-oriented processes, creating a baseline for applying analytics and AI. However, the digitalization of behavioral, operational, and worker-centric processes lags significantly, which may limit the ability to deliver on the promise of predictive, end-to-end risk management bolstered by AI and analytics. Capability constraints, particularly legacy systems and limited technical expertise, remain among the primary obstacles.

The risk landscape itself is also changing. Psychosocial safety, mental health, fatigue, and hybrid-work concerns are increasingly viewed as part of the EHS mandate. While widely acknowledged, these human-centered risks are unevenly prioritized in practice and creating a growing gap between long-term risk exposure and near-term operational focus.

The function is becoming more strategic, data-driven, and human-centered, but organiztions are not updating their tools at the same pace.

Key signals shaping the future of EHS

AI adoption has moved beyond experimentation

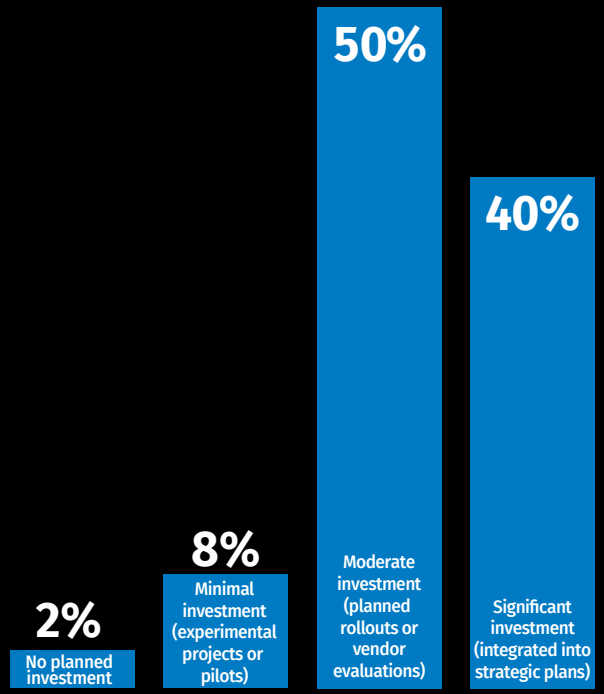
Digitalization maturity is uneven

Human-centered risks are expanding the EHS mandate

The EHS role is becoming more strategic and data driven

AI and EHS

Planned investment in AI for EHS Processes



AI has moved decisively into the mainstream of EHS. Survey results show AI adoption is well underway across most organizations, with a majority having progressed beyond experimentation. One in five respondents (20%) report extensive AI integration within EHS programs, while another 62% report moderate or limited use, and 16% report piloting or exploratory efforts. Only 2% indicate no current AI use.

Perceived cultural readiness for adoption of AI is also strong. More than 80% of respondents say their organizations are mostly or fully ready to add AI tools to improve operations, including 42% who consider themselves fully ready. Cultural readiness closely tracks with current adoption levels: 96% of organizations with high AI adoption report readiness, compared to 64% among those who report low or no adoption.

Respondents most frequently cite AI's enhanced ability to predict and prevent incidents as its top benefit (30%), reinforcing the technology's perceived value in proactive risk management. Improved efficiency in reporting and compliance follows closely (26%), suggesting strong perceived AI value in reducing administrative burdens. Faster, data-centered decision-making and the ability to process large volumes of information are each cited by 21% of respondents.

High-impact AI use cases include risk assessment and hazard identification, data analytics and reporting, and using AI to predict maintenance scheduling and asset safety. Compliance management, environmental monitoring, and incident reporting are also widely regarded as strong AI applications.

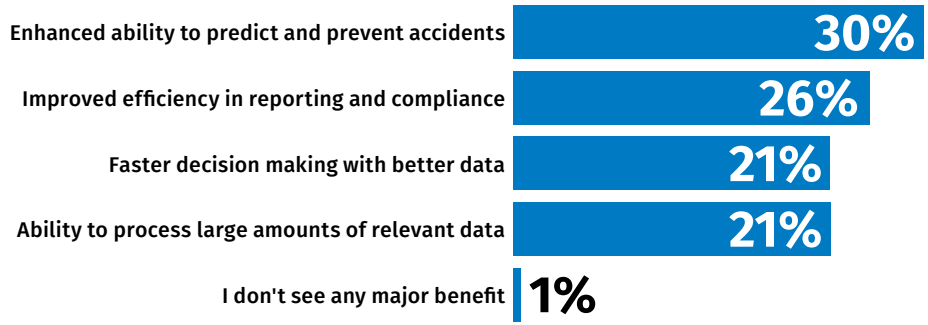
These results show AI's strongest perceived benefits align with persistent EHS challenges such as anticipating risk, synthesizing complex data, and improving consistency at scale.

Concern about AI is nearly universal. An overwhelming 90% of respondents express at least one concern, including 82% of those who consider their organizations fully AI-ready. The most frequently cited concern, reported by 51% of respondents, is overreliance on AI at the expense of human judgment. Concern about overreliance is evident across all readiness levels and intensifies among less-ready organizations, peaking at 65%.

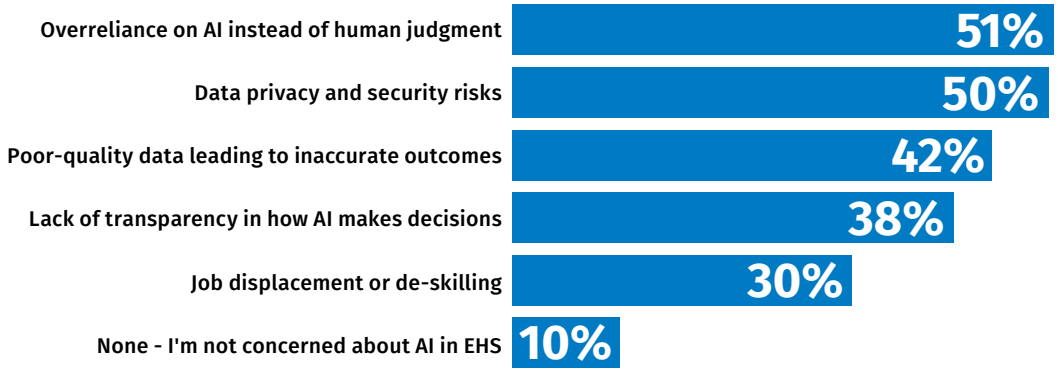
Data privacy and security risks concerns follow closely at 50%, while poor-quality data (42%) and lack of transparency in AI decision-making (38%) are also prominent. However, concerns about job displacement or de-skilling are less dominant but still notable at 30%.

AI adoption and anxiety seem to be advancing in parallel. EHS professionals want to establish a necessary boundary where AI should inform decisions, not replace "human-in-the-loop" accountability. The industry is concerned that growing reliance on AI insights may risk undermining professional judgment and trust rather than strengthening them.

Perceived benefits of AI in EHS



Key concerns about AI adoption in EHS



What this means for EHS professionals

AI is rapidly becoming embedded in core safety processes, delivering real value but also introducing elements of operational, ethical, and governance concern. The challenge ahead is not AI adoption, but stewardship. Based on these findings, EHS leaders should consider that governance and accountability should first be established by explicitly defining and clarifying where AI informs decisions and where human judgment remains essential.

AI should serve as an enabler of professional judgment and a tool for decision support, rather than decision authority. Preserving human accountability and responsibility in EHS performance and decision making would seem to be essential. It's also clear that organizations must continue to work towards end-to-end digital processes because AI value and performance depend on connected, high-quality data. Digitalizing, especially in behavioral and operational processes, is critical to realizing greater AI value and benefit. Data integration through digitalizing becomes essential.

Advanced Analytics and Digitalization

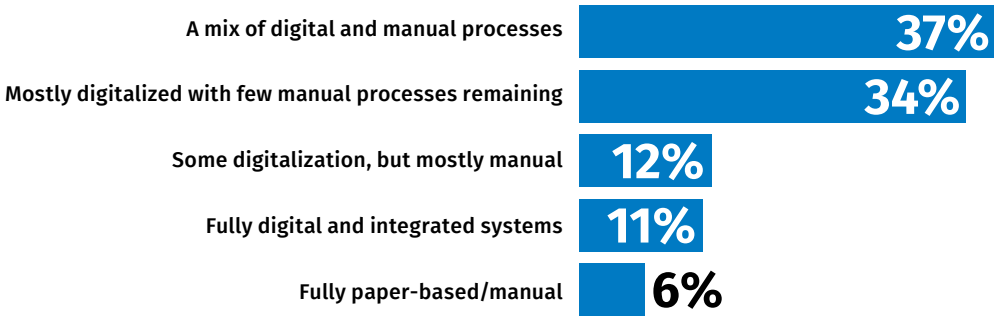
Digitalization strengthens EHS risk analysis, improving oversight, and supporting proactive decision-making. Survey results show respondents place the highest value on digitalizing incident and near-miss reporting, as well as equipment, maintenance, and performance data. They consider these data types as the most critical inputs for proactive EHS risk analysis and form the analytical backbone of modern EHS programs.

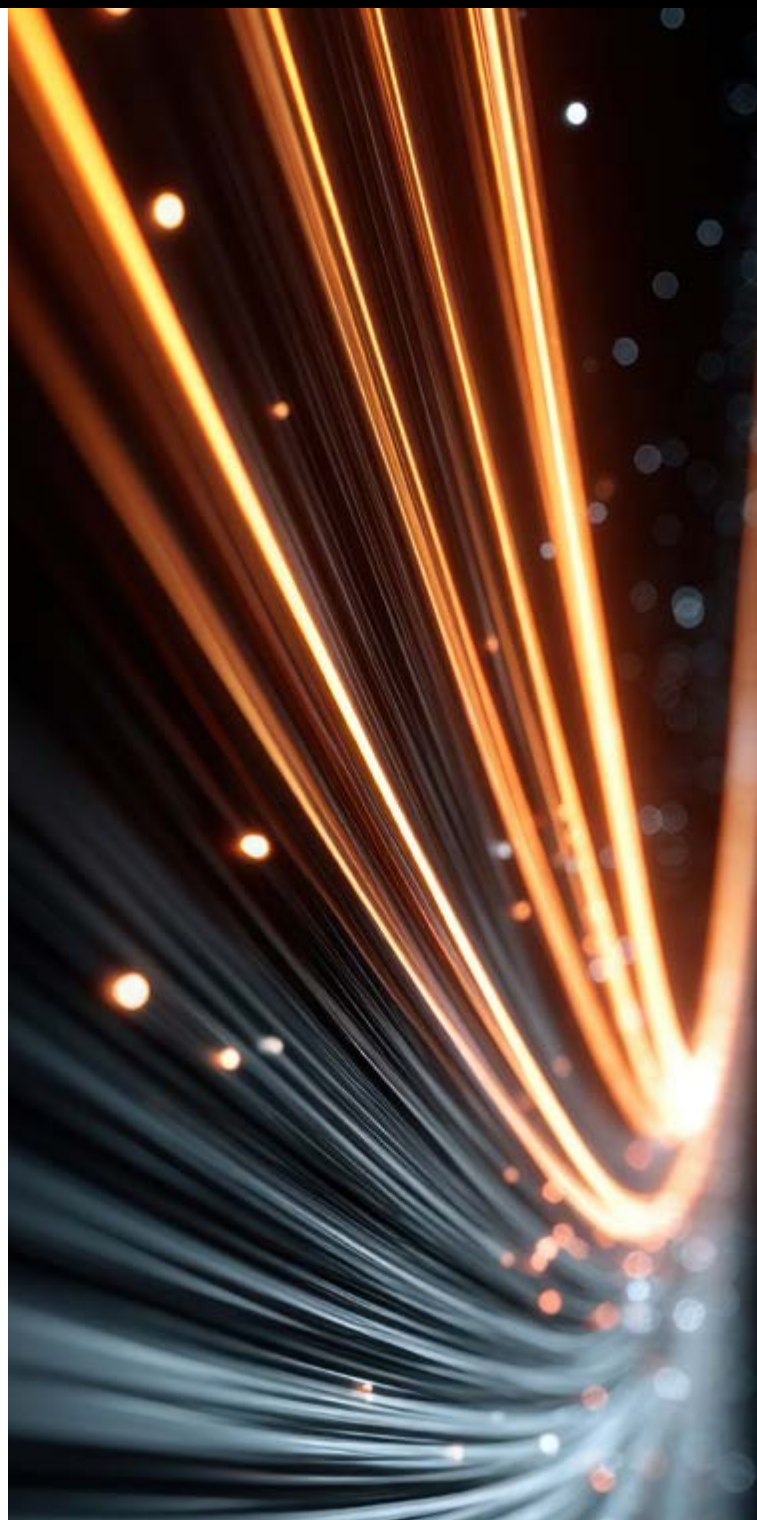
When it comes to digitalizing EHS processes, most organizations are transitioning rather than fully transformed. Only 11% report being fully digital, while a majority operate in hybrid states, either using a mix of digital and manual processes (37%) or being mostly digitalized with some manual workflows remaining (34%). Notably, 18% of organizations say they still heavily rely on manual or paper-based processes.

These results suggest the key challenge here may be that hybrid EHS environments (a combination of digital and paper-based processes) constrain the value of advanced analytics. Fragmented systems and manual handoffs often diminish data quality, delay insight generation, or undermine the scalability of analytics and automation.

Digitalization is most advanced in foundational, compliance-oriented processes, including safety data sheet management (58%), inspections and audits (54%), regulatory reporting (54%), and training tracking (52%). Adoption across these areas shows organizations have successfully digitalized repeatable, well-defined workflows that support consistency and regulatory oversight.

Progress in digitalizing EHS processes





In contrast, digitalization of behavioral, health, and operational controls, such as emergency response planning (42%), behavior-based safety observations (36%), occupational health monitoring (35%), and permit-to-work systems (30%), is less prevalent. What may explain this imbalance is that many of these processes are managed outside of centralized EHS platforms or governed by operation and local teams. However, while compliance-focused digitalization improves efficiency and visibility, it does not, on its own, enable comprehensive, end-to-end risk management. The processes least likely to be digitalized are, in fact, those that most closely tie to day-to-day operations and worker behavior – areas that are widely understood to provide early signals of risk.

The most significant barriers to further digitalization, according to the research, are not budget or workforce resistance, but technical and organizational readiness. Lack of internal technical expertise and constraints imposed by legacy systems stand out as dominant challenges that are slowing progress. Barriers are broadly distributed rather than concentrated, suggesting most organizations face multiple, compounding obstacles rather than a single blocking issue.

These findings highlight digitalization deployment being constrained by capability challenges. While organizations recognize the value of digitalization and analytics, many lack the internal skills, systems integration, or architectural flexibility required to advance beyond foundational use cases.

Digitalized health and safety processes

What this means for EHS professionals

These findings show EHS organizations building digital foundations and continuing to move towards advanced, analytics-driven maturity. But remaining digital gaps in operational and behavioral processes may seriously limit the ability to apply advanced analytics, automation, and AI at scale. EHS professionals should consider shifting focus from digitalizing what is easiest to what has the greatest impact on advancing EHS performance. This requires prioritizing digitalization of operational, behavioral, and health-related processes that are widely understood to surface early indicators of risk and support regulatory requirements.

Organizations would be well advised to support advanced analytics and AI by strengthening their data foundations. Revealing deeper insights requires structured data that is consistent, high-quality, and timely. Closing digitalization gaps throughout EHS processes is a prerequisite for applying advanced analytics and AI-driven decision support.

Future of Safety Professionals

Survey results highlight that future EHS challenges are becoming increasingly human-centered. When asked about topics expected to dominate the profession over the next three to five years, psychosocial safety, mental health, fatigue, and risks associated with hybrid and remote work are at the top of the list. This shift underscores the need for proactive, data-informed approaches that thoughtfully integrate technology with human-centric EHS strategies.

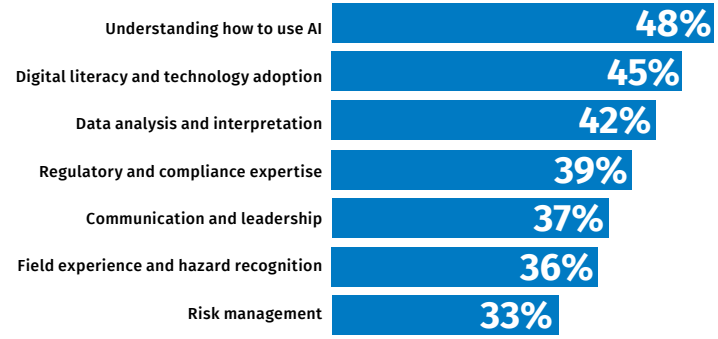
When safety professionals were asked about their future, most respondents believe their roles will become more critical as the work environment grows in complexity. At the same time, they recognize the need to expand beyond traditional safety expertise to include strategic thinking and analytical capabilities, particularly as technology and automation continue to reshape how work is performed.

When asked about the most important skills junior EHS professionals will need to meet tomorrow's challenges, respondents expressed a strong preference for capabilities in AI, technology, and data analytics. These skills were viewed as more important than traditional competencies such as regulatory compliance, communication, leadership, and even field experience. These responses suggest that foundational safety skills can be developed on the job, while technological and analytical skills are increasingly seen as prerequisites for success in the evolving EHS job market.

To better understand how organizations are planning for succession within their EHS functions, we also asked about strategies to replace retiring personnel. Most organizations (54% of respondents) plan to rely on internal EHS staff, while others intend to hire early career EHS professionals (43%) or recruit experienced talent from other organizations (37%). Notably, 44% of respondents indicated they plan to rely on automation or AI to help offset the impact of personnel losses.

Perceptions of the future role of safety professionals

Key skills for junior EHS professionals



What this means for EHS professionals

Taken together, these findings suggest the future of EHS will be defined by a convergence of human-centered risk management and the application of advanced technological capability. As organizations grapple with increasingly complex work environments, the EHS function is poised to become more strategic, data-driven, and influential. Investing in next-generation skills, rethinking succession planning, and thoughtfully leveraging automation and AI will be essential for organizations seeking to build resilient EHS teams and proactively manage the risks of tomorrow.

Total Worker Health

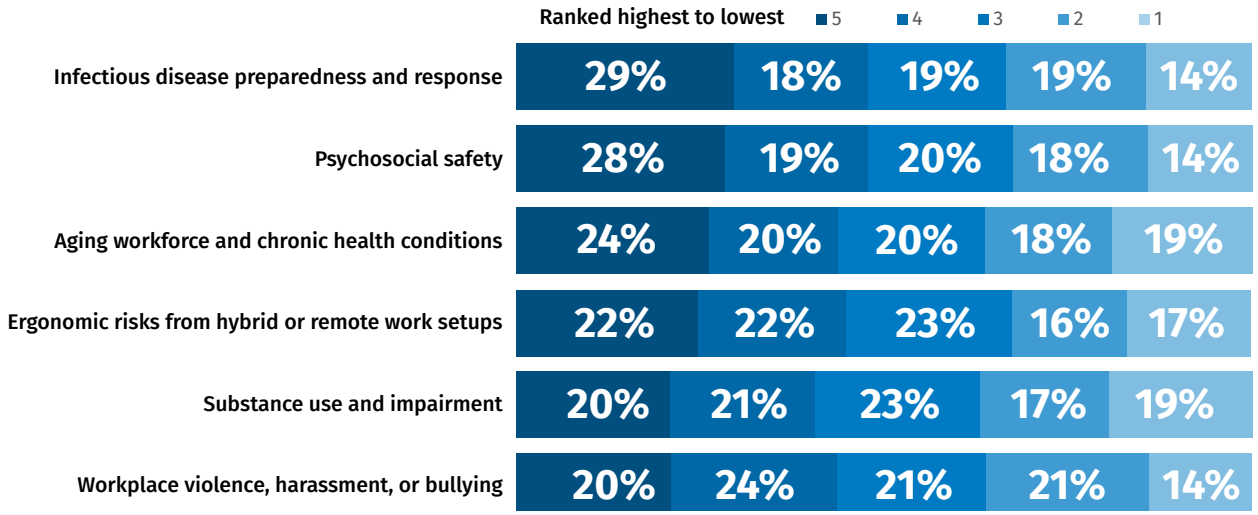
As the scope of EHS continues to expand beyond traditional physical hazards, mental health and psychosocial risks are increasingly important concerns. To better understand how EHS professionals perceive these emerging responsibilities, including which programs and challenges they believe will have the greatest impact, we examined perspectives on mental health, program effectiveness, and anticipated safety priorities over the coming years.

An overwhelming majority of EHS professionals associate mental health with the responsibilities of the safety function, with 62% "strongly agreeing" and 25% "somewhat agreeing." Only a small minority (5%) believe that mental health should not be considered a safety responsibility.

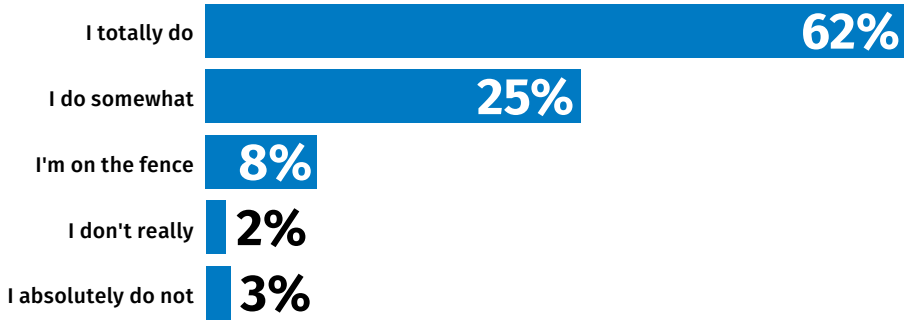
When asked to assess a range of programs based on their potential impact, EHS professionals favored initiatives such as emergency preparedness, fatigue management, and return-to-work support over well-being programs and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives related to safety.

The safety challenges expected to have the greatest impact on organizations over the next three to five years include infectious disease preparedness, psychosocial safety, and managing an aging workforce. Ranked lower were mental health and workplace stress, digital privacy concerns, and the potential impact of AI on job safety. This likely reflects the broad range of responsibilities held by EHS professionals and is an acknowledgment that certain issues are perceived as having a more direct and immediate impact on EHS roles than others.

Top 6 anticipated health and safety challenges (next 3-5 years)



EHS responsibilities and mental health



What this means for EHS professionals

Overall, the findings highlight a clear recognition that mental health falls within the scope of modern EHS practice, even as it competes with a wide array of other responsibilities. While preparedness, fatigue management, and workforce demographics are viewed as more immediate priorities, the lower ranking of mental health and emerging technology related risks suggests potential gaps between long-term trends and near-term focus. As EHS roles continue to evolve, it is reasonable to expect that balancing immediate operational demands with proactive attention to psychosocial and other emerging human-centered risks will be critical to sustaining a comprehensive and future-ready safety strategy.

Safety Performance and Practices

EHS professionals operate in increasingly complex organizational environments, where safety priorities must compete with financial, operational, and strategic demands. To better understand where EHS leaders experience the greatest friction, both in promoting safety and in implementing programs, we examined perceptions of organizational challenges, implementation barriers, incident prevention strategies, and regulatory compliance concerns.

One of the ongoing challenges for EHS professionals is competition or perceived competition with other business priorities. When respondents were asked about the challenges of promoting EHS and provided with a list of options, responses were evenly distributed, with one notable exception. Limited resources, employee resistance, regulatory complexity, and "none—we do not have any challenges" each accounted for approximately 23% of responses. In contrast, lack of leadership support was selected only 9% of the time. This suggests that challenges in promoting EHS are multifaceted rather than driven by a single dominant issue.

Junior EHS professionals, however, were less likely to indicate that there were no challenges to promoting EHS. Instead, they most frequently cited limited budgets and employee resistance as their primary concerns, highlighting how experience level and organizational influence may shape perceptions of challenge.

Implementing safety programs presents a related but distinct set of obstacles. When asked to identify the most significant barriers to implementation, EHS professionals ranked resource limitations highest, followed by regulatory constraints. Data quality and workforce engagement were identified less frequently, while leadership buy-in was ranked last. Day to day, EHS managers were more likely to identify these factors as significant or moderate barriers and less likely to report that they were not barriers at all. This difference may reflect greater exposure to operational realities or closer proximity to the frontline workforce.

We also explored perceptions of the most effective strategies for preventing serious incidents and fatalities (SIFs). Respondents indicated that job safety and job hazard analyses (JSA and JHA) were the most effective approaches, with safety leadership training ranking a close second. Pre-task planning and risk-based audits were viewed as less effective, though still important components of a comprehensive safety program. Notably, differences in responses across industries and EHS role types were minimal.

Finally, when asked about the primary challenge to maintain regulatory compliance, keeping up with changing regulations clearly emerged as the top concern. Resource limitations, employee engagement, and lack of training were cited far less frequently. This emphasis reflects the complexity of the U.S. regulatory environment, where EHS professionals must track not only evolving requirements but also how those requirements are interpreted and enforced in real time. Translating regulatory change into operational practice, including driving adoption across the organization, often without direct authority, remains a significant and ongoing challenge.

What this means for EHS professionals

EHS professionals are navigating critical constraints, such as limited resources, regulatory complexity, and workforce engagement. While effective tools and strategies for preventing serious incidents are well understood, consistent execution is often constrained by operational realities. As the role of EHS continues to evolve, addressing these systemic barriers, particularly for early career professionals and frontline managers, will be essential to strengthening safety performance and sustaining long-term organizational commitment.

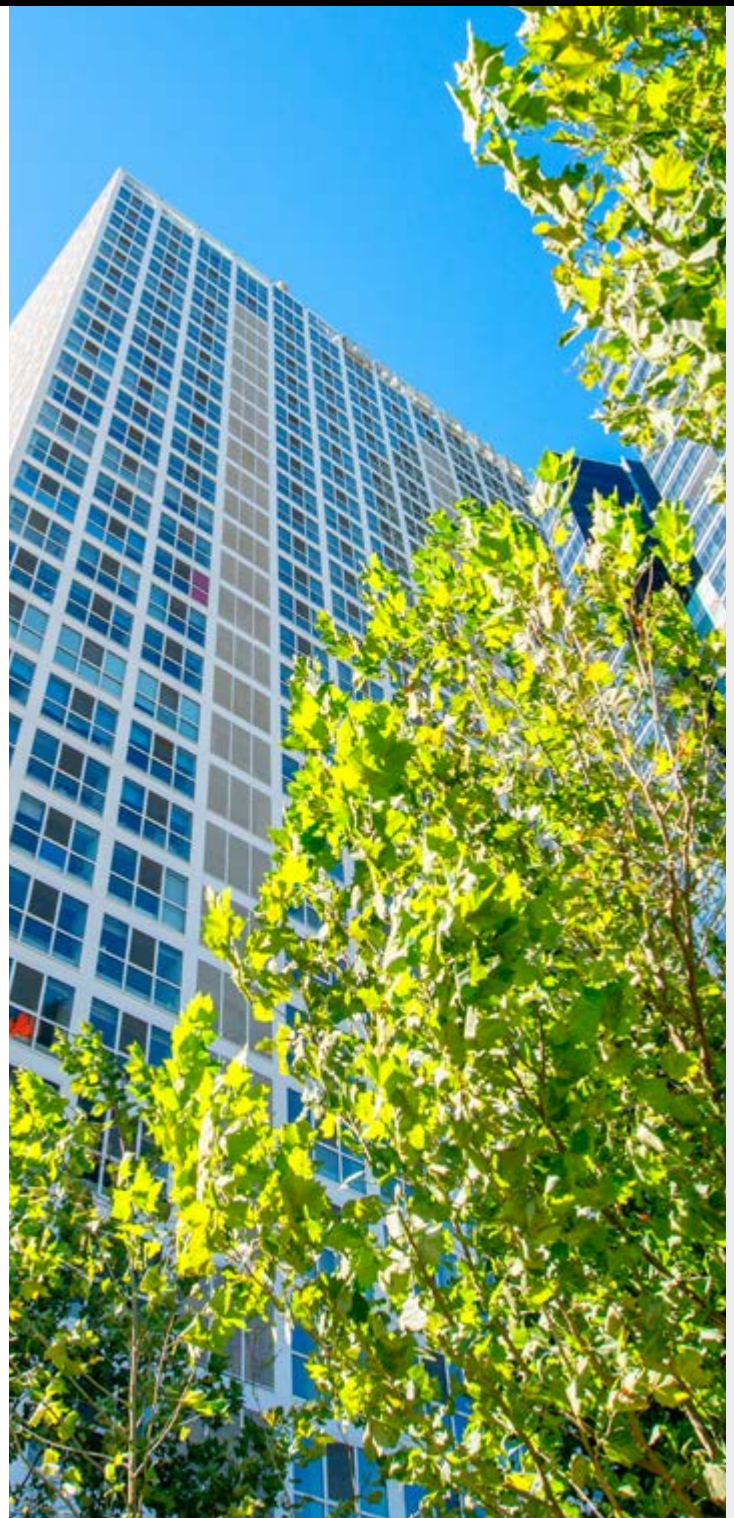
EHS and ESG

EHS professionals find themselves at the center of these efforts. EHS functions provide much of the operational data, risk insight, and program execution required to support credible ESG strategies. To understand the extent of this involvement, we examined how EHS professionals contribute to ESG initiatives today and where organizations plan to invest resources in the years ahead.

ESG principles connect day-to-day safety, health, and environmental performance to broader business strategy, risk management, and long-term value creation for EHS professionals. By aligning EHS programs with ESG objectives, professionals help organizations meet regulatory and stakeholder expectations, enhance workforce well-being, reduce operational risk, and demonstrate measurable sustainability and social responsibility outcomes.

Across the surveyed cohort, a strong majority reported active engagement in all ESG initiatives included in the survey. These activities ranged from supporting health, safety, and well-being metrics and providing environmental performance data to advising on EHS related standards and, in many cases, participating in or leading ESG strategy development. Only 3% of respondents reported no involvement in ESG-related activities.

When asked how EHS resources will be allocated to support ESG goals over the next several years, respondents most frequently cited investments in training and awareness programs, workplace health and safety initiatives, and data management, tracking, and reporting systems.



What this means for EHS professionals

These findings reinforce the critical role EHS professionals play in translating ESG commitments into measurable action. With nearly universal engagement across ESG activities and growing investment in data, training, and health and safety programs, EHS is clearly evolving from a compliance-focused function to a strategic enabler of sustainable business performance. As ESG expectations continue to mature, the ability of EHS teams to integrate operational excellence with transparent reporting and workforce-centered outcomes will be central to long-term organizational success.

Strategic Implications and Recommendations

Investments in AI for EHS Processes, has moved firmly into the mainstream. This reflects a strong move beyond experimentation to operational commitment. A combined 90% of respondents plan moderate to significant investment in AI technologies, including planned rollouts, vendor evaluations, and integration into broader strategic plans, while only a small minority anticipate minimal or no spending. This signals strong organizational confidence in AI's value as a core EHS capability.

Organizations recognize AI's value, but not for autonomous decision-making. Many remain wary and skeptical of substituting human judgment with algorithmic authority and are looking to embed checks, governance, and accountability mechanisms. This reinforces a central theme that organizations want AI adoption to be accompanied by deliberate human stewardship. The concern about AI overreliance signals a clear boundary organizations are trying to protect - that AI should inform decisions, not own them.

AI use in EHS has moved to practical application, with strong individual confidence and growing investment momentum. Our research shows AI adoption is actively underway across core EHS functions, and most organizations are planning moderate to significant AI investment. However, individual readiness is well ahead of organizational capability, scalable skills, and structured enablement. Even though AI awareness is high, applied guidance, EHS-specific education, and operational clarity are still needed.

Organizations are actively digitalizing EHS, but many are in a transitional, mid-maturity stage. Many organizations have built a digital base but are not yet positioned to fully realize AI-driven, predictive, or automated EHS outcomes, which rely on end-to-end digital processes. Primary blockers for digitalization remain and include technical capability and system readiness, rather than lack of budget or organizational resistance.

The role of safety professionals is being redefined by psychosocial risk, work complexity, automation, and data-driven decision-making. It points to a future EHS role that is both more human-focused and technically demanding than ever before. There seems to be a redefinition of the profession, where foundational safety knowledge is expected to be learned on the job, while analytical and digital capabilities are becoming prerequisites. Noteworthy is that organizations are already planning to use automation and AI as part of their succession strategy, with nearly half expecting technology to help offset retirements.

A tension exists between acknowledgment and prioritization in Total Worker Health. While EHS professionals overwhelmingly agree mental health and psychosocial risks belong within workplace safety responsibilities, they are unevenly operationalized in practice. EHS leaders appear to be navigating a crowded agenda where human-centric risks are acknowledged yet often deferred. The key challenge ahead will be to bridge the gap between long-term Total Worker Health demands and short-term operational focus, ensuring psychosocial and mental health risks are addressed as the definition of workplace safety continues to broaden.

The most persistent challenges facing EHS professionals are practical and systemic rather than cultural or ideological. There is strong and consistent agreement on what works to prevent serious incidents (job safety and hazard analyses and safety leadership training) suggesting that the tools for effective safety are well known. But their consistent application is uneven. Regulatory compliance adds another layer of strain, with the pace and complexity of regulatory change standing out as the single greatest concern, particularly in translating evolving requirements into everyday practice. Taken together, the findings suggest core safety challenges may not be winning greater hearts and minds at the top, but sustaining reliable execution amid constrained resources, regulatory flux, and operational realities, especially for those closest to the day-to-day work.

EHS no longer operates at the periphery of ESG, but at its operational core, supplying the data, insight, and execution that give ESG strategies credibility. A particularly notable finding is the near-universal involvement of EHS professionals in ESG initiatives, with only a negligible minority reporting no engagement. This may be a signal that ESG for many has moved from a specialized or corporate-level concern to a day-to-day EHS responsibility. Rather than ESG being treated as a separate reporting exercise, EHS professionals are actively helping to lead ESG strategy itself.

Conclusion

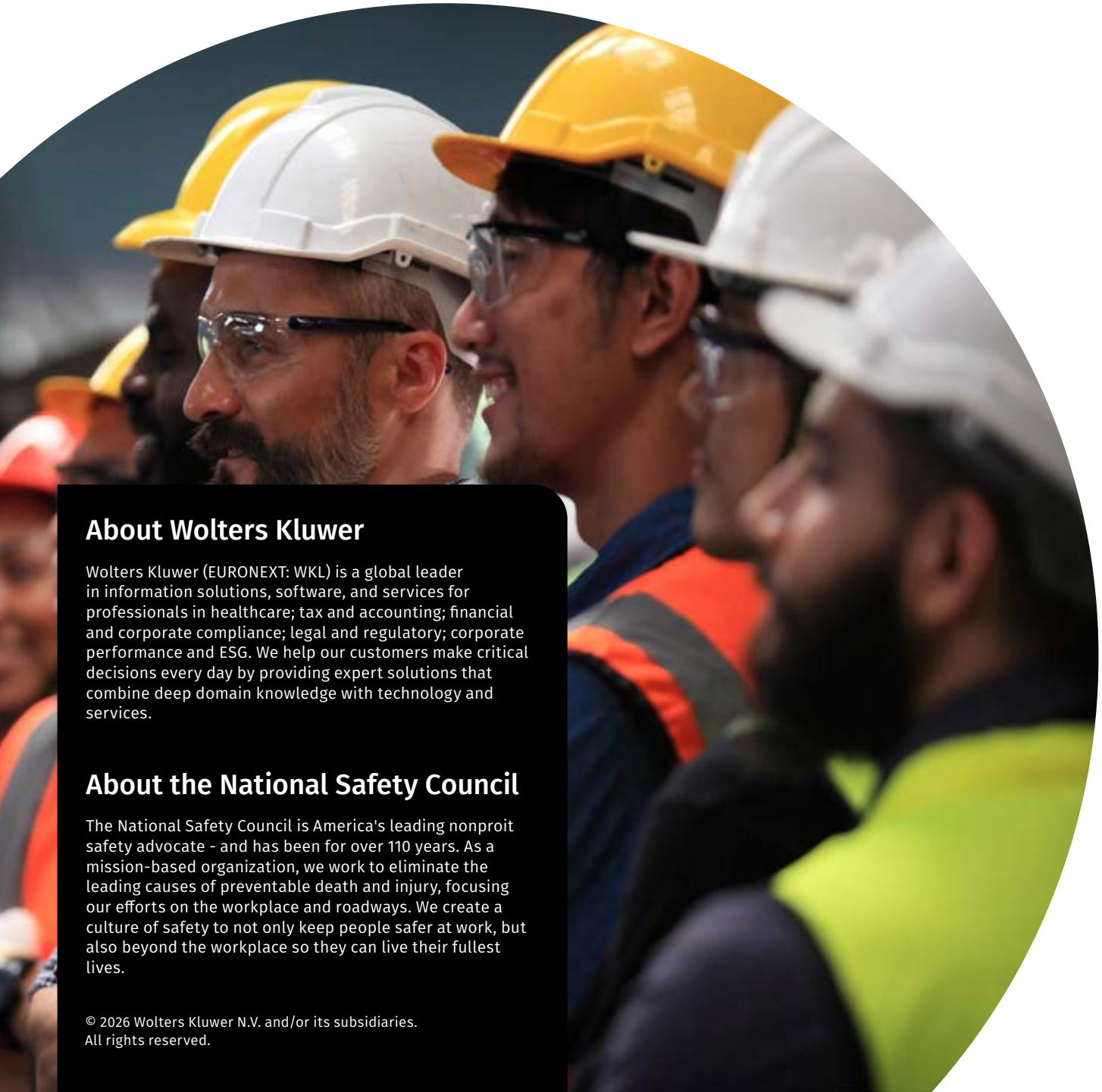
The EHS profession of the future will be defined by greater strategic relevance, technological fluency, and an expanded view of risk that places people at its center. No longer strictly compliance driven, EHS is evolving into a function that integrates technology, workforce well-being, and enterprise risk management.

The most successful EHS organizations will be those that close the gap between aspiration and execution. This will require moving towards fully connected, end-to-end digital ecosystems that enable predictive analytics and responsible AI use. EHS leaders will act as stewards of technology, ensuring that AI strengthens, not replaces, professional judgment, accountability, and trust.

EHS professionals will increasingly operate at the intersection of human judgment and machine intelligence. Technology fluency, analytical thinking, and data capabilities will increasingly be prerequisites, while foundational safety knowledge will be strengthened through practice and experience. Automation and AI will become part of succession and capacity planning, but not a substitute for leadership, ethics, or critical thinking.

At the same time, the demands on EHS professionals will continue to broaden. Psychosocial risks, mental health, fatigue, and work design will require sustained attention alongside traditional hazards. The challenge ahead is balancing immediate operational pressures with long-term Total Worker Health priorities, so emerging human-centered risks are acknowledged and operationalized in practice.

Ultimately, the future of EHS belongs to leaders who connect insight to action, harness technology to see risk sooner, and embed safety as a driver of resilient, sustainable business performance.



About Wolters Kluwer

Wolters Kluwer (EURONEXT: WKL) is a global leader in information solutions, software, and services for professionals in healthcare; tax and accounting; financial and corporate compliance; legal and regulatory; corporate performance and ESG. We help our customers make critical decisions every day by providing expert solutions that combine deep domain knowledge with technology and services.

About the National Safety Council

The National Safety Council is America's leading nonproit safety advocate - and has been for over 110 years. As a mission-based organization, we work to eliminate the leading causes of preventable death and injury, focusing our efforts on the workplace and roadways. We create a culture of safety to not only keep people safer at work, but also beyond the workplace so they can live their fullest lives.

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