The Year-End Safety Compression Effect



Nothing unusual has to happen for a workplace to become unusually risky in December.

The same equipment is running. The same procedures are posted. The same supervisors are on the organization chart. Yet overtime is higher, vacation coverage is thinner, seasonal employees are being added, warehouses are fuller, docks are more congested, the weather is worse, darkness arrives earlier and customers want everything before the holiday cutoff.

Each change may be manageable on its own. The problem is that they do not arrive one at a time.

Year-end risk often comes from compression: several modest changes reduce the organization’s margin for error at the same time. A task that was routine in October can become materially different when it is performed by a less familiar crew, at the end of an extended shift, in a crowded work area, under delivery pressure and with a supervisor covering two departments.

> **Risk does not always rise because one hazard gets worse. Sometimes the safety margin shrinks because too many ordinary pressures arrive together.**

The procedure can stay the same while the risk changes

Traditional safety systems are good at identifying hazards tied to equipment and tasks. They are often less sensitive to changes in operating context. That matters because context can determine whether the control is actually usable.

A powered industrial truck route may be well designed at normal inventory levels. Add temporary racking, seasonal staging and more pedestrians and the geometry changes. A manual-handling task may be acceptable at ordinary volume. Double the throughput and extend the shift and cumulative exposure changes. A

supervisor may normally have enough time to coach new workers. Add vacation coverage and a production surge and that same supervisor becomes a bottleneck.

None of this requires a new hazard assessment form for every busy day. It does require managers to notice when the assumptions behind existing controls are no longer true.

Warehousing is a useful warning signal

OSHA renewed its National Emphasis Program for Warehousing and Distribution Center Operations in 2026, with inspections focused on powered industrial trucks, material handling and storage, walking-working surfaces, emergency exits, heat, ergonomics and fire protection. The agency also specifically links warehousing safety to temporary workers and holiday workplace conditions.

The lesson applies far beyond warehouses. Manufacturing, retail, transportation, hospitality, food processing, health care, utilities and construction can all experience year-end changes in staffing, workload and supervision. The exact hazards differ. The compression mechanism is similar.

Current U.S. enforcement context: OSHA renewed the Warehousing and Distribution Center Operations National Emphasis Program effective July 31, 2026.

Look for the compression stack

The fastest way to identify year-end vulnerability is to stop reviewing hazards one by one and look for combinations. Ask what has changed in the work system over the last four to six weeks.

Compression factor	What changes	Why it matters
Staffing	**Seasonal hires, temporary workers, transfers, absences**	**More people are unfamiliar with hazards, local rules and each other.**
Supervision	**Larger spans of control, acting supervisors, cross-coverage**	**Less time for observation, coaching and intervention.**
Hours	**Overtime, extra shifts, schedule changes**	**Fatigue and recovery become part of the exposure.**

Throughput	**Higher production, shipping or service volume**	**More repetitions, traffic, handling and pressure to keep moving.**
Space	**Overflow storage, temporary staging, blocked sightlines**	**Normal traffic and egress assumptions can fail.**
Environment	**Snow, ice, rain, cold, darkness**	**Travel, walking surfaces, equipment and outdoor work become less predictable.**
Maintenance	**Deferred work or limited support coverage**	**Small defects may remain in service longer.**
Experience mix	**Fewer experienced workers per shift**	**Informal coaching and problem recognition weaken.**

The value comes from the stack, not the individual score. Three mild changes can be more important than one obvious red flag if they affect the same task or crew.

Supervisor capacity is a leading indicator

At peak periods, organizations often measure labour capacity but not supervisory capacity. They know whether enough people are scheduled to move the work. They are less likely to ask whether enough experienced leadership is scheduled to control the work.

That is a mistake. New and temporary workers generate legitimate demand for instruction, correction and questions. Congestion creates more exceptions. Equipment issues require decisions. Weather creates changing conditions. If the supervisor is also covering absenteeism, approving overtime and chasing production, the system can become under-supervised without ever looking understaffed.

A useful metric is not simply workers per supervisor. Track new or unfamiliar workers per competent supervisor. One supervisor with 20 experienced employees

is not carrying the same risk load as one supervisor with 12 people, six of whom started this month.

Temporary workers need workplace-specific training

Seasonal staffing deserves special attention because responsibility can become blurred between the staffing agency and host employer. OSHA treats staffing agencies and host employers as joint employers of supplied workers and emphasizes coordination. General safety orientation from an agency does not replace training on the host workplace's actual equipment, traffic, chemicals, emergency procedures and hazards.

Managers should know who is authorized to do what. A worker being available does not make that worker qualified. Peak demand is exactly when organizations are most tempted to stretch assignments, shorten familiarization or move people into tasks because "we just need help for today."

That is how a staffing solution becomes a risk transfer in the wrong direction.

Congestion changes more than housekeeping

Year-end congestion is often treated as a tidiness problem. In reality it can alter the control environment.

Extra pallets change pedestrian routes. Overflow product narrows aisles. Temporary staging blocks line of sight. Delivery vehicles queue in unfamiliar locations. Snow piles consume yard space. Fire protection clearance and emergency exits can be compromised. A forklift operator who has driven the same route for months is suddenly operating in a different traffic system.

When the physical layout changes, the risk assessment should change with it. Do not rely on workers to "be extra careful" in a geometry that no longer supports the original traffic plan.

Fatigue belongs in the operational plan, not the wellness newsletter

Overtime is sometimes discussed as a personal resilience issue: sleep more, hydrate, take breaks. Those messages are useful but incomplete. Fatigue is also created by the way work is scheduled and staffed.

If the peak plan requires repeated extended shifts, short turnarounds or constant schedule changes, the organization has created an exposure that training alone cannot remove. Managers should look for the tasks where fatigue has the greatest consequence: driving, mobile equipment, energy isolation, maintenance, lifting, work at height, high-speed production and decisions made

under time pressure.

The right control may be a schedule change, additional relief, task rotation, a second-person verification or delaying nonessential work. “Pay attention” is not a fatigue-control strategy.

Build a weekly compression scan

A year-end risk review should be fast enough to use. A ten-minute weekly scan can be more effective than a detailed assessment that happens once after the peak is over.

Question	Green	Watch	Act
How much of the crew is new, temporary or transferred?	Normal mix	Noticeably higher	Experience concentration is inadequate for the work
Is supervision at normal strength?	Normal coverage	Some cross-coverage	Critical crews lack experienced supervision
Are overtime and extra shifts increasing?	Normal	Sustained increase	Fatigue-sensitive tasks are being performed under extended schedules
Has the physical layout changed?	No material change	Temporary staging	Traffic, egress or sightlines are materially affected
Are production or delivery pressures elevated?	Normal	Peak demand	Shortcuts or deferred controls are appearing
Is maintenance support available?	Normal	Reduced coverage	Known defects are accumulating or temporary fixes are growing

Are weather and daylight affecting work?	**Stable**	**Seasonal deterioration**	**Routes, access or outdoor work need changed controls**

Do not turn the scan into a score that gives false precision. Its value is the conversation. If three conditions move into “watch” at the same time, managers should ask which tasks are carrying all three.

Use micro-interventions instead of another campaign

Peak season is a poor time to launch a complicated safety initiative. The organization is already overloaded. Use targeted controls that reduce friction in the highest-risk places.

- Add an experienced worker to the shift or area with the largest concentration of new employees.
- Re-mark temporary pedestrian routes and staging areas instead of relying on the normal map.
- Limit who can operate mobile equipment during the peak rather than expanding authorization casually.
- Move nonessential maintenance and training out of the most compressed period, while protecting critical preventive work.
- Give supervisors one or two specific conditions to watch each shift rather than a long seasonal checklist.
- Revisit start-of-shift plans when weather, staffing or congestion changes during the day.

Do not forget the January transition

Compression can remain after the holiday peak because people assume the pressure is over. Temporary storage remains. Deferred maintenance has accumulated. Workers return from vacation. Schedules normalize unevenly. New employees who were heavily supervised in December may suddenly be treated as fully independent in January.

Plan the decompression. Remove temporary layouts. Close maintenance backlogs. Review near misses and peak-season exceptions. Confirm which temporary workers remain and what training or authorization they need. Reset supervisor spans. If an improvised control worked well, decide whether it should become permanent rather than allowing it to drift into practice without review.

What OHS managers should do this week

Walk one operation with the compression lens. Do not ask only, “What are the hazards?” Ask what is different from a normal month. Count unfamiliar workers. Look at where product is being staged. Check whether sightlines and emergency routes still make sense. Ask supervisors what they are covering that they normally do not cover. Review overtime in the jobs where mistakes carry the greatest consequence.

Then choose the one combination most likely to overwhelm the existing controls and intervene there. The objective is not to eliminate year-end pressure. It is to keep pressure from silently changing the risk faster than the safety system changes with it.

> **Peak season does not always create new hazards. It often changes the conditions under which old hazards are controlled.**

Key takeaways

- Review combinations of staffing, workload, supervision, congestion, weather and overtime instead of assessing each factor in isolation.
- Treat supervisory capacity as a leading indicator during peak periods.
- Verify workplace-specific training and task authorization for temporary and seasonal workers.
- Reassess traffic, egress and material-handling controls when physical layouts change.
- Manage fatigue through work design and scheduling, not only worker reminders.
- Plan a January decompression so temporary peak-season conditions do not become permanent risk.