

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Addressing the Environmental Health Workforce Shortage: Unpacking Complexities Associated With the Environmental Health Technician Role

Abstract Environmental health professionals are crucial in protecting communities from harm by preventing and addressing environmental health threats. Becoming an environmental health professional (EHP) typically requires a degree-level qualification or equivalent in most countries. Globally, a chronic shortage of qualified EHPs has led to greater reliance on the employment of environmental health technicians (EHTs) to address environmental health threats, particularly in regulatory settings. Our article uses a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis to explore the complexities of this growing workplace trend across several countries. Our findings indicate that while the EHT role offers many benefits, it also presents challenges. To effectively tackle these challenges, we propose a strategic framework consisting of five essential components that are needed to assist in managing the complexities associated with this trend: 1) education and training, 2) role clarity, 3) risk-based task allocation, 4) professional development, and 5) organizational support.

Keywords: education and training, environmental health professional, environmental health technician, professional development, strategic framework, workforce development, workforce shortage

Introduction

In many countries, environmental health professionals (EHPs) play a key role in supporting governments to meet their legislative responsibilities associated with protecting the community from harm. Historically, these responsibilities have centered on preventing the spread of infectious diseases associated with contaminated food or water supplies, the disposal of waste, or by the improvement of housing conditions, and prevention efforts have focused on seeking compliance with public health legislation aimed at control-

ling the physical and biological environment (Battersby, 2016; Frumkin, 2016).

In today's context, interacting factors such as globalization, climate change, rapid population growth, an aging population, urbanization, and increasing health inequalities have contributed to the complexity of environmental health problems and how these problems are addressed (Dunn et al., 2024; Gerding et al., 2019). Many environmental health problems now require multidisciplinary and multiagency responses involving multiple approaches. These approaches include

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the application of risk- and evidence-based frameworks, health-promoting practices and theories, and systems-based thinking, moving prevention efforts beyond regulatory control as a key mechanism to address environmental health threats (Dunn et al., 2024; Gerding et al., 2019).

This changing context has led to the increased professionalization of the environmental health workforce, where in many countries, to practice as an EHP, a recognized professionally accredited degree is required, which also often requires the completion of a work experience component. This requirement is reflected in the course accreditation policies of professional bodies within environmental health in the UK, Australia, and the U.S. (Chartered Institute of Environmental Health [CIEH], 2026b; Environmental Health

Australia [EHA], 2014; National Environmental Health Association [NEHA], 2026; National Environmental Health Science & Protection Accreditation Council, 2026).

National accreditation bodies often require supplementary documentation of practical experience to verify the application of knowledge and skills acquired during academic study, prior to an individual achieving full qualification as an environmental health officer. In the UK, the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) mandates that candidates demonstrate competence via a portfolio of reports, a food identification and fitness assessment (where not part of the degree), and an oral interview (e.g., for the viva voce examination). This additional process typically takes 6–12 months to complete (CIEH, 2026b).

Despite the move toward the increased professionalism of the EHP workforce, challenges exist. For example, state legislatures in more than 12 states in the U.S. have eliminated degree requirements for most government positions (Arrojas, 2025). Skills and experience are replacing the degree requirement as a primary hiring factor in those states. This dynamic will energize conversations around the roles, responsibilities, and scope of practice for the environmental health workforce, including environmental health technicians (EHTs).

EHTs also constitute a major segment of the broader environmental health workforce (Bare et al., 2025; CIEH, 2021; Environmental Health Committee [enHealth], 2009; NEHA, 2026). Although there is no universally agreed-on description of an EHT, in some instances they might be referred to as a paraprofessional or have a specialized title that includes terms such as food safety, housing, environmental, or public health officer.

For this article, we use the term EHT to encompass environmental health workers who perform roles that support the delivery of environmental health services—including within government, not-for-profit, and private sectors—and who may also have regulatory responsibilities, but who do not possess the formally recognized higher education qualifications required for full professional status in environmental health, as previously described.

Commonly, EHTs provide technical support to EHPs, such as collecting samples of

water, food, air, or soil for analysis, monitoring, or controlling pest and vector outbreaks. They may also support the response to environmental health-related complaints, participate in public health education programs, and assist in the response to public health incidents such as disease outbreaks (Bare et al., 2025; enHealth, 2009).

Generally, educational requirements for employment as an EHT are not formalized by governments or professional bodies, although there are some exceptions. For instance, the Western Australian Government has recognized the Edith Cowan University Diploma of Environmental Health as a qualification that allows employment as a “diploma-qualified authorized officer,” allowing an EHT to undertake job duties under the supervision of a qualified environmental health officer (Oosthuizen et al., 2024). The diploma also enables students to advance into the professionally accredited undergraduate degree in environmental health, thereby providing a pathway to gain recognition as a fully qualified EHP (Oosthuizen et al., 2024).

In the UK, educational requirements for roles (e.g., food safety or housing practitioner) that contribute to environmental health services in local government have been established in collaboration with CIEH, government agencies, and academic institutions (CIEH, 2021; Coventry University, 2026; Middlesex University London, 2026; University of Birmingham, 2026). These specialized qualifications are designed to ensure that technical staff who are responsible for inspecting food and housing meet legislative standards and to help address workforce shortages among qualified enforcement officers (CIEH, 2021; Food Standards Agency, 2023).

More typically, educational requirements for employment as an EHT vary and appear to depend on the workforce needs of the relevant country, with the responsibility for determining suitability often left to the employing organization. A minimum entry level might be stipulated, such as a diploma or certificate-level qualification in a science- or health-related field (e.g., see NEHA, 2026). EHTs might possess other qualifications or experience that could be deemed relevant to supporting the delivery of environmental services, particularly in statutory-based settings. These other qualifications include building trades such as plumbing, construction, and electrical work,

as well as specialist qualifications in areas such as occupational hygiene, public health, health promotion, and environmental protection.

Although formal professional recognition for employment as an EHT might be lacking, EHTs can still qualify for affiliate or associate membership with relevant professional bodies (CIEH, 2026a; EHA, 2026). Employing EHTs has also been identified as offering several organizational advantages, notably serving as a cost-effective approach by allowing higher-level professionals to focus on complex tasks while EHTs handle more routine responsibilities. EHTs can also help address staffing shortages when professional staff are overextended, and—with appropriate support and training—can transition into advanced roles, thereby contributing to the long-term sustainability of the environmental health workforce (CIEH, 2021; enHealth, 2025; NEHA, 2026; Taylor & Modystach, 2017).

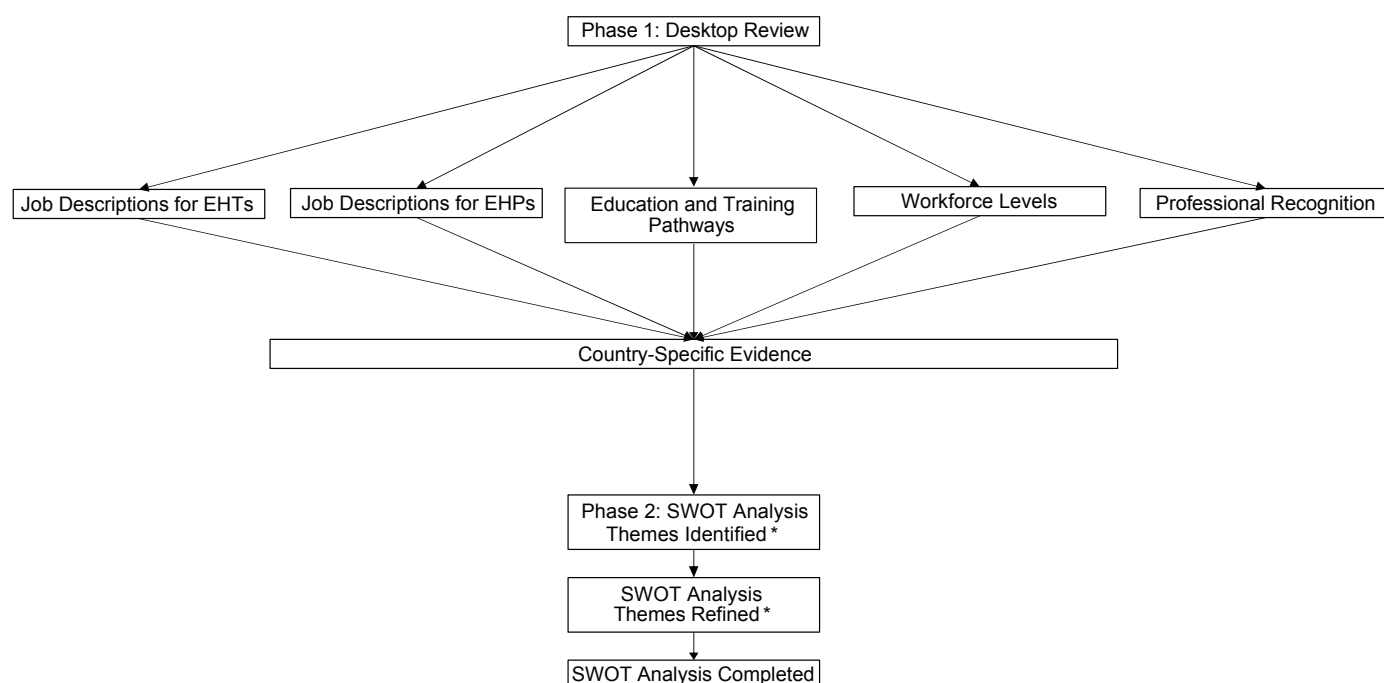
The increased reliance on EHTs, particularly in statutory-based contexts, and the complexities arising from this trend form the primary motivation for our research. These complexities have been partially identified in previous workforce studies and reports in various countries. In Australia, for instance, reports have highlighted concerns about the lack of clarity surrounding the qualifications and responsibilities of EHT roles, the absence of clearly defined professional development pathways, and the risk of de-skilling within the EHP workforce (enHealth, 2009; Wall, 2006).

In the UK, factors such as a growing shortage of qualified EHPs and budgetary constraints have led to a higher appointment rate of nonqualified EHPs or EHTs compared with EHPs, potentially affecting the ability of local authorities to deliver essential environmental health services and meet statutory obligations (CIEH, 2021). Furthermore, issues such as unclear career progression, complex qualification pathways, lack of available mentors to support practical training, and misalignment between qualifications and job expectations have been recognized as major challenges associated with food safety practitioner roles in the UK. These challenges also have implications for job attraction and retention in these roles (Food Standards Agency, 2023).

In the U.S., inconsistency in training and credentialing for EHTs, limited recruitment and training pathways (particularly in rural and under-resourced areas), as well

FIGURE 1

Outline of Research Methods



* Initial SWOT analysis themes were identified by one community of practice (CoP) member. Identified themes were then refined by all CoP members.

Note. EHPs = environmental health professionals; EHTs = environmental health technicians; SWOT = strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

as unclear role definitions and lack of formal recognition of the EHT role have been identified as major challenges. These factors affect the mobility and standardization of practice within this workforce, potentially leading to operational constraints such as diminished contributions to core programs, reduced support for EHPs, and an overall shortage of EHT personnel (NEHA, 2026).

The literature indicates that multiple countries are encountering similar challenges associated with a growing reliance on the EHT role. Given the crucial role both EHTs and EHPs play in delivering environmental health services, and considering the global scope of environmental health concerns, this research sought to examine how these complexities can be addressed by posing the following research question: What strategies can be implemented to effectively manage the complexities arising from the increased appointment of EHTs in statutory-based contexts?

We contend that a careful examination of these complexities is essential to facilitate knowledge exchange and coordinated responses to environmental health challenges, while also supporting a unified and consistent approach to strengthening the environmental health workforce.

Methods

We used a collaborative qualitative approach (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2022) and used two principal methods: a desktop review (Moore, 2013) and a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis (Gürel & Tat, 2017). These methods were implemented by members of a community of practice (CoP) consisting of an informal network formed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wenger, 1998).

The CoP comprises environmental health academics and representatives from professional associations within environmental health located in Australia, Portugal, the UK,

and the U.S. Members meet online every 2 weeks (and have done so since 2021) and are qualified EHPs with significant industry experience who were recruited to the group through snowball sampling (Noy, 2008). During this period, the group has shared expertise and conducted research related to environmental health practice.

Our research study commenced in 2024. The desktop review formed the first phase of this project, during which the CoP gathered data from secondary sources such as academic journals, industry reports, online databases, and governmental and employment websites (Moore, 2013). The review of secondary sources aimed to establish the current body of knowledge related to the growing reliance on the EHT role. The CoP paid particular attention to job descriptions for both EHT and EHP positions, educational and training pathways, workforce shortages, and requirements for professional recognition or certification in each member's respec-

TABLE 1

SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) Analysis for the Environmental Health Technician Role

Strengths	Weaknesses
Enhances Cost-Effectiveness of Services EHTs can assist local governments in meeting their statutory responsibilities in a more cost-effective way by enhancing the capacity and efficiency of EHP activities. Enables lower-risk activities to be undertaken, freeing time for EHPs to engage in more strategic activities. Specialist Knowledge Supports Effective Responses EHTs often possess specialist knowledge in technical areas such as plumbing, microbiology, environmental remediation, or building, which supports a more effective response to environmental health problems. Cost-Effective Qualification Costs to qualify as an EHT are lower for individuals seeking a professional role. Supports Organizational Capacity Building Provides an avenue for the appointment of students currently completing EHP degrees, which supports organizational capacity building in the profession.	Lack of Job Role Clarity and a Clear Delineation Between EHP and EHT Roles A lack of clarity of the EHT job role and no clear delineation between EHP and EHT roles leads to uncertainty about the required qualifications (e.g., skills, knowledge, attributes) required for the role and inconsistent approaches to managing environmental health problems. Limited Transferability EHTs might be less transferable across settings due to their specialist nature. Lack of Professional Development Pathways Defined pathways are lacking to support the professional development of EHTs, including the advancement to EHP roles. Existing qualification pathways for EHTs (such as Certificate III or IV courses) might not have sufficient underpinning science to enable advancement to a professional qualification. Reduced Investment in EHP Roles The lower costs associated with employing EHTs could lead to reduced investment in EHP positions, thereby limiting the ability of EHPs to engage in more strategic activities.
Opportunities	Threats
Increase Capacity The ability to increase the capacity to deal with environmental health problems via developing more clearly articulated positions and pathways for EHT roles. Clear Delineation Clear delineation of EHP and EHT roles via the development of a risk-based framework, which assists in determining activities that are appropriate for EHTs to undertake.	Job Scope Creep A workforce shortage of EHPs and a lack of clarity on the scope of EHT work could result in job scope creep, where EHT duties expand to include higher-risk activities for which they are not qualified, resulting in organizational and community risks. Attraction and Retention Failure to attract and retain EHTs could result from poor job design and the lack of clear roles and professional development pathways. Fragmentation of Services Increased fragmentation of environmental health services is associated with reliance on specialized EHT services. De-skilling Further worsening of EHP workforce shortages due to a potential reliance on EHT roles, leading to a de-skilling of the workforce and decreasing the ability of organizations to deal with the increasing complexities of environmental health problems.
<i>Note.</i> EHP = environmental health professional; EHT = environmental health technician.	

tive country. Additionally, the CoP contributed insights based on their engagement with industry partners and students, specifically discussing their perceived implications of the increased appointment of EHTs within the field of environmental health.

A SWOT analysis was performed based on data gathered during the first phase of the investigation (Gürel & Tat, 2017). This methodology was selected for its practicality, simplicity, cost-effectiveness, and its capacity

to present a structured and balanced overview that interested parties can easily interpret. Additionally, the tool has proved valuable in distilling complex information and supporting strategic planning, including mitigating risk. These characteristics provided a solid basis for addressing our research question. The SWOT analysis spanned 6 months and was conducted during online meetings every 2 weeks using an iterative approach. Initially, one member of the CoP identified themes

from the data collected during the project's first phase. The group then worked together to refine these themes and reached agreement on their classification within each SWOT category. Figure 1 outlines the research methods used for this project.

Results

Table 1 presents the results of the SWOT analysis conducted to inform strategies for effectively managing the complexities asso-

ciated with the increased appointment of EHTs within statutory-based settings. The SWOT analysis identified several important factors. Notably, the strengths of appointing EHTs include their ability to improve the cost-effectiveness of environmental health services, contribute specialist expertise to address environmental health challenges, and support organizational capacity building. Identified weaknesses include an unclear definition of the EHT role and its implications for aligning qualifications, limited transferability of the position, and insufficient professional development pathways, particularly for advancement into professional environmental health roles.

Threats recognized in the SWOT analysis involve the risk of job scope creep stemming from shortages in the EHP workforce, which could lead to EHTs undertaking higher-risk responsibilities for which they are not adequately trained or qualified. Additional threats include difficulties in attracting and retaining EHTs, fragmentation of environmental health services, the potential for deskilling, and further exacerbation of EHP workforce shortages.

Conversely, opportunities exist to expand capacity to address environmental health issues by establishing clearly defined EHT positions and career pathways. Furthermore, the development of a risk-based framework to clarify distinctions between EHP and EHT responsibilities and support the appropriate delegation of tasks in accordance with qualifications and competencies was also identified as an opportunity.

Overall, the results of the SWOT analysis highlighted a range of interrelated themes associated with the increased appointment of EHTs within statutory-based settings.

Discussion

The central question of this research was: What strategies can be implemented to manage the complexities arising from the increased appointment of EHTs in statutory-based contexts? The SWOT analysis identified several strengths associated with appointing more EHTs, such as enhancing environmental health service delivery by addressing capacity challenges, providing specialist advice, and supporting workforce sustainability. The SWOT analysis also identified specific weaknesses and threats, includ-

ing unclear role definitions, limited pathways for professional development, risks of job scope creep, and potential service fragmentation, all of which can negatively impact effective environmental health service delivery.

Given the multifaceted nature of the challenges associated with the employment of EHTs, we propose that an overarching strategy is required that involves the development of a strategic framework. We argue that a framework offers the opportunity to translate the findings from the SWOT analysis to provide a foundation for interested parties (e.g., employers, governments, professional bodies) to guide the effective management of EHT roles, helping to support workforce planning, role clarity, and service delivery.

Frameworks are tools often developed to help communicate relationships between concepts, generate solutions to problems, and are valuable in contexts where multifaceted challenges require coordinated responses (Moullin et al., 2015). Frameworks have also been identified as a useful tool in health workforce planning (Asamani et al., 2021). In the context of environmental health workforce planning, we also suggest that a framework offers a flexible structure that can be tailored to the needs of different jurisdiction and workforce settings while promoting a consistent approach to addressing the complexities associated with the increasing employment of EHTs. This latter point is particularly important to help support a unified and consistent approach to strengthening the environmental health workforce, which was one of the main motivations of our study.

Key Components of the Proposed Framework

Drawing on the findings of the SWOT analysis, we identified five key components that emerged as areas for consideration in the framework: 1) education and training, 2) role clarity and job design, 3) risk-based task allocation, 4) professional development pathways, and 5) organizational support and resourcing. Specifically:

1. Education and Training: Consideration should be given to the establishment of minimum qualification standards for EHTs and pathways for progression to EHP roles. This component addresses the weakness associated with the ambiguity of EHT roles

and supports the development of pathways to build workforce capacity.

2. Role Clarity and Job Design: Attention should be given to defining the scope of practice and responsibilities of EHTs, while clarifying the role and distinction between EHTs and EHPs. This focus is required to address the weakness associated with the uncertainty of the qualifications of EHTs and to mitigate threats such as job scope creep and misalignment of EHT responsibilities.

3. Risk-Based Task Allocation: Tasks allocated to EHTs should be determined based on risk and matched to the qualification and competency level. This component aims to mitigate threats such as community and organizational risks while supporting opportunities for the safe delegation of duties and the expansion of environmental health service capacity.

4. Professional Development Pathways: Consideration should be given to creating structured opportunities for upskilling and career advancement of EHTs. This component aims to address the weaknesses associated with a lack of progression options, while building on existing technical expertise and encouraging workforce retention.

5. Organizational Support and Resourcing: Attention should be given to ensuring adequate organizational support and resourcing to enable supervision, mentorship, and infrastructure to support EHTs in their role and enhance capacity via student placements. This component aims to mitigate threats, such as fragmentation of environmental health services, to support more sustainable service delivery.

Developing a strategic framework is essential to address the complexities identified in the SWOT analysis. This framework offers a coordinated approach to strengthening the environmental health workforce, improving service delivery, and ensuring that both EHTs and EHPs are supported to operate within clearly defined and professionally recognized roles.

Study Limitations and Next Steps

Our study was primarily based on a desktop review and qualitative input from members of a CoP. While this approach enabled broad international insights, it might have limited the depth of country-specific analysis. The

reliance on secondary data and professional perspectives could mean that our findings do not fully capture the experiences of frontline EHTs or employers. Additionally, while useful for strategic planning, the SWOT analysis is inherently subjective and might not account for all contextual variables influencing workforce dynamics. Future research that involves empirical data collection, interviews with interested parties, and case studies would strengthen the evidence base and enhance the applicability of the proposed framework.

Conclusion

Our study highlights the growing reliance on EHTs as a response to the global shortages of qualified EHPs. Although EHTs offer valuable support, our SWOT analysis revealed significant challenges, including role ambiguity, limited career pathways, and risks to service quality.

To address these issues, we propose a strategic framework comprising five key components: education and training, role clarity, risk-based task allocation, professional devel-

opment, and organizational support. This framework offers a coordinated approach to strengthen workforce capacity, improve service delivery, and ensure clearly defined roles for both EHTs and EHPs. ✨

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