

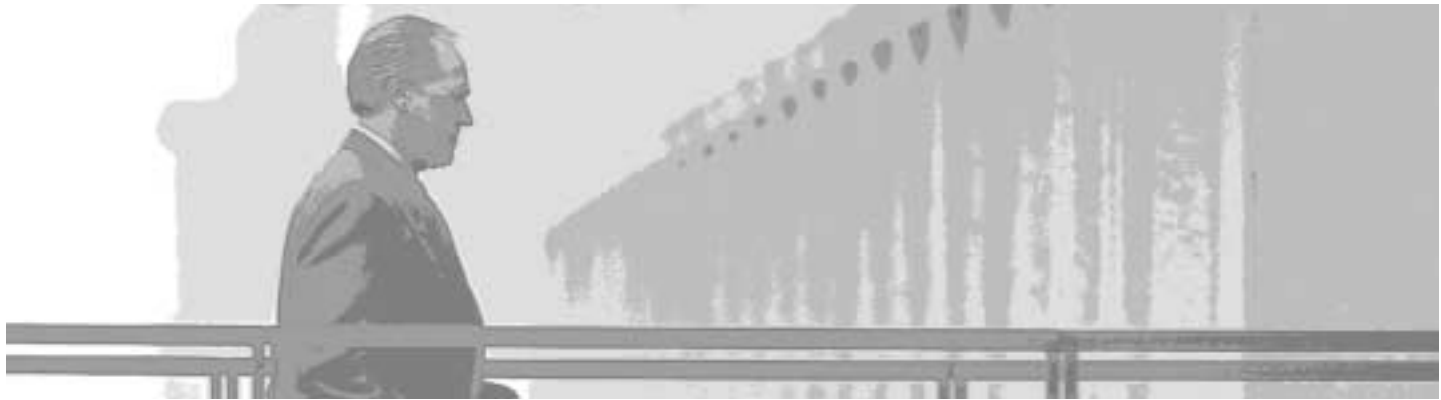


OHS Professionals Are Getting Grayer, But Are We Getting Wiser?

by James E. Leemann

This article is intended to make you very, very uncomfortable. We are losing some of our most skilled professionals to downsizing and retirement. In addition, the emerging generation of occupational health and safety professionals may not have the skill set necessary to face future issues. This article makes the case that our successes of the past have led our business and government managers to feel very comfortable, even though we know that even more demanding challenges are on the horizon. Business and government managers will need to replace the departing senior professionals with enthusiastic new professionals who have skills adapted to the changing health and safety model that is evolving in the 21st century.

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This is a call to all OHS professionals to wake up to reality—things are not getting bigger and better at an ever-accelerating pace. We will need new skills to add value and to make an impact in our organizations. Without them, we will be marginalized, forever taking samples, calculating accident rates and responding reactively to the issue *du jour*. How can we make a real strategic difference?

The beginning of the new millennium brings with it some of the same occupational and environmental health and safety issues that challenged us at the end of the 20th century—chemical hazards, ergonomics, biomonitoring, indoor air quality, workplace injury/illness rates and, now, biochemical terrorism. But does it also bring the professionals required to address these issues and solve the problems?

New Challenges and a Sense of Frustration

Recent tragic events in the United States will likely lead to even more pressure being placed on corporations to demonstrate their commitment to the health and safety of their work forces, the local communities in which they operate and the global community in which they market, distribute and sell their products. The experience gained over the past 30 years in solving employee health and safety concerns positions the U.S. government and industry to address new health and safety challenges—or does it?

The 2000–2001 AIHA membership survey¹ revealed that industrial hygiene professionals are well-trained and well-educated (68 percent hold either a master's and/or a doctorate) and are quite experienced (64 percent are considered midcareer professionals). Despite this, many AIHA members with whom I have spoken or taught over the past several years have expressed a growing concern that something is fundamentally wrong in our OH&S profession. There continues to be an outward frustration with getting IH programs valued and implemented. A recent survey² of industrial safety and health professionals by a national trade magazine

found that only 38 percent believe their work provides a rewarding sense of job satisfaction. Is this a reflection of a growing malaise within the profession?

In his keynote address³ at AIHce 2001, Edward Barlow said the aging IH work force must seize change to ensure continued progress. As we enter the 21st century, a significant number of OHS professionals are approaching their retirement years. Byron Orton, Iowa labor commissioner and chair of OSHA's National Advisory Committee on Occupational Safety and Health, stated in a BNA special report⁴ that in Iowa there is "absolutely a crisis" regarding the numbers of occupational health professionals. Not only are there few practicing professionals, but not many students are graduating in the health or safety fields.

Fewer Students, Retiring Leadership

I would agree with Orton and offer a slightly different view on the makeup of the students in OHS curricula. Many of the students I have taught are foreign



nationals who intend to return to their native country to practice. Is the issue of graduating fewer students in OHS more or less exacerbated by the makeup of the student body and where they plan on practicing their profession?

Many OHS professionals who are not retiring are facing the economic realities of downsizing, outsourcing and organizational restructuring; indeed, many are vigorously seeking non-OHS advancement opportunities. This talent migration to non-OHS work will certainly yield benefits, as these professionals will take their OHS knowledge into their new assignments. But the OHS profession will likely continue to lose strong leadership and the experience needed for tackling enduring health and safety issues.

In large part, the current state of the OHS professions is due more to their successes than their failures. Many of the issues raised by OSHA in the early 1970s have largely been addressed and are now considered to be in maintenance mode. This has reduced the need for experienced OHS specialists who deal with traditional issues.

Another factor worth mentioning is the significant changes that have taken place in the business management landscape over the past several years. Today, most OHS professionals work for mid- to lower-level managers usually younger than 45 years old. Most of these managers have never experienced a serious occupational health or safety event. Few, if any, have ever been fired or disciplined for injuries, incidents or violations. OSHA was established in 1971, which was so long ago that these new managers cannot relate to the way it used to be. Flixborough, England; Seveso, Italy; Mexico City, Mexico; Bhopal, India; and Pasadena, Texas—these are events from another generation.

So What?

Certainly all professions are facing anxiety and disillusionment as the demand for their services shifts with the economic winds accompanying the upturns and downturns of the marketplace. So, what is the problem? The quandary we face today is the isolation of the OHS professions

from mainstream decisionmaking and the growing awareness of known and yet-to-be-known occupational health and safety concerns needing to be addressed. Unless a definitive business case can be made to address these concerns, management's attention is focused on driving down costs and meeting profit objectives. This is especially true both with the recent downturn in our economy and the terrorist attacks in our country. OHS professionals are, in fact, the first line of defense within industry and government. The current general malaise within the OHS profession may, however, potentially slow progress toward addressing OHS concerns.

"Management Needs to Listen to Us"

Since the dawn of the modern-day OHS profession, I have witnessed and been a party to many gatherings where OHS professionals debate how to get management to listen to them. Ken Dickerson, former senior vice president of external affairs for Atlantic Richfield Company, recently wrote about this issue.⁵ The essence of his argument is that "management does not appreciate the EH&S effort" and "there is the issue of how the EH&S professionals can cause management to listen."

Dickerson makes some very good points on how to get management to listen, which

we have heard and said for many years. To some extent I have found that what he espouses in his article just does not work. His article is very one-sided in that he continuously reiterates, "management needs to hear from us" or "management needs to listen to us."

We have probably been our own worst enemy in how we have sought support for projects and programs we think would improve the performance of the company.

My experience with management is that it hears us loud and clear; the problem lies in what we are saying. What might be more important now is for OHS professionals to seek opportunities to listen to what management has to say as opposed to being on the blunt end of management's response to something we have said. Too often, OHS professionals think they know what is best for the enterprise without having all the facts of the enterprise's condition before them. Consequently, when management hears a solution delivered by an OHS professional, its first reaction is to do nothing.

Unfortunately, we have probably been our own worst enemy in how we have sought support for projects and programs we think would improve the performance of the company. We have reached a point in our profession's evolution where it is time to change the approaches we have used in the past. The future is not about getting management to listen to us, but about listening to management so that we can better craft possible solutions to problems that can be integrated into the enterprise in a way that adds value versus simply adding costs.

Hank Lick, AIHA president, has pointed out that the OHS professional models that will be used in the 21st century will likely be completely different from what we used in the 20th century. Lick said, "Practicing OHS professionals and those who are graduating today will need to be multiskilled in not only the technical aspects of the practice, but in demonstrating the talent of being able to integrate health, safety and environmental issues into business planning and decisionmaking processes."

The fundamental question is, "Are OHS professionals properly trained, positioned and motivated to successfully deal with this new generation of issues and the

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Outraged? Or in Agreement?

by *Richard MacLean*

We circulated early drafts of the accompanying article to scores of OSH professionals. In addition, a similar article appeared in the November issue of *EM* magazine, published by the Air and Waste Management Association. The feedback was immediate, vocal and revealing. Many agree wholeheartedly with the premise that something may be amiss and have gone so far as to volunteer support for the effort. Others, equally strong in their opinions, have stated that nothing is wrong and this effort serves to do nothing more than "stir up a hornet's nest."

The wide spectrum of responses and the emotion with which they are delivered tells us that something is going on, or else these project reviewers would not devote such energy to offering their opinions. Some of the responses take the premise of this project personally, rejecting any thought that they could be "marginalized," ineffective or without significant influence in their organizations to

move beyond the mundane. They may be completely correct. But this study is not about the career successes and failures of individuals; it is about the collective achievements and setbacks of our professions as a whole.

In a sense it is like the story of the blindfolded individuals who were asked to describe a massive object by touch. Each explored a different part, and each described quite accurately his or her own reality. The reality of what is going on in our professions is not defined by the personal experiences of a few, but the combined wisdom of many—collectively taking off the blindfold, so to speak.

The Pulse of the Professions project team does not know what the reality is, nor does anyone else. We have our personal opinions, but at this stage we only know there are major disconnects, significant enough to possibly be interfering with progress.

Our primary objective is to put some perspective into the dynamic times in which we find ourselves. Please take this study very seriously, but do not take it personally. Frankly, we hope it does stir up a hornet's nest of constructive dialogue that will lead to tools, techniques

and a better understanding of how one can be more effective, regardless of how good or bad one views the current situation or one's career accomplishments.

We welcome your opinions. We encourage you to share this article with your colleagues (available in PDF format on www.Enviro-Innovate.org). And, we challenge you if you feel that your reality is the reality. We have formed a team with one of best business schools in the world, Wharton, to keep the research plan fair and valid, thus minimizing the interjection of our own personal opinions. Indeed, the professionals with the strongest opinions—in agreement or disagreement—should be the ones most enthusiastic to get fresh facts, not the ones relying on possibly outdated opinions or their slice of reality. The AIHA leadership is taking this forward-looking approach, and we applaud that vision and courage.

MacLean is senior investigator for the Pulse of the Professions project.

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changing perspectives on traditional issues?" If not, the consequences will have broad implications for the ability of companies to cost-effectively meet the known and yet-to-be-known OHS challenges. Optimizing the performance of OHS professionals has the potential to positively impact all business efforts in these areas.

A Unique Partnership

A systematic examination of the current state of the EH&S profession is needed for better understanding of this issue. Fortunately, one is under way in the form of a unique partnership between the Center for Environmental Innovation (comprising the Pulse of the Profession team), a university-based, nonprofit research center, and the Wharton School in Pennsylvania. The nation's largest EH&S organizations are becoming involved; the Air and Waste Management Association, the American Society for Safety Engineers, the Environmental Law Institute, the National Association for Environmental Management, the National Association of Environmental Professionals, the National Environmental Health Association, the Water Environment Federation and AIHA are early sponsors.

A two-phase approach will be used to conduct the investigation. In phase one, the project will quantify the issues and gain insight into possible solutions. Phase two will fully explore possible solutions and best practices with management representatives from business and government and also examine which problems extend to other areas outside the United States. Five data-gathering techniques will be used: a review of current literature; surveys sent to the members of collaborating professional organizations; Internet surveys; focus group sessions; and face-to-face interviews and telephone surveys.

Paul Kleindorfer, co-director of the Wharton School's Risk and Decision Processes Center and co-investigator of the project, said, "In working with corporate executives, regulators and industry EHS professionals over the years, I have found that there is perceived lack of understanding and appreciation for each other's positions on issues. Until we overcome these differences, the EHS function will continue to find it difficult to position itself to add value to business and society. By researching the current state of the EHS professions, we can identify business and management practices that will enhance and sustain the essential EHS



work force necessary to deliver business and societal value."

Phase one will extend into mid-2002, and by this time next year the issues we face as EH&S professionals should be well-defined and an initial list of possible solutions prepared. Since AIHA is directly involved in this effort, project updates will appear in *The Synergist*.

Calling All Stakeholders

Many of my colleagues over the years have turned to Rodney Dangerfield's signature saying, "I get no respect," to describe how they feel about being pushed to the sidelines and ignored by the public, politicians and business executives. As difficult as it may be, the profession must first admit there may be problem before we find a solution. Regardless of who is at fault, it is our problem. AIHA leadership is already hard at work on this issue, but others must be involved since we cannot solve this problem by ourselves. If management, the public and the politicians do not see there is a problem—and they don't seem to now—they will not spend any time, money or resources on it.

Government leaders and business managers are preoccupied with other major issues, especially now, as they should be.

But that is not an excuse for us to muddle around and complain about more cutbacks as the work intensifies. A true resolution to these issues must address communications among all stakeholders, and if we are not knowledgeable enough to communicate these issues adequately, nothing will happen. Yet improved communication is not the sole answer to our dilemma.

For the past decade, I have often urged EH&S professionals to "become more businesslike" and "communicate in the language of business." Noticeable improvements have certainly occurred; however, we still seem to be losing ground. We must recognize that the problem is much more complicated and challenging than any of us anticipated. We need systematic research and creative solutions if we are to excel. The time to act is now.

What Can You Do?

If you or your organization is interested in supporting the CEI-Wharton School research investigation, contact me directly at leemann1@earthlink.net or visit the CEI website at www.Enviro-Innovate.org.

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