

The Changing Face of Safety

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Introduction

As the field of Safety and Health enters the 21st Century, the professionalism of the SH&E practitioners continues to dramatically increase with each passing year. The new wave of SH&E professionals will demand the use of more meaningful metrics and rational for where organizational resources will be spent in the name of SH&E. Even the term “SH&E could disappear. In addition to changing the methods used to manage safety and health programs, these new approaches will change what we look at when managing the safety, health and environmental issues to which an organization is exposed. The outcome will be a shift from managing regulations and hazards to the implementation of managing the risk to which organizations are exposed. This shift in thinking will permeate the lexicon of the SH&E profession in that terms such as “zero accidents” and “safety first” will be replaced with the concept of “Acceptable Risk”. Sacred cows and “drivers” such as obsession with regulatory compliance will be replaced with assessing an organization’s risk exposures. While not ignoring compliance with regulations, regulatory compliance be viewed more as a basic minimum or “given” in an organization’s approach to SHE, but not the driving force. This shift will even impact how standards will be written.

The New Order

For the better part of the 20th Century most safety professionals came from a discipline that was unrelated to safety. The use of the term “professional” could even be questioned since many were not college educated, possessed little to no training in the field of safety and were not viewed as key players in the management team. It can even be argued that in many instances the safety department was used as a “dumping ground” to place failed managers from other parts of the organization. While you might have to have an accounting degree to be the Chief Financial Officer, or a sales and marketing degree to be the Director of Marketing, or a business degree to be the VP of Manufacturing, anyone was qualified for safety. This is rapidly changing. Many universities now offer degreed programs in safety, industrial hygiene and environmental sciences.

Graduate programs in these fields now exist. Some business schools have come to recognize that safety is moving from a “nice to have” benefit to a critical component of an organizations business plan. But perhaps the largest strides have been made in the graduates who are entering the business world and government with safety degrees. There is an growing understanding that to impact the organization you must behave like other disciplines in the organization. Whereas budgets, insurance costs, capital expenditures were secondary considerations for “old time” safety managers, now they are a vital part of their job duties. The new SH&E professional more closely resembles a Risk Manager then the old Education, Enforcement and Engineering Safety Manager model. Although the profession is still struggling with how to identify itself as a “profession”, there is a clear understanding that we are at a crossroads where such a shift is not convenient, but necessary. Just as the medical profession struggled with the same problems at the turn of the 20th Century, so is the safety profession at the turn of the 21st. Interestingly enough some of the strongest opponents come from the “old timers” who see the inevitable shift and try to slow it down. Citing slogans like “you don’t need education to be a good safety professional”, “I learned on the job”, “Safety is a state of mind not a profession”, they are holding on afraid of losing title, prestige or their ability to call themselves safety professionals.

The Shifting Metrics of the New Professional

Zero accidents, that’s our goal! This phrase has been the mantra for safety programs since it seems...well forever. The gold standard metric of the profession has been the Lost Time Accident (LTA) and the supporting metric is the Incident Rate, or often known as the OSHA Recordable Rate. The environmental and industrial hygiene sectors of the field have had it even worse. They deal in TLV’s, PEL’s, Allowable Limits, that are practically a foreign language to management. The environmental field packs the most muscle since the cost of the fines for non compliance and the necessity of permits for new construction and continued operations of businesses give them considerable visibility. But the rationale behind the numbers remains bureaucratic and arbitrary to many members of management. They are not tied into a business case as much as a regulatory case.

Safety professionals have long touted the LTA as the number to watch. But is it truly representative of the degree of risk to which an organization is exposed? Tragedies such as Bhopal and Texas City have demonstrated that excellent LTA rates do not necessarily mean safe plants.

The new safety professional is looking at risk. Total risk. This is the new metric. Safety professionals are moving closer to their insurance brethren and using many of the measurements they have used for years; financial measurements. Why? This is the language of business. An organization understands dollars and cents much easier then complex formulas for calculating injuries that are meaningless to the casual observer. No one has to be trained on what a dollar represents. Furthermore the new safety professional acts like other members of management. They form business plans, operating budgets and cost justifications for capital improvements and adding of staff. The old mantra of “give it to me in the name of safety” is dying a fast death. As such these new professionals will be more readily accepted by the rest of the business team as “one of us”.

Managing Risk not Safety

As the new professional becomes more involved in the organizational management structure it becomes necessary to view the risks to the business based on the damage they can do to the organization and the likelihood of the occurrence. This is a substantial departure from the historic approach of safety to attempt to eliminate, control or address all hazards present. Interestingly enough, this approach to managing risk is much closer to the insurance approach to the business than the traditional safety approach. Much can be made of the fact that the two fields are merging so rapidly in theory, thinking and approach that in the near future one would no more consider having the two disciplines in separated departments than one would today separating safety from environmental or industrial hygiene. Naturally the change that this thinking encompasses is foreign to many safety professionals lifelong training. Translating hazards into “dollars” has been more of an abstract approach than a standard management technique. If you asked the average safety professional to place a value on a life, the answer would be that you couldn’t. There is no number you can place on such a loss. The insurance professional will immediately ask for the age of the employee, average wage, some other data and give you an exact number. A number, I might add, that your average safety professional would not know how to calculate, if they could make the leap of logic. This is an extreme example of the differences between the two fields that is narrowing. It also illustrates what each discipline has to learn from the other. All life is not condensed down into dollars and cents as the insurance industry would make it with actuarial tables and projected costs. However, it is also not a “crusade” where the pocketbook should be opened up by a business based on the theory that monies spent in the name of safety should not be questioned.

The theory of “Acceptable Risk” will be the mantra of the new safety professional. The acceptability of risk will encompass everything from regulatory compliance to determining where an organizations resources will be devoted and money spent. Risk assessments, hazard studies maximum foreseeable loss calculations will all play into the safety professionals thinking. Business plans will be driven by this type of thinking and organization insurance packages will be designed around it.

Government Standards vs. Standard of Care

In today’s high litigious world no organization is going to ignore the more recent standard and be satisfied complying with an older version of the standard. This would be setting oneself up for a potential lawsuit by not meeting a “Standard of Care”. This term Standard of Care is becoming more common in the safety lexicon. It represents a concept that if there is a voluntary standard that addresses risks in your organization, you are to a large degree compelled to use such a standard as your benchmark. Not to do so would leave your organization and yourself open to the question of if you have paid proper due diligence to risk mediation measures. Such thinking even reaches Non Consensus Standards (guidelines). The classic example are the ACGIH Threshold Limit Values. These are not the result of a consensus standards organization, however any company that it monitoring it’s employees will use the latest TLV’s as opposed to OSHA PEL’s. Clearly the OSHA PEL’s have the force government standard behind them But who wants to stand in a courtroom and defend the use of a standard that is 30 years out of date and possibly higher than the recent standards.

The outcrop of this is that many of the “voluntary” consensus standards have become anything but voluntary. No organization wants to find itself in a position of not complying with the latest Standard of Care in terms of safety and health regulations. Trying to defend yourself on a 25 year old standard based on “because OSHA says so” just won’t go far in a court of law. The end result is that voluntary standards have become voluntary in name only.

Safety Management Systems Are Born

As the SH&E field has matured so has the way it is managed. Thirty years ago the approach was the 3 E’s of safety; Education, Engineering and Enforcement. This gave way to the “program approach” in which the various elements of what constituted a good SH&E program were broken out and implemented. The next wave was the “Technocrat” approach in which it was thought that all ills could be cured with a specification standard for the topic. This was followed by the Human Behavior phase in which it was decided that since human factors were responsible for 80 to 90% of all incidents if we could only control the people all would be well with the world. Through this entire transition the programmed standards driven approach was the main thrust of the initiatives.

The introduction of ISO 9000 quality approach had more than just a ripple effect into other disciplines in the organization. Ironically, much of what ISO 9000 preached fit easily into the safety field, in fact was already being practiced in some instances.

This shift has resulted in dramatic changes from the old approach of managing standards, program elements, incident rates, potential for huge fines or even hazard recognition. The new world is driven by risk assessment and measures taken to address the risks of an organization.

Summary

Changes are occurring rapidly in the SH&E profession shifting the strategic thinking of measuring LTA’s and worrying about standards compliance. This shift is resulting in terms being used such as “risk assessment”, “acceptable risk” and “maximum foreseeable loss”. The result of this will be that the new SH&E professional will be viewed as a manager of risk and more in line with the financial thinking of the rest of the organization. The natural upshot of this will be SH&E professionals viewed more as vital members of the business team and even able to move into other positions in the business that a decade before would have been unthinkable.