

The Compass



AMERICAN SOCIETY OF SAFETY ENGINEERS

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Interview with Jack B. Hirschmann Jr. President and CEO, Oberon Co.

A SSE's Council on Practices and Standards (CoPS) is committed to developing and publishing materials demonstrating that investment in SH&E is an important business strategy for any organization and will positively impact the bottom line.

This interview, with Jack B. Hirschmann Jr., president and CEO of Oberon Co., is sponsored by CoPS' Business of Safety Committee (BoSC). BoSC is a data-gathering group which heads up ASSE's efforts to show that investment in SH&E is a sound business strategy which can have a positive impact on an organization's bottom line. An ASSE member, Hirschmann represents the Society on the ANSI Z87 committee, which addresses eye and face protection.

CoPS Business of Safety Committee: Give us some history of Oberon and yourself.

Jack Hirschmann: I founded the Oberon Co. in 1978. Three generations of the Hirschmann family have been involved in the safety industry. Jack Bouton Hirschmann Sr. (1909-1997), who founded H.L. Bouton Co. in 1942; me; and Randell Bouton Hirschmann, who joined Oberon in 1987.

My involvement in the family business began as a teenager. My first patent for a welding goggle design was made in 1956, when I was 14. Oberon expanded its line to offer higher-quality eyewear, goggles and faceshields at economical prices. They

are commodity items with about half of them being USA made. We have more than 50 employees and a full manufacturing operation in New Bedford, MA, where much of the manufacturing is automated through computer-controlled machines and robotics. In addition, we have an overseas manufacturing presence with several additional employees. In the eye and face protection industry, Oberon considers itself to be a leader and innovator.

Oberon was initially established to manufacture face protection as a complement to Bouton's eye protection line. We found that the market did not want just another faceshield so we looked to niche markets. These markets gave us an opportunity to develop unique and specialty products to meet the specific need of the application, for example, our gold heat reflective faceshield. These specialty faceshields lead us into hoods, then into clothing to protect the entire body. In the late 1980s we expanded back into eye protection.

BoSC: Explain your philosophy regarding SH&E investment and how it fits into the strategic goals and objectives of Oberon.

JH: Safety and health are both a personal, and an economic issue. I spend time in the factory and people become more than just employees—they become part of an extended family. I certainly do not want to endanger their health. As a mechanical engineer, I understand how

the machines work. There is no reason for them not only to function properly, but also safely. Over the years in the factory, my own safety could have been jeopardized by unsafe machines or practices as well.

A focus on safety, especially house-keeping, will reflect on the quality of the product. A clean, organized and well-lit factory will encourage the employee to build the product correctly and provide a key economic benefit. Secondly are the costs of downtime, workers' compensation and retraining.

BoSC: As a smaller employer, Oberon

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does not have the resources of a Fortune 500 company. How does Oberon address safety issues to ensure that investment in safety has a positive impact on the bottom line? Do you see yourself as a small business or more a mid-range type of company?

JH: A safe working environment has a significant impact on the bottom line. To compete in the world economy, one must be lean and highly productive. Lost-time costs directly impact the bottom line because we are too small to have backup people and machines standing by, but as I said earlier, safety is a way of thinking. Doing it right the first time is always best, whether it's a safety issue or making the product.

Because I am a hands-on (perhaps at times too involved) person, I see Oberon as a small company. My greatest pleasure comes from being in that factory and being involved in the development of new products. When it comes to all the paperwork and the need for our levels of management, I realize we are no longer a small company.

BoSC: You are a supporter of safety performance, specifically through your involvement on ASSE's standards development committees. What has driven you to be such a vocal champion of these issues?

JH: I don't think there is any one reason why I am involved in standards committees, such as eye and face protection with ASSE, and for other products with ASTM. As an engineer by training, I am very interested in how the product is made. To ensure uniformity, there needs to be manufacturing guidelines. With almost 50 years of knowledge in the eye and face protection industry, I can contribute a lot of history and knowledge.

I don't believe that the government should regulate the manufacturing of eye and face protection products, but the buyer needs to know that a pair of safety glasses will meet certain performance levels. If there is a void, either the government or a special interest group will step in and dominate the process. With a good standard, both the end user and the manufacturers



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will benefit. The latest Z87.1 eye and face protection standard is an example where no one interest was able to dominate. ASSE was successful in bringing all interested parties to the table to produce a tighter standard without excluding any point of view. A poor standard would hurt the image of the industry and in the long run be bad for my company.

BoSC: With regard to Oberon's investment in safety, do you view safety performance to be more of a management responsibility, employee function or more of a cross-team initiative?

JH: Safety, health and the environment are a joint effort of management and the employee. They must work as a team. If management mandates it without telling the employee why, it will not work. I think it is easy to explain why something should be done, but the employee must buy into the concept. Management must not only talk about the subject, but also follow it.

Oberon believes in recycling, not just paper and cardboard, but also the water used to cool machinery and plastics scrap from manufacturing. In the case of the cardboard and paper, it costs more to recycle, but saving money in the short term is not the reason we do it. It is a future investment in helping the environment. Hopefully, the employees see the advantage and practice the concept at home. Having served as a commissioner of public works for my town, I personally see the need to recycle and conserve.

BoSC: As CEO, are there any specific actions you take when you find it necessary to intervene on behalf of a safe and healthy workplace at Oberon?

JH: I practice what I preach. As a small company, we do not have a dedicated safety person. I do not assume that someone else has looked for safety problems. By taking an active role, I show others, management and workers, that we must be diligent in our efforts to ensure that a machine is operating safely and practices are followed. It may be something as simple as picking up or wiping up something on the floor.

BoSC: Some SH&E professionals believe they have less of an opportunity than other professionals to advance into the top echelons of major organizations. Do you see this as a real issue or perhaps simply a perception that needs to be corrected?

JH: I believe SH&E professionals are perceived as a necessity and not part of the company that contributes to the growth and bottom line profits of the company. It is more likely someone will advance from the sales or finance side. In a larger company I would likely, as a mechanical engineer by training, be in R&D or product development. So unless you get more into production or sales, the chances to move into the top echelons are very limited.

Yes, I see this as a problem in small and medium-size companies. The larger the company, the more clout they will

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have because they are more of a manager carrying out a discipline. Does it need to be corrected? No. It requires specific training and implementations. If everyone were a generalist, who would get the work done? There is so much to learn to be a good SH&E professional; there is no time in the academic program to cover more. To move up, they have to continue to grow in not only their field, but in other areas as well. So, I do not see it as something that the SH&E profession can do. It is up to the individual.

BoSC: What is your philosophy or guidance as to how SH&E professionals can advance into senior management? In what areas do you think we, as a profession, need to improve if we are to move into senior-level management positions?

JH: If someone were a degreed SH&E professional, perhaps the best way to move up would be to get an M.B.A. This would make this person more of a generalist and

give him the qualifications to shift to a different position or assume a larger role in a small to mid-size company.

BoSC: How can SH&E professionals make the argument to senior management that investment in safety makes good business sense?

JH: The question makes it sound like senior management does not care about safety. Today, with the cost of workers' compensation and fines from state and federal agencies, management cannot ignore safety; but those things that affect the bottom line the most will get more of their attention. Therefore, I would recommend to any SH&E professional to document the savings and contributions he and the safety department make to the company. Carefully prepare your budget and not only carefully justify the expenses, but show how they will impact future costs. Perhaps a program last year reduced injuries. Show how this will lower workers' compensation costs in the future. Enlist the help of manufacturing to calculate reduction in lost-time or retraining costs. How did you pay for yourself and make the business profitable?

BoSC: As head of a firm that sells safety equipment, and as a person with safety responsibilities in your own firm, how do you view OSHA compliance? Our view has been that OSHA compliance is the minimum, but you may have a different perspective from working with clients and managing your own operations.

JH: First, a safety program cannot be built around what I do to comply with OSHA. A company must have a proactive versus a reactive program. For example, arc flash PPE has become a big topic. OSHA has just recently become involved and is issuing citations. As a manufacturer, we have tried to educate the end user about the need for such PPE. As an industry, we must work with all parties, including OSHA, to let people know about the dangers of electrical arc flash versus electrocution. So the focus should not be just on compliance, but on education and implementation of safe work practices. Just the threat of compliance will not make a safe workplace.


BoSC: What message would you send regarding the future of safety and the workplace?

JH: Like all disciplines, I see safety as becoming more complicated in the future. This will require a higher level of education and training. The importance of ASSE will grow. Chapter meetings must provide topics to further SH&E professionals' knowledge. Additional training through courses and seminars will be essential. When I graduated from college in the 1960s, they said my training would be out of date by the changing technology in seven years. Today, I think the world is moving even faster. Never stop learning.

The importance of safety in the workplace will not diminish, just its focus. The SH&E professional must be prepared for this challenge and make the change to use the new technology as it comes along.

BoSC: Any final thoughts?

JH: Get involved—not only in ASSE, but also in other organizations. Share your knowledge with others. It may be a civic organization such as the Boy Scouts. You can help them lead a safer life and at the same time learn things from them. As you broaden your horizons, you will also learn new skills to apply to your job. ■



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