

COUNCIL ON PRACTICES AND STANDARDS

Serving the Specialist of the Safety, Health and Environmental (SH&E) Profession

ASSE's Council on Practices and Standards provides you with the following article.

If you would like to reprint this article in your Chapter Newsletter, please notify Rennie Heath at rheath@asse.org and credit the Council on Practices and Standards. In addition, please refer readers to the <http://www.asse.org/practicespecialties> website.

This interview with ASSE President Michael W. Thompson is adapted from the ASSE Oklahoma City Chapter's monthly newsletter. In the interview, Thompson provides background on his own safety career and offers his insights on the future of safety.

What is your safety philosophy?

I believe that when asked, everyone will say they are for safety, and then they will point to someone else to take care of it. If we can bridge that attitude with the reality that safety and good business performance are connected, then we can achieve cultural change.

What do you believe is the future of safety?

Safety will always be one of the higher requirements in the Maslow Hierarchy of needs. SH&E professionals will continue to be technically oriented and people-focused. Safety will continue to evolve depending on the context of this question.

For some, safety is about security in their personal lives. Safety by definition will be viewed in a more holistic way. SH&E professionals will find that being generalists will become difficult as the world continues to differentiate its global economy.

SH&E professionals must network and be better connected into the business that employs them. They must also be solutions-oriented and have multiple educational credentials.

What is the biggest change you have seen in safety?

Moving beyond the perception that we are "Compliance Cops" within our respective organizations is a challenge for many SH&E professionals. Yet many have bridged this and are a dynamic part of their respective employer's business. Other SH&E professionals seem to be trapped in a victim mentality and are unable to break out of it. We must be seen as a positive partners and contributors to business.

Claiming OSHA regulations as a justification for SH&E program compliance is no longer enough. We are showing that we can create solutions that meet the workforce needs and also are compatible with business.

What is the most memorable moment in your safety career?

It is impossible for me to pinpoint any one moment. Careers are made through work experiences and continuing professional education.

I lost my father to an industrial illness, and this caused me to reorient my education goals. I vowed to make a difference in other people's lives. This experience partly explains my passion for SH&E and my philosophy associated with servant leadership. After graduating from Texas A&M University with a bachelor of science degree in safety engineering, I entered the paid business world through Chevron.

Early in my career, I was engaged in a fatality investigation. As the root cause specialist, I supported senior management as they struggled with this fatality at their worksite. I witnessed a transition from their view that safety was something they did as a part of a scheduled and discreet activity once a month. They brought me into their team and ongoing conversations as part of their business decision-making. I learned from them as I helped them come to grips with the sometimes abstract issues of SH&E within the business context.

My active engagement with the American Society of Safety Engineers (ASSE) has benefited me in ways far greater than my own contributions to ASSE. I do not have to justify my viewpoint to others, as it is me who must live with me. I always ask myself, "Have I participated actively with my employer, my management and fellow colleagues to achieve an incident- and injury-free workplace and community?" Have I got it right yet? No, but therein sits my personal and professional challenge.

What are the most important issues in your specific industry?

I work in the energy business. Today with the advent of even more technology and the application of these technologies to secure energy for our global economy, we must remain technically viable. This means risk assessment; technical, business, community, environment skill sets and competencies pose opportunity to SH&E professionals.

Professional development is a constant requirement—the median age is approaching 50. Some economic predictions suggest huge retirements in the industry and with that goes the considerable capabilities of these individuals to get the job done safely. The aging workforce and the younger replacement workforce will present challenges to SH&E professionals.

Resource availability is also in constant tension. We seek these limited resources to conduct our SH&E activities just as other departments within the business. All SH&E professionals must be able to justify via a business model the programs they propose.

Biography

Michael W. Thompson is a Health, Safety and Environment Manager for BP America E&P Digital and Communications Technology Business Unit in Houston, TX. He has over 20 years of progressive assignments in HSE and five years of manufacturing and general management experience in electronics.

Thompson is President of the American Society of Safety Engineers. His other professional memberships include:

- Committee Member, Boy Scouts of America Risk Management and Insurance Council

- Committee Member, Center for Chemical Process Safety (CCPS) Tools to Enhance Hazard Identification
- Advisory Board Member, East Carolina University
- National Environmental, Safety and Health Training Association
- Co-Chair, NIOSH National Occupational Research Agenda (NORA) Oil and Gas Extraction Subsector Council
- Committee Member, Risk Management Committee, Sam Houston Council Boys Scouts of America
- Society of Petroleum Engineers
- Advisory Board Member, Texas Engineering Extension Service

Thompson holds a bachelor of science degree in safety engineering from Texas A&M University with continuing education in business management. He is also a Board-Certified Safety Professional in Comprehensive Practice.