

The Versatile SH&E Pro

Today's employers are looking for versatile, value-add employees. As Tom Lawrence, Vice President of ASSE's Council on Professional Affairs (CoPA), explains in this column, CoPA recently completed a study to learn whether SH&E professionals are viewed in this way and to identify how they can better meet the needs and expectations of management. Based on the results, CoPA is developing a two-pronged plan to ensure that SH&E professionals are at the front of employers' minds when they are looking for that versatile employee.

An identity crisis is taking place in the American workplace. The dynamics of the organizational structure of many businesses are in a state of flux because of issues such as globalization, the shift to a more service-oriented economy and reduced workforces. Professionals and practitioners are being asked to take on more and varied responsibilities, many of which extend beyond their traditionally defined roles.

These new hybrid jobs make it difficult for employees to map career paths or to position or prepare themselves for new work-related opportunities. Employers are almost forced to look for more versatile workers, which is leading to a change in the "value proposition" for many professions. The model is shifting from "Do you have the technical skills typically associated with your profession?" to "How do your skills add value to the organization?" This phenomenon is not limited to any one occupation. The Society for Human Resource Management, the Society of Actuaries and the American Industrial Hygiene Association are a few groups that have recently looked at the issue on behalf of their professions.

ASSE is taking the lead in guiding its members and the profession through this period of change. The Society's goals are to ensure that the value proposition for the SH&E professional is clearly understood by employers/customers and that ASSE members have the entire set of skills needed to compete in this new workplace environment.

To that end, ASSE, through its Council on Professional Affairs (CoPA), recently completed a study on current perceptions of the safety professional's value in the workplace and how safety professionals could better meet the needs and expectations of the management team. The project consisted of a member survey and one-on-one interviews with managers who hire, manage or work with safety professionals.

Working with an outside marketing consultant, 2,370 member surveys were processed and 70 telephone interviews were conducted with senior managers. The primary purpose of the research was to identify gaps in perceptions between safety professionals and senior management. The survey/interview tool was designed to:

- Measure the importance and perceived value of the safety function overall and relative to a list of specific tasks, including those in ANSI Z590.2, Scope and Functions of the Professional Safety Position.
- Identify overall strengths and weaknesses of safety professionals in general.
- Determine barriers that impact the effectiveness of individuals performing the safety function.
- Gain insight into the nature of the workplace relationship between safety professionals and senior management.

The Findings

Overall, the results from this study were positive in terms of perceptions toward safety professionals and the safety function as a whole. However, in several areas, the perceived performance of the safety professional fell below management's stated expectations. These areas include business and strategy, and technical safety expertise.

Business & Strategy

Corporate managers noted that the safety function performs less effectively in the following skill areas:

- Plan and react strategically.
- Transform data/insights into practical solutions.
- Develop methods that integrate safety performance into business productivity.
- Align the group's project plans with overall business strategy.
- Understand financial-related terms and information.
- Evaluate proposed investments against their projected payoff.

Technical Safety Expertise

With respect to technical skills, managers noted these as potential areas for improvement:

- Assess the probability and severity of losses and accidents that may result from hazards.
- Implement techniques to evaluate hazard control and program effectiveness.
- Provide advice in planning, design, development, fabrication, testing and packaging of products or services regarding safety requirements/principles.

Organizational & Management Support

The study also found gaps in the perceptions between safety professionals and senior management with respect to organizational and management support of the safety function. For example, the issue safety professionals cite most frequently as a barrier that affects the safety function is lack of support by upper management and line management. However, senior managers are considerably more likely to say that no barriers affecting the safety function exist at their company. In addition, senior managers' perceptions of organizational culture are significantly more favorable than safety professionals' perceptions.

Where To From Here?

What do the findings of the study mean in light of the new "value-add, versatile employee" model? The perception among senior managers is that in many respects safety professionals do not have the skills necessary to fill these new adaptive roles. Safety professionals are viewed as too technical, not able to look at issues from a big picture perspective or integrate programs into the organization. Ironically, senior managers also view safety professionals as lacking key adaptive-type technical skills such as evaluating the effectiveness of safety-related programs. Finally, certain technical skills seem to be undervalued, such as the safety professional's involvement in project design and planning.

While one can debate whether these views are accurate, as the adage states, "perception is reality." Therefore, CoPA is developing a two-pronged plan to address these findings. The first part will deal with the skill sets of the safety professional—determining what training and awareness programs are needed to reposition the safety professional in today's workplace. The second part will look at what steps can be taken to improve the image of the safety professional in the minds of employers/customers and to correct any misconceptions. The goal is to have safety professionals at the front of employers' minds when they are looking for that value-add, versatile employee.