

SH&E Career Success

Strategies for the early years and beyond

By Pamela Ferrante

THE EARLY YEARS OF THE 21ST CENTURY are providing an opportunity for upward mobility and swift ascension into the ranks of management for young SH&E professionals—opportunities not seen since OSHA was created in 1970. Three factors have converged to create this climate.

1) A large number of SH&E professionals either have retired in the past five years or expect to retire in the next four to five years. In an online survey conducted several years ago, nearly 25 percent of responders fell into this category (*ISHN*).

2) Layoffs and downsizing trends common in the SH&E field during the 1990s have been reversed. Companies often see SH&E professionals—particularly those who focus mostly on safety—as overhead; as a result, safety departments are often among the first to be significantly reduced or eliminated when the economy slows or has short-term problems. Recent economic upturns have seen companies rebounding from the need to reduce workforces and the hiring process has begun anew for the workforce in general. One can reasonably surmise that the SH&E profession will be a part of this hiring upsurge; in fact, anecdotal reports from the field support that assertion. For example, one department

director of a local university indicated that all spring 2005 graduates from the university's safety program had at least one job offer before graduation—and most of the female graduates had at least two.

3) SH&E professionals in the first three to five years of their careers can use their broad skill base to cross many industries. SH&E graduates from major colleges and universities are not typically trained for a specific sector, such as construction or heavy manufacturing, and are valued by many companies precisely because they can perform a wide range of functions in numerous settings. As they move from their first or second jobs into their first positions of authority and responsibility, they can begin to determine which arena (if any)

is preferred. This allows them to selectively choose among those areas experiencing higher job growth. Once SH&E professionals settle into their careers and specific industrial area, they are often less able to move readily between industries.

For those who have entered the SH&E field within the past three to five years or will enter it soon, these factors are converging in their favor. With the right career moves, these practitioners could find themselves moving up the ranks at a rapid pace. While this may not apply to everyone, those willing to commit to a long-range goal have the ability to enhance their long-term career potential.

In addition to drive and determination, achieving this goal requires a plan—a written plan that is applied consistently over time, with regular reviews and revisions. This article reviews and discusses three areas that can help SH&E professionals navigate and successfully manage the early years of their careers. Current employment projections in the SH&E field are briefly reviewed, with a focus on factors and circumstances that make this a prime time for rapid upward mobility. In addition, a recommended skill set that will enhance the likelihood of moving into positions of responsibility is discussed, as are a means of creating a clear, concise career plan.

For veteran practitioners, the information should be considered part of a long-term career management strategy. Most careers do not move in a straight line. Changes such as downsizing or company closure can be abrupt and may be beyond the control of the individual, or they can be more gradual, such as when a professional changes his/her area of specialization or increases personal knowledge and skill base in order to move into a different area of practice. The result is that all SH&E professionals should have a certain skill set if they seek management positions. A written plan is a valuable tool in this regard.

State of the SH&E Profession

The number of SH&E professionals retiring or preparing to do so is a significant statistic (Institute of Medicine). Nearly one-quarter of respondents to the

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ISHN survey indicated that they have already or are on the verge of retirement (ISHN). This represents a large demographic that is causing and will continue to cause a major shift in the SH&E workforce.

Professionals nearing retirement typically represent those who have had lengthy careers and hold upper-level management positions. While young SH&E professionals are not ready to assume such roles, they will benefit from the upshift in the tables of organization within their own company and many others. As upper-level positions are filled, a substantial vacuum will be created in lower- and mid-level management positions. Those who can demonstrate a readiness to assume leadership roles will be in a "buyer's market" and will likely have many options for their next career move.

Another recent survey indicates a general increase in SH&E budgets. In fact, 36 percent of respondents said that their budgets had increased from 2003 to 2004 (Gaspers 22). Along with this, hiring has been regenerated in most segments of the workforce, including the SH&E profession. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' (BLS) *Occupational Outlook Handbook 2005*, considered the best barometer of job growth predictions in the U.S., the need for industrial engineers—including those in the safety and health field—will grow about as fast as the average occupation through 2012. This source also projects a similar level of growth for occupational safety and health specialists and technicians (BLS).

In addition, another BLS document titled "Tomorrow's Jobs" references the growth in administrative and support positions in the waste management and remediation services field, a specialized sector of the profession. BLS predicts the need for these services will grow 37 percent by 2012. While this statistic represents all job growth in this sector, not simply those in the safety field, some of the jobs created can be expected to require varying levels of safety backgrounds, education and experience (BLS).

Furthermore, *Career Guide to the Safety Profession*, a joint publication of ASSE and the Board of Certified Safety Professionals (BCSP), suggests that there is no reason to believe the need for SH&E professionals will decrease in the foreseeable future.

The employment outlook for safety professionals is very favorable. Depending upon their education, communications skills, experience and professional certifications, safety professionals can expect to have a rewarding career far into the future (ASSE/BCSP 11).

This document also describes an increased need for SH&E professionals who can

help companies manage ergonomic risks and injuries, as well as for those with specific knowledge of the insurance and workers' compensation markets who can help companies control rapidly rising costs in these areas. It is also worthwhile to compare salary levels of SH&E professionals with other careers (Table 1).

Key Skill Set

Talent continues to be in great demand, and that will always be so. No organization can ever have too much talent, which is why companies go to great lengths and spend hundreds of millions of dollars to attract, train, develop and retain their talent pools (Long 6).

Once a new SH&E professional finds his/her first job, how does s/he pursue career aspirations that are bigger than that job? What skills and abilities should be nurtured and developed in order to enter the ranks of management? Many books and articles address this question—often expressing differing opinions—but in the author's opinion, the following skill set will help a new SH&E professional evolve into a seasoned veteran ready to lead in today's top companies.

Technical Knowledge

Technical knowledge is fundamental to everything an SH&E professional does. By the time an undergraduate degree is earned, an individual should have mastered the profession's basic principles and theories, and should know what resources to consult for additional information. In addition, many safety degree programs require or offer internships to help an undergraduate obtain real-world experience before graduation.

However, such preparation provides an individual with only the basic knowledge set required to succeed. A commitment to continued learning through reading, attending conferences and other types of experiences is essential for career and professional growth. Therefore, in the author's opinion,



With the right career moves, new SH&E practitioners could find themselves moving up the ranks at a rapid pace.

Table 1
Salaries of SH&E Professionals vs. Other Careers, 2002

Occupation	Median Salary	High Salary	Low Salary
Teachers: preschool, elementary, secondary	\$39,810 to \$44,340	\$62,890 to \$68,530	\$24,960 to \$29,850
Occupational safety and health specialists and technicians	\$46,010	\$71,450	\$25,080
Accountants	\$47,000	\$82,730	\$30,320
Industrial engineers (including safety and health)	\$58,010	\$87,250	\$37,230
Computer programmers	\$60,290	\$96,860	\$35,080
Chemical engineers	\$72,490	\$107,520	\$48,450

Source: BLS. Occupational Outlook Handbook 2005.



**Today's
SH&E
professional
must recognize that
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general
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the practitioner should commit to reading at least one SH&E-related book every two months and at least two articles appearing in periodicals or online magazines every month in order to stay abreast of current developments.

Those who hope to succeed in management should also consider subscribing to their community's local business paper or a national business publication such as *The Wall Street Journal*. Staying abreast of the latest technology is also crucial and requires a deliberate effort to learn and determine how to best apply the latest advances.

In addition, one should pursue certification as soon as possible following graduation. The actual designations themselves (such as CSP, CIH, CHMM, ARM) are not as important as working through the rigorous process of studying and test-taking. Being certified demonstrates that a person possesses the fundamental knowledge required for professional-level work as well as a willingness and ability to achieve a career goal. It also demonstrates to those who evaluate management capabilities that a value has been placed on what the certification represents—an agreement to abide by the standards set by the certifying organization and a public vow that one's professional ethics mirror the certifying organization. In addition, holding a designation typically means earning a higher salary. For example, a professional with a CSP earns up to 26 percent more than a practitioner without the CSP (ASSE 26).

Business Savvy

An SH&E professional who wants to attain leadership positions must "talk the talk" of business executives. "Executives who can link their capabilities and potential to their organization's bottom line—and communicate this clearly within their company—are more likely to advance their careers successfully" (Heneghan 175). Today's SH&E professional must be as comfortable determining the return on investment for major safety expenditures as s/he is talking about the type of respirator needed for benzene exposure. The skilled SH&E manager must be able to read a balance sheet as easily as an accident investigation report. S/he must be able to interpret a profit/loss statement, communicate an understanding of the big picture and demonstrate the ability to make SH&E fit into an overall company business plan.

The upwardly mobile SH&E professional must recognize that companies need managers who are multifaceted and who understand operations, finance and general business principles. A professional who demonstrates that s/he can be such a manager is more likely to rise through the ranks to a point where his/her level of responsibility can fundamentally affect a company's safety culture.

Communication Skills

The ability to speak clearly and be understood is another essential career skill. An aspiring SH&E manager must be able to talk comfortably with all levels in the company's hierarchy—and s/he must be able to communicate a message to one person or

100. In addition, written communication is as important skill. Knowing how to write an e-mail that will be read or a proposal that will be acted on is crucial. Organizations such as Toastmasters International (www.toastmasters.org) and Dale Carnegie and Associates Inc. (www.dalecarnegie.com) are excellent resources for those interested in improving communication skills.

In addition, a manager should strive to develop a vocabulary that can help him/her influence people and improve credibility. Simple tools such as crossword puzzles or "word-of-the-day" calendars can help sharpen this skill.

Learn to Get Along & Work Well with Others

The simple advice shared in Robert Fulghum's *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*—such as share and play nice—resonates well for many reasons. The basic principle is that people must get along. Likewise, an SH&E professional must get along with those with whom s/he works. It is important to know how to build consensus among differing views and understand instinctively when to compromise. An aspiring SH&E manager should have a firm sense of personal and professional ethics, and apply them rigorously and constantly. S/he must be both a good team member and team leader. This is not easy and it is rarely learned during formal education.

It is also important to get along with one's boss. As Onion and O'Toole state in *You've Just Been Made the Supervisor . . . Now What?!*:

If you plan to stay with your organization, you won't get far without a good relationship with your boss. Even if you plan to move on to another organization, it will be much easier with a positive reference from your current boss (Onion and O'Toole 320).

Because this is a key subskill, it is important to understand what "getting along with the supervisor" encompasses. At its core, it means consciously assessing the relationship and being the one to make changes if needed. It is the rising manager's responsibility—and in his/her best interest—to keep the lines of communication open. Key components to consider when assessing this relationship include:

- What is the character of the relationship with the supervisor as compared with coworkers? It should be different, unless the supervisor does not want it that way.
- What motivates the supervisor?
- What are the supervisor's pet peeves, blind spots and nonverbal cues?
- Is the boss a morning person or not?
- Do the less-experienced manager's accomplishments make the boss look good to his/her boss (Onion and O'Toole 320-342)?

Build Visibility

Advancing one's career to the next level requires being visible both inside and outside of the organization. This means taking on required work projects or volunteer opportunities that allow a person to be recognized as a take-charge, effective manager.

This can be accomplished in various ways. It can include participation in professional organizations such as ASSE, as well as working on community projects related to personal interests outside the workplace. Whatever outside projects are selected, the company should certainly get credit if possible and reasonable. Providing such visibility to one's company in the community is likely to be noticed and rewarded. Furthermore, participation in professional organizations also provides many resources for improving technical knowledge, identifying new industry trends and becoming aware of competitors' activities.

Making internal and external contacts is a key part of becoming a visible manager. Developing a network of professional colleagues inside and outside of an organization that will serve a young manager well in many ways in the early years of a career. These contacts can help one solve a problem, find a resource or stay current in the field. They can also provide job leads.

Time Management

"I'm overworked" and "I'm doing more with much less" are common complaints in today's corporate world. Those who can manage their professional time well are more likely to move up. Multitasking and setting priorities are key. If possible, choose projects wisely, looking for those that will solve a recurring problem, that will have a fundamental impact on how a company views safety, or that will create an opportunity to work with other professional disciplines or departments within the organization. The latter increases one's knowledge of company operations while increasing visibility across operating units. It helps cultivate a person's image as a "can-do" manager throughout the organization.

Exercise caution, however, about taking on too much. While it is often said that to get something done give the task to someone who is busy, there is a limit to what any one person can do well. Those who stretch themselves too thin risk doing nothing well or failing in a public way.

Be a Follower

In Out of the Box: Skills for Developing Your Own Career Path, Hansen examines how being a good leader means knowing when and how to be a good follower. This is important for novice SH&E professionals on two levels. First, someone may be good, but s/he must still be a subordinate before moving up the ranks—s/he must still "pay dues." An aspiring SH&E manager must be ready to make the most of it. Second, even professionals at the top must let others lead on occasion (Hansen 82).

Follower skills are similar in some ways to leader skills. Following are several that Hansen recommends be developed:

- **Be humble.** Be willing to perform grunt work. Understand and accept one's role in the company. Much can be learned while at the entry level; take advantage of it.
- **Exhibit unconditional commitment.** This is difficult to master, especially in today's economy when

a position can be abruptly eliminated and when it is unlikely that one will spend an entire career with one company. However, accepting a job mandates an ethical commitment to do one's best all the time. As long as a company is paying for a job to be done, one must do his/her best. If this obligation cannot be fulfilled, it is time to move on.

- **Anticipate problems.** Preparing for the worst increases the likelihood that the task will be completed no matter what. Being able to complete a task under the best or worst conditions is key for any prospective manager.

- **Demonstrate initiative.** It is important to know when to do something independently and develop a reputation as someone who does not need meticulously detailed instructions for each assignment. It is also important to be able to interpret and determine some factors independently. However, followers also know when to ask for help or direction, and do not hesitate to do so or fear the appearance of incompetence.

- **Have a "thankful heart."** Followers understand varying roles in an organization and realize the importance of the contributions from all parties. A follower does not need to be center stage all the time and appreciates what s/he has (Hansen 82-85).

Know When to Move On

What would happen if OSHA were abolished tomorrow? For many SH&E professionals, the majority of daily work documenting compliance with regulations would cease. How long would it take management to recognize that this individual no longer has work to complete?

An SH&E professional who wants to establish a reputation as a competent manager must understand the value his/her work adds to the organization. If unable to redirect tasks and assignments in order to take advantage of skills and abilities, the current position may not be a good fit and will not likely lead to positions of greater responsibility over time. Being a value-added employee is a must in order to progress in the field in general or within a given company. An aspiring manager should take some time to evaluate this aspect of career growth and be undaunted if moving on makes the most sense as a long-term strategy.

A Career Plan

Everyone needs to actively manage his or her career . . . security is maximized by moving forward in one's career in a purposeful way, not by trying to stay in place and let others make career decisions for you (Critelli ix).

Networking for Job Seekers

Using a professional network to find a job is an acceptable practice. However, it is best to use an established network of people with whom one has developed relationships outside of any job prospecting. Most SH&E professionals are willing to help point new professionals in the direction of potential opportunities and/or companies that may be hiring. However, no one likes to feel used for the sole purpose of helping someone find a job. Attending a meeting only to distribute resumes or calling casual contacts (such as those met once briefly) after being laid off (or fired) is not an effective way to maintain those contacts.



Moving into the management ranks requires a written career plan that is deliberate, organized and oriented to specific professional goals and objectives.

To move into the management ranks, an SH&E professional needs to evaluate his/her current skill level against that discussed here and by developing a plan to close any gaps. This requires a written plan that is deliberate, organized and oriented to specific professional goals and objectives.

An honest assessment of skills is the first step. For each skill outlined in this article, a self-rating should be performed using a numerical scale (e.g., 1 to 5, 1 to 10). In addition, for each skill, a brief narrative should be written to further clarify the rating.

Next, one should seek the opinion of at least one trusted advisor, preferably someone who acts as a mentor or even a current supervisor. This helps to ensure that strengths and weaknesses are fully and objectively analyzed. Be prepared to hear constructive feedback and avoid reacting quickly if these assessments differ from the self-assessment.

Once the evaluation process is complete, set priorities based on those areas that need an investment of time and energy. If the assessment has been completed honestly, the number of areas identified as lacking may seem overwhelming. It would not be unusual to identify at least 10 or more goals that need attention. However, some priorities are unique and the specific end point is distinctive. Establishing top priorities and giving them intensive early efforts will pay off in the long run.

The next step is to write specific, measurable goals and objectives. This can be a challenge, largely because it is difficult to write clear, concise, measurable goals and objectives. Before starting, consider the definitions of goal and objective. According to *Webster's*, one definition of a goal is "the end toward which effort is directed." In line with that definition, an objective is the means used to achieve a goal.

Use of the acronym "SMART" is an effective way to facilitate goal writing:

- S—Specific (based on some sort of numerical quantity);
- M—Measurable (reflect on the specifics of the goal);
- A—Actionable (able to answer the question "what do I need to do to make this happen?");
- R—Realistic (reasonable steps to achieve the final outcome);
- T—Timeline (able to answer the question "when will I be done?"; this helps organize and allocate resources).

The next step is to develop a set of objectives that will enable each goal to be achieved. Each objective should be time-specific and follow a logical sequence to the completion of the goal.

It is best to develop a mix of short- and long-term goals. Short-term goals are those that can be completed within six months, while long-term goals will typically take at least one year. Focusing early efforts on one or two short-term goals helps to ensure that a few goals will be accomplished early; this builds confidence, which, in turn, helps provide the energy and determination needed to continue.

Many goal-planning resources are available, in-

cluding Internet sites such as www.careershop.com, www.jobhuntersbible.com, www.headhunter.com and www.monster.com. An Internet search will highlight thousands of additional sites. In addition, major libraries typically have a department with business books and periodicals. A company's human resources department is another good option. Many are geared toward in-house staff development and may even have financial resources available to pay for classes that are of value to the company.

Once the plan is written and work to complete goals is proceeding, the plan must be regularly reviewed and revised. This process allows progress to be monitored and reinforces the need to keep growing. The plan should be reviewed every six months—more often if career progression appears stalled or a major career growth event or upheaval has occurred.

Conclusion

No one has a stronger motivation for your success than you do, and no one has a better grasp of your strengths and weaknesses. People who don't take charge of their own careers often become victims rather than masters of their destiny (Long 6).

This is an excellent time to enter the SH&E profession. Anyone willing to work hard and use a carefully planned process will find early successes, potentially leading to positions of significant authority in as little as 10 years. It is up to the individual SH&E professional to do the work and make it happen. ■

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