The Changing Face of the Safety Profession: Moving Towards International Standards of Competency for Safety Professionals

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Introduction

This paper will report on the global efforts to develop a common framework for defining competencies and standards of practice for the safety profession. The session will include updates on efforts to develop a common OSH core body of knowledge, legally recognized standards of competency for the safety profession, certification and registration schemes to facilitate practice across country borders, and definitions of competency for voluntary standards such as *ANSI Z10 (Occupational Health & Safety Management Systems)* and *ANSI Z490 (Criteria for Accepted Practices in Safety, Health, and Environmental Training)*.

What Is a Profession?

Context
In the body of literature on professions, the traits believed to be universal amongst well-established professions converge on a few key points. To start, the definition: while an "occupation" describes what one does in order to earn a living, a "profession" is more distinct—and "professionals" different from "technical specialists"—in that to be a member of a profession, one must have specialized, exclusive, job-related knowledge. In modern times, these major traits are accompanied by other requirements held by mature professions, sometimes referred to as "ideal traits:"[1]

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[1] Described by P.W.G. Morris, et al., in "Exploring the role of formal bodies of knowledge in defining a profession – The case of project management," *International Journal of Project Management*, 24 (2006), p. 711. The "ideal traits" come from the model originating from the older, more firmly established

1. Specialized advanced education (to be achieved by professional)
2. Formal entry requirements (determined and maintained by a consolidated, "legitimate" source)
3. Autonomy over the terms and conditions of practice (held by the profession)
4. A code of ethics (typically maintained by an external validating source)
5. Monopoly over a discrete body of knowledge and related skills (held by the profession)

"Newer" professions such as occupational safety and health (OSH) face a challenge in attaining these traits, as these professions are particularly vulnerable to territorial encroachment from competitors and constantly changing market forces. A profession in a dynamic marketplace is not simply "objective, inevitable, [or] timeless."[2] It is, in fact, validated by external forces, and cannot exist if it does not have clients or a broader community willing to acknowledge it. It thus becomes even more important for a profession to actively pursue professionalization, which involves considering what these traits "look like," the process by which they should be attained, and determining who should be responsible for facilitating professionalization.

The most tangible marker of a profession's existence in the United States is the professional association, which is a product of the moment when professionals realize they perform specific job roles that they have in common that are not performed by other professions. Associations influence the supply of labor while assuring the quality of service provided by professionals – as well as the status of professionals themselves. Given these tasks, associations must therefore strive to carve out a "competence territory" that is exclusive to its membership.[3]

An association is invested with the primary responsibility of not only ensuring, but boosting the profession it represents so that the profession can continue to sustain itself and improve the status of its members. ASSE is no different in this regard, yet it is still subject to constant external threats to the broader recognition of the safety profession.

A Brief History of OSH Professionalization

The concept of "professional status" for OSH practitioners is not a new one. Fifty years ago, John V. Grimaldi, then President of ASSE, noted that there were discussions as to "whether the profession is essentially engineering, managerial, some combination of these or possibly something else quite different."[4] The interest in clarifying the identity of the OSH field (i.e., determining what it is and is not) has not waned over the years. Some notable examples include:

- In 1993, Fred Manuele developed an action plan for OSH practitioners to achieve recognition as a profession.[5] He raised questions regarding the OSH recognized body of knowledge, the need for a formalized process to review and develop it, and encouraged the development of definitions of practice.

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professions, such as law and medicine, which are commonly assumed to be autonomous, authoritative, and free of outside competition. Project management faces many of the same difficulties as the safety profession in its need to actively pursue professionalization.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., 713.

[4] "Safety Engineering in a Changing World," *Journal of the American Society of Safety Engineers*, November 1961, 35.

[5] Fred Manuele, "On Becoming a Profession," *Professional Safety*, October 1993, 22-26.

- ASSE commissioned a study in 2003 by Knapp & Associates, resulting in a report entitled *Safety as a Profession: Framework and Recommendations*. The report made five observations on what must exist for safety to be a profession:
    1. A scope of practice and a core set of competencies for the safety profession, endorsed by safety organizations;
    2. Recognition of a common body of knowledge for the profession;
    3. Outcome-based educational programs that focus on core competencies;
    4. A code of ethics; and
    5. An organization that promulgates the scope of practice and professional standards.
- Drs. Lon Ferguson and James Ramsay weighed in on the topic in the October 2010 edition of *Professional Safety*.[6] They outlined six characteristics of a profession and pointed out the need for the OSH profession to:
    1. Develop acceptable and usable qualification standards for the profession.
    2. Establish occupational closure, which is the distinction between the qualified and the unqualified, wherein the unqualified are not considered professionals.
    3. Influence the creation of professional licensure and regulation.
- Over the past two years, there have been significant government-sponsored initiatives to define or characterize the OSH professional in Europe and Australia. In Europe, the EU-funded EUSAFE project was launched in November 2010 with the goal of establishing a universal qualification and training framework for OSH professionals across Europe, in order to improve international recognition of practitioners' competences and qualifications. In Australia, HaSPA, an alliance of OHS associations and OHS education providers, launched a project in 2009 to define the core body of knowledge and core competencies for the OSH generalist professional. The project, funded by a governmental grant of $390,000, "is a fundamental component of the process of sustainably repositioning the OHS professional. It will have a systemic, long term effect on OHS professional education, resulting in improved quality of OHS advice and more effective prevention activities."[7]

Based on these findings, it can be deduced that a younger profession, such as OSH, must acknowledge that it cannot convincingly become an exclusive, "mature" profession if it is not willing or able to identify the essential nature of that which *makes* it a profession.

ASSE is working with several international OSH organizations to address the fact that the OSH profession lacks the solid identity and territory of a well-established profession, and to map out a lasting, process-based solution. Major topics under discussion are examined in the next sections of this paper.

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[6] Lon Ferguson and James Ramsay, "Development of a Profession: The role of education and certification in occupational safety becoming a profession," *Professional Safety*, October 2010, 24-30.
[7] HaSPA, "Developing the Core Body of Knowledge for the OHS generalist professional," July 30th, 2009. http://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/2bd40a00419ee06ba29daf1db9f25928/HaSPA+Developing+a+framework+for+the+BOK+6-08-09v2.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=2bd40a00419ee06ba29daf1db9f25928

Defining a Core Body of Knowledge and Core Competencies for the Generalist OSH Professional

Body of Knowledge

Traditionally, a "profession" has been defined by a set of traits that distinguish it from other professions, including a discrete "competence territory," or Body of Knowledge (BOK). The BOK provides the underlying knowledge base that is required for professionals to competently perform their jobs and apply principles to practice. It serves as a basis for course and curriculum design, program accreditation,[8] and professional certification. A body of knowledge must also be dynamic. Professions and their core competencies and skill sets change over the years, meaning the body of knowledge must constantly incorporate new techniques and information while maintaining the relevance of curriculum. The BOK is a key "trait" for a profession to have clearly and concisely defined if it wishes to be autonomous.

Safety organizations around the world have defined an OSH core body of knowledge with differing methods of controlling access to it. For example, ASSE defines the OSH body of knowledge via learning outcomes, which any graduate of a professional safety program must possess, and defers to the Board of Certified Safety Professionals (BCSP) for certifying generalist safety professionals. The BCSP defines the OSH body of knowledge via specific knowledge areas within "content domains."[9] The Board of Canadian Registered Safety Professionals (BCRSP) provides competency categories with specific OSH knowledge.[10] The Health and Safety Professionals Alliance (HaSPA) in Australia maintains a BOK by providing a framework of themes, concepts, and models of practice.[11]

Despite the existence of Bodies of Knowledge amongst these organizations, there is not a universally accepted, core BOK for the OSH profession, a consensus on the means of delivering it, nor a universalized means of ensuring that a safety professional actually possesses it. Without a consolidated core BOK, there is tremendous variation in—and a lack of control over—how OSH professionals are educated, trained, provided professional development, and certified. This creates a space where there is no control over the underlying theories of practice safety professionals may be taught, and a lack of control means that they may be presented with misguided information on how to perform their job roles and/or have major gaps in important knowledge.[12] The incoherent structure and lack of defined consensus in OSH educational outcomes means that there is no universal way for an employer to be reassured that he or she is hiring a fully qualified and competent OSH professional.

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[8] Accreditation is the process whereby an association or agency grants public recognition to a school, institute, college, university, or specialized program of study having met certain established qualifications or standards as determined through initial and periodic evaluations (Knapp).

[9] For more information on the CSP's content domains, please see "Comprehensive Practice Exam Blueprint" at http://www.bcsp.org/pdf/ASPCSP/ComprehensivePracticeExaminationBlueprint_Jan09.pdf.

[10] For more information, please see "Blueprint for the Canadian Registered Safety Professional Examination," June 2010 - http://www.bcrsp.ca/pdf/EXAMINATION%20BLUEPRINT%202010.pdf.

[11] Please see "The Core Body of Knowledge for the Generalist OHS Professional: Conceptual Framework," http://www.sia.org.au/downloads/SIGs/Education/BoK/Body_of_Knowledge_conceptual_framework_draft_15-09-10.pdf.

[12] For more information, please see Fred Manuele's "On Becoming a Profession," *Professional Safety*, October 1993, and "Reviewing Heinrich: Dislodging Two Myths From the Practice of Safety," *Professional Safety*, October 2011.

HaSPA's 2009 project attempts to address these concerns, as it aims to develop and implement a core BOK for "generalist OSH professionals." The project was awarded "in recognition that enterprises will benefit significantly by the increased availability and use of suitably qualified OHS professionals to provide advice and services to improve workplace health and safety."[13] The HaSPA project is noteworthy because it seeks to go beyond the traditional models and methods of defining a BOK (i.e., publishing required knowledge areas or issuing competency statements). HaSPA is instead developing a document that describes the knowledge that underpins competency. It will set forth the theories, concepts, and models of practice that form the knowledge base for the competent generalist OSH professional. It also plans to develop a process to validate and cyclically update the body of knowledge.

In September 2011, the International Network for Safety and Health Professional Organizations (INSHPO)[14] sponsored a workshop on the standards of practice for the OSH profession, which included a discussion on developing a generally recognized core body of knowledge. It was agreed that the HaSPA project outcome should serve as the basis for the global effort. The organization plans to have all INSHPO member and affiliate organizations review and comment on the document. If disagreements exist, alternate perspectives may be noted in the document. A process for reviewing at least one topic annually by an international panel of experts would ensure the validity of the content.

Competencies

> *Despite the success of the [United Kingdom's Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974], the standing of health and safety in the eyes of the public has never been lower, … [due in] part to the enthusiasm with which often unqualified health and safety consultants have tried to eliminate all risk rather than apply the test in the Act of a 'reasonably practicable' approach.[15]*

This quote from the UK's "Lord Young Report" serves as an example of the negative impact that incompetent practitioners can have on the OSH profession. The root cause of this problem is the failure of the OSH profession to institute meaningful occupational closure. That is, practitioners with minimal education and training can hold themselves out as OSH professionals. The image of the OSH profession will continue to suffer if employers/customers continue to experience "OSH professionals" who, because of a lack of clarity on what that term implies, do not have the requisite skills or experience.

A first step toward achieving occupational closure is to gain consensus within the OSH community on the core competencies of the generalist OSH professional. Core competencies are the identified knowledge, skills, and behaviors that are necessary to effectively perform the OSH generalist professional function. OSH core competencies reflect mastery of the OSH core body of knowledge, but may also include "soft" competencies such as interpersonal skills. OSH core competencies assist OSH professionals in identifying training and developmental needs, may

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[13] HaSPA, "Developing the Core Body of Knowledge."

[14] INSHPO is a consortium of 15 occupational safety and health practitioner organizations from 11 countries that serves as a forum for international collaboration to improve safety and health at work. BCSP and ASSE are members, and ASSE is Secretariat. Two of the overarching goals of INSHPO are to achieve international recognition of the OSH profession and to facilitate global practice by safety professionals.

[15] From "Common Sense, Common Safety" by Lord Young of Graffham, October 2010, p. 11. http://www.number10.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/402906_CommonSense_acc.pdf

serve as a basis for certification or regulation of OSH professionals, and facilitate OSH practice across national borders. While OSH certifying bodies or professional associations in many countries have well-developed methodologies for defining competencies for OSH professionals, there is no generally-recognized set of core competencies for the OSH generalist professional.

The prevailing approach to identifying the skills and behaviors that are required for OSH professionals is to survey practicing professionals regarding their job tasks. BCSP and BCRSP conduct revalidation surveys every 5-7 years, respectively. In its efforts to develop the European OSH certification, the European Network of Safety and Health Professional Organisations (ENSHPO) and International Social Security Administration (ISSA) surveyed 27 European countries during the 2002-2006 timeframe. HaSPA collected job task information to support the ENSHPO project and as part of their OSH Body of Knowledge project. Along these lines, INSHPO is currently working on a project to analyze the latest job task data collected by BCSP, BCRSP, ENSHPO, and HaSPA to identify core competencies for the OSH generalist professional. The INSHPO analysis can be used as a basis for updating *ANSI/ASSE Z590.2, Criteria for Establishing the Scope and Functions of the Professional Safety Position.*

Developing a Long-Range Plan to Make OSH Certification the Primary Vehicle for Occupational Closure

<u>Certification</u>
Newer professions, particularly those professions that lack a specialized university qualification and/or licensure, have had difficulty achieving the same level of autonomy as "older" professions, such as law or medicine. To create barriers to entry to exclude the unqualified is to create occupational closure, which is typically achieved through the licensing, certifying, or registering of professionals.[16] These methodologies ensure that any individual practicing in the field has the competencies to perform his or her job.

Certification has been embraced by professional associations in addressing the issue of occupational closure and ensuring a profession's autonomy, as it is "a means of endorsing the distinctiveness of the discipline."[17] Identification of a BOK and core competencies is patently important in ensuring that the certification process is sustainable; for an association to maintain its position in an industry, it must maintain control over a BOK, the definition of core competencies, and related certification processes.

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[16] A registry is a listing of individuals verified to have the minimum relevant qualifications deemed necessary by an external validating source, such as an association.
From Joan E. Knapp, "Designing Certification and Accreditation Programs:"
"Licensure is the process by which an agency of government grants permission to persons to engage in a given profession or occupation by certifying that those licensed have attained the minimal degree of competency necessary to ensure that the public health, safety and welfare will be reasonably well protected.
"Certification is a voluntary process by which a nongovernmental agency or association grants recognition to an individual who has met certain predetermined qualifications specified by that agency or association. Such qualifications may include graduation from an accredited or approved training program, acceptable performance on a qualifying examination, and/or completion of some specified amount or type of work experience."
[17] Morris, 713.

From OSH profession perspective, competency criteria are identified by several sources, but are not uniform. This further complicates the possibility of attaining occupational closure. Some places where criteria to measure competence have been identified include:

1. State licensing and title protection legislation
2. Voluntary ANSI standards [ANSI Z590.1 (proposed) and Z590.2]
3. Registry programs [the ASSE National Registry of Safety Professionals and Other Registrants, and the Occupational Safety and Health Consultants Register (in the United Kingdom)]
4. Certification requirements

In the context of OSH certification, there have been several global initiatives to standardize the competency criteria. ENSHPO developed the European Occupational Safety and Health Manager (EurOSHM), a voluntary European certification standard for occupational safety and health to help to verify the competence of OSH professionals across several European countries.[18] INSHPO has initiated a project to develop international competency criteria that will facilitate international OSH practice and serve as a model for certification programs in developing countries. Finally, HaSPA is attempting to standardize OSH competency criteria among their jurisdictions through their Body of Knowledge project.

In the United States, an attempt to standardize OSH competency criteria by means of an ANSI standard failed in the late 1990s due to a lack of consensus among the leading safety organizations. However, the ASSE Board of Directors did approve definitions of "safety professional" and "safety practitioner" in 1998.[19] Similarly, while the OSH competency criteria required for the CSP is well established, certification has not proven to be a successful vehicle for occupational closure due to the proliferation of OSH-related certifications with disparate criteria. Accredited certification must be promoted and reinforced as a necessity for any practicing OSH professional.

Developing a Plan to Educate the Business Community on the Value of Hiring Certified OSH Professionals

Since certification of OSH professionals is not mandated by law, educating the business community on the importance of certification is a key step toward achieving occupational closure. In this context, the message to the business community is twofold: There is value in utilizing competent OSH professionals, and certification is the way to ensure that the OSH professional is competent. Thus, comprehensive guidance on when to use OSH professionals and how to properly evaluate OSH-related competencies is necessary.

Some examples of what these guidance tools or a marketing campaign may look like can be found in the work done by the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH). In the United Kingdom, the Management of Health and Safety at Work regulations require employers to appoint 'one or more competent persons' to help them to meet their duty to control risks at work. The statute, however, does not define "competence." The UK's Health & Safety Executive

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[18] For more information regarding the EurOSHM and ENSHPO, please visit http://www.enshpo.eu/.
[19] ASSE *Society Update*, vol. 1 – No. 7, Feb/March 1998, front page.

(HSE), which is parallel to OSHA, has resisted calls for further defining competencies.[20] As a result, IOSH developed the "Get the Best" campaign, which calls for "a series of measures to recognize and promote standards in health and safety, tighten up directors' responsibilities and improve education."[21] The campaign includes brochures stating that "someone without the right qualifications and experience can claim to be a 'health and safety adviser' and that means lives could be put at risk." In addition, IOSH developed recruitment advertisements for different levels of OSH professionals in a pamphlet called, "Well-meaning amateurs need not apply."[22]

IOSH has also developed a guide on competence and training for employers and health and safety professionals, "aimed at raising health and safety performance across all levels and sectors of employment by outlining the competences that staff need, and how these can be developed."[23] Finally, IOSH recently released a brochure outlining the key steps to consider when engaging with a health and safety consultant.[24]

In Australia, HaSPA has developed "Minimum Service Standards for Professional Members of OHS Associations,"[25] which include the requirement for professional certification of OSH professionals providing independent advice.

ASSE has developed *The Employer's Guide to Hiring a Safety Professional* in an effort to encourage employers to only hire safety professionals with relevant credentials.[26] The guide was formally released in early 2011.

In the United States, initiatives are under way to define OSH competency for federal employment purposes, in setting contractual performance standards, and in connection with ANSI Z10 and Prevention through Design (PtD) standards. ASSE should advise and consult on each of these initiatives.

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[20] "Ready and able?" *Health and Safety News*, http://www.healthandsafetyatwork.com/hsw/content/ready-and-able, May 6, 2009.

[21] IOSH, "Get the Best," http://www.iosh.co.uk/news_and_events/campaigns/idoc.ashx?docid=56a285c3-182e-4e82-9bc9-bbc5bd486149&version=-1.

[22] "Well-meaning amateurs need not apply," http://www.iosh.co.uk/news_and_events/campaigns/idoc.ashx?docid=b46acb2b-8d9c-44ac-926c-1b81525b88eb&version=-1.

[23] "Setting standards in health and safety: raising performance through training and competence development," http://www.iosh.co.uk/information_and_resources/idoc.ashx?docid=8e3da5f0-513a-4cba-9d58-8f53e16d1010&version=-1.

[24] "Getting specialist help with health and safety," http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg420.pdf

[25] "Victorian Code of Ethics and Minimum Service Standards for Professional Members of OHS Associations," http://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/6382fd004071f40b984bdee1fb554c40/Victorian+Code+of+Ethics+and+Minimum+Service+Standards+FINAL+101109.pdf?MOD=AJPERES.

[26] http://viewer.zmags.com/publication/dc63cf6e