

Who is performing the safety function?

The intersection of safety and human resources

By Laura H. Rhodes and David P. Rhodes

IS SAFETY SIMPLY PERFORMED by the safety professional at your facility or organization? Do you want others to be “doing” safety? Could they identify a hazard if they saw one? Are they qualified to do so? This article reviews the literature regarding the intersection of the safety and human resources management professions, and discusses results of a survey of human resources and labor relations professionals regarding safety functions they perform and their preparation to do so. Based on these findings, recommendations for positive change are presented.

The Literature

Through their professional examination content, processes, conferences and research journal topic selection, ASSE, the Board of Certified Safety Professionals (BCSP) and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) have each demonstrated that the human resources and safety fields

are, at least, complementary. Through the efforts of a joint curriculum, patches of knowledge will not only be analyzed but “threaded together” (Brady 2).

The Latin derivation of the word *curriculum* is “a course to run.” Curriculum developers must ask, What do we want our students to do? At the K-12 level, the term “interdisciplinary curriculum” involves separating math, the arts, language arts, social sciences and humanities into individual units. The “course to run” in human

resources is to create opportunities for students to see the integrated necessity of safety and health into human resources functions. Curriculum should reflect the documented needs of the professional.

A mismatch could be said to exist between old institutions and “new realities” of intensified international competition, rapid technological change, new forms of work organization, changed workforce demographics and career patterns and altered employee expectations of work. Lewin, et al report that human resources literature has been similarly “divorced from mainstream business strategies” (Lewin, et al 10).

The most-obvious advice an academic advisor might give a human resources graduate would be to apply to an accredited safety sciences master’s program. However, to be admitted to such a program, one must have significant math and science background. A student whose undergraduate degree is human resources, personnel management, business or management would need to make up significant prerequisites before being granted candidacy and, as a result, is often denied admission. An integrated curriculum, subspecialty or safety certificate curriculum may provide graduates with greater adaptability. Human resources graduates must also be able to perform managerial tasks. According to Doeringer, the need for greater career flexibility has intensified. Individuals should be able to move up the career ladder but also move across conventional career boundaries (Doeringer 173; Steinberg).

Other research supports formalizing the intersection of the safety and human resources curricula. In a 1984 study, Bergmann and Close raised the question, “What are the key skills needed by entry-level human resources managers?” (Bergmann and Close). Their research focused on development of curricu-

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HUMAN RESOURCES

SAFETY

Many human resources professionals are performing safety functions, yet many are not academically prepared to do so.

Human resources managers in small companies perform more safety activities than those in larger companies.

Table 1

Respondents' Primary Job

Respondents indicate they are safety generalists. According to the Society for Human Resource Management, safety is within the generalist's scope of activity.

Primary Job	Percent of Respondents
HR Generalist	53.8
Labor/Industrial Relations	16.8
Employment/Recruitment	4.6
Employee Relations	3.6
Training/Development	3.0
Legal	2.5
Compensation	2.0
Health, Safety, Security	2.0
Benefits	2.0
Union	2.0
Consultant	1.5
HRIS	1.0
Other	5.1

Table 2

Business Sectors

Various business sectors were represented by the respondents. In other words, human resources professionals represented many different work demands.

Business Sector	Percent of Respondents
Unionized Manufacturing	20.0
Non-Union Manufacturing	16.5
Government	16.0
Healthcare	8.5
Consulting	6.5
Service Sector	6.0
Other	23.5

lum suggestions based on employer needs. Manufacturing and nonmanufacturing organizations emphasized specialty skills including employee selection, compensation administration, training and development, equal employment and interpersonal skills. Of 33 college course topics, manufacturing employers ranked safety and health 22nd, compared to 29th by nonmanufacturing employers. Safety and health concerns were considered more important than coursework in subjects such as marketing, production management, managerial accounting, psychological measurements and research methodology.

Similarly, Blair asked what competencies are required for safety management professionals as perceived by CSPs and safety educators (Blair 1997;

1999). Blair states that the most highly rated roles of the safety professional are mentor and innovator, which require such abilities as creative thinking, flexibility, communication and listening. According to Graham, the single most-important skill needed by the safety professional is an excellent ability to communicate (40+).

In his examination of the major baccalaureate courses and their perceived importance by CSPs, Ferguson asked safety professionals to what degree particular course titles were a part of their work (Ferguson; Soule). The study discussed in this article surveyed graduates of Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) Labor Relations master's program in order to ascertain the scope of their safety functions. Some of Ferguson's questions were posed, as were questions about safety tasks performed by human resources personnel. Participants ranked their academic preparation in these areas. The study focused on the relationship between curriculum and the world of human resources work. In other words, participants identified safety functions and the academic preparation required to perform those functions.

From these data, curriculum integration can begin with the courses most valuable to the practitioner. For the human resources person, they will be better prepared; for the safety professional working under, near or in conjunction with human resources, the burden will be lightened. The point here is not to make safety professionals from human resources professionals or vice versa. Instead, one must ask, should all safety and health activities be performed solely by safety professionals? Does the administration, supervision or coordination of safe work practices require a safety professional title, designation, license or degree?

According to Pierce, title protection and licensing actions are a means to protect the profession, not a way to improve worker safety. A supporter of total quality management and the integration of safety into all levels of quality production and service, Pierce says it is time to let go of the "safety and health turf"—that an "us and them" attitude is simply not productive. He calls the inability to move out of the straight safety paradigm an attempt at "professional purity." What is needed, instead, is a new, multi-functional professional whose focus is on coordination of the safety and health effort (Pierce).

Petersen has long advocated assigning safety and health responsibilities to every level of the organization (Petersen). Although this is occurring, those held accountable may not be properly prepared to handle the task. Perhaps human resources profes-

signals are attempting to perform safety tasks but lack the expertise to handle the safety function directly, manage and support others who are directly accountable, identify when to outsource the function to a CSP, or interact and prioritize safety issues with other offices within the organization.

The Study

The survey described here investigated whether human resources graduates need a better understanding of how to manage and support the safety function. Data show that these graduates either manage or directly supervise the safety function, or work in tandem with safety managers. Consequently, they need to be better prepared to handle those functions.

The following discussion reviews the problem, research design and study sample demographic information, presents data gathered and offers recommendations for improvement.

The Problem

This survey examined perceptions of the safety function by industrial and labor relations master's graduates (Rhodes 3084). To achieve this, four research questions were developed.

- 1) Do graduates identify safety functions as a portion of their job accountabilities?
- 2) Does organizational size influence the extent of graduates' safety functions?
- 3) Do graduates identify similar deficiencies, regardless of organizational size or sector?
- 4) Are graduates performing safety functions as defined by ASSE?

Research Design

Prior to this survey, a pilot study was conducted using the IUP Labor Relations Master's Degree Cohort. This group includes 25 graduate students who had earned at least 18 credits in the program. At the time of the study, most of these individuals were working in the human resources profession, a criteria for admission to the cohort.

The results of the pilot study revealed a need to clarify wording of survey questions. The survey was revised as suggested by the cohort. It was then sent to graduates of IUP's Industrial and Labor Relations master's program. Of 510 potential participants, 436 had known addresses. Of the 436 mailed, seven were returned due to improper addresses. Postcards were sent to all addresses 10 days after the initial mailing. A

Table 3

Respondents Who Dealt with Safety in the Last 12 Months

According to respondents, safety is at least a portion of the human resources function.

Safety Issue	Percent of Respondents
Workplace Violence	68.4
Workers' Compensation	66.8
Accident Investigation	56.1
Security	55.0
Employee Safety Training	54.6
Safety Grievances/Disputes	51.0
OSHA Regulations & Standards	45.8
Safety Committee Administration	44.0
Written Safety Program Development	43.8
Personal Protective Equipment	43.5
OSHA Recordkeeping	43.0
Management Safety Performance	42.8
Job Safety Analysis	42.7
Ergonomics	40.3
Disaster Preparedness	39.1
Safety Incentive Programs	34.9
HazMat Management	32.5
Vehicle Safety	31.6
Fire Emergency Management	29.8
Contractor Selection	28.7

follow-up letter was sent to those who had not responded. Phone calls were then made to those who did not respond after the postcard and follow-up letter. Of the surveys returned, 276 were useable. Those working in human resources at the time of the study constituted the study population (n=202).

Results/Findings

Some 58 percent of respondents were men and 42 percent were women. The respondents graduated between 1980 and 1999. At the time of the study, 27 percent of respondents were not working.

Table 4

The Effect of Company Size on Safety

Respondents, by size of organization on separate department, separate budgets and presence of safety committees. Organization size seems to affect the safety function.

	Small (<1,000)	Medium (1,000-4,999)	Large (>5,000)
Separate safety department	28.3	53.2	59.1
Separate safety and HR budgets	24.5	60.9	66.7
Presence of a safety committee	67.3	72.3	74.7

Respondents were asked what professional designations they held. Such designations are based on established bodies of knowledge. For example, six percent of the professional in human resources (PHR) designation is based on safety. Eight percent of respondents were PHRs, while six percent were senior PHRs. An additional seven percent held other designations.

Primary Job

Most respondents identified human resources generalist as their primary job function. This becomes significant as the title is compared to the literature which describes a human resources generalist. Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents who identified each of several primary job functions. Note that two percent identify safety as the primary job.

Business Sectors

Table 2 shows the percentage of respondents employed in each business sector. Data show that respondents represented a wide array of sectors. Had respondents been primarily employed in manufacturing environments, one might assume that the hazards would be greater and, therefore, respondents would more likely feel unprepared to perform safety.

Research Questions

1) Do graduates identify safety functions as a portion of their job accountabilities?

Despite the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirement for essential functions (Pritchard), only 78 percent of respondents' job descriptions were in writing. Of written job descriptions, 46 percent specifically included "safety." Forty-seven percent said that they participated on a safety committee; of those, 35 percent said they held a leadership role. Keep in mind those surveyed were human resources professionals, not safety professionals. Of human resources professionals in small-size organizations (fewer than 1,000 employees), 32 percent selected "I am the safety department."

To determine whether a portion of the human resources professional's job included safety, graduates were asked about safety issues with which they had dealt during the last 12 months. They indicated that workplace violence, workers' compensation, accident investigation, security, safety training, grievances and OSHA regulations had been part of their duties during the last 12 months. Table 3 shows the percentage who indicated they dealt with a particular safety issue during the last 12 months. Clearly, among the study

population, some portion of their position was dedicated to safety.

2) Does organizational size influence the extent of graduates' safety functions?

Survey results suggest that an organization's size may affect the number of safety functions encountered by the human resources professional. Some 47 percent of the respondents worked for companies with more than 5,000 employees. Twenty safety topics were presented (Table 3). The frequency of some safety issues is influenced by organizational size. For example, Table 4 shows those in small companies were more likely to deal with

Table 5

Respondents Preparedness to Handle Specific Safety Issues

This table shows the percentage of respondents by employer size who identified "inadequate preparation for specific safety issues dealt with in the last 12 months."

Safety Issue	Small (<1,000)	Medium (1,000-4,900)	Large (>5,000)
Workplace Violence	52.2	60.5	64.9
Workers' Compensation	44.0	67.5	70.8
Accident Investigation	70.5	82.1	63.3
Security	81.0	90.0	89.1
Employee Safety Training	85.4	76.5	82.8
Safety Grievances/Disputes	45.2	38.9	45.5
OSHA Regulations & Standards	64.6	69.7	81.0
Safety Committee Administration	74.4	77.4	83.9
Written Safety Program Development	86.4	78.1	87.0
Personal Protective Equipment	81.4	90.6	89.7
OSHA Recordkeeping	71.1	73.5	84.7
Management Safety Performance	86.0	68.8	70.9
Job Safety Analysis	73.3	70.6	73.2
Ergonomics	89.6	96.6	90.4
Disaster Preparedness	87.8	100.0	93.5
Safety Incentive Programs	78.0	74.2	83.6
HazMat Management	90.0	96.7	90.6
Vehicle Safety	87.5	90.0	90.6
Fire Emergency Management	90.5	100	90.7
Contractor Selection	84.8	93.5	82.1

Figure 1

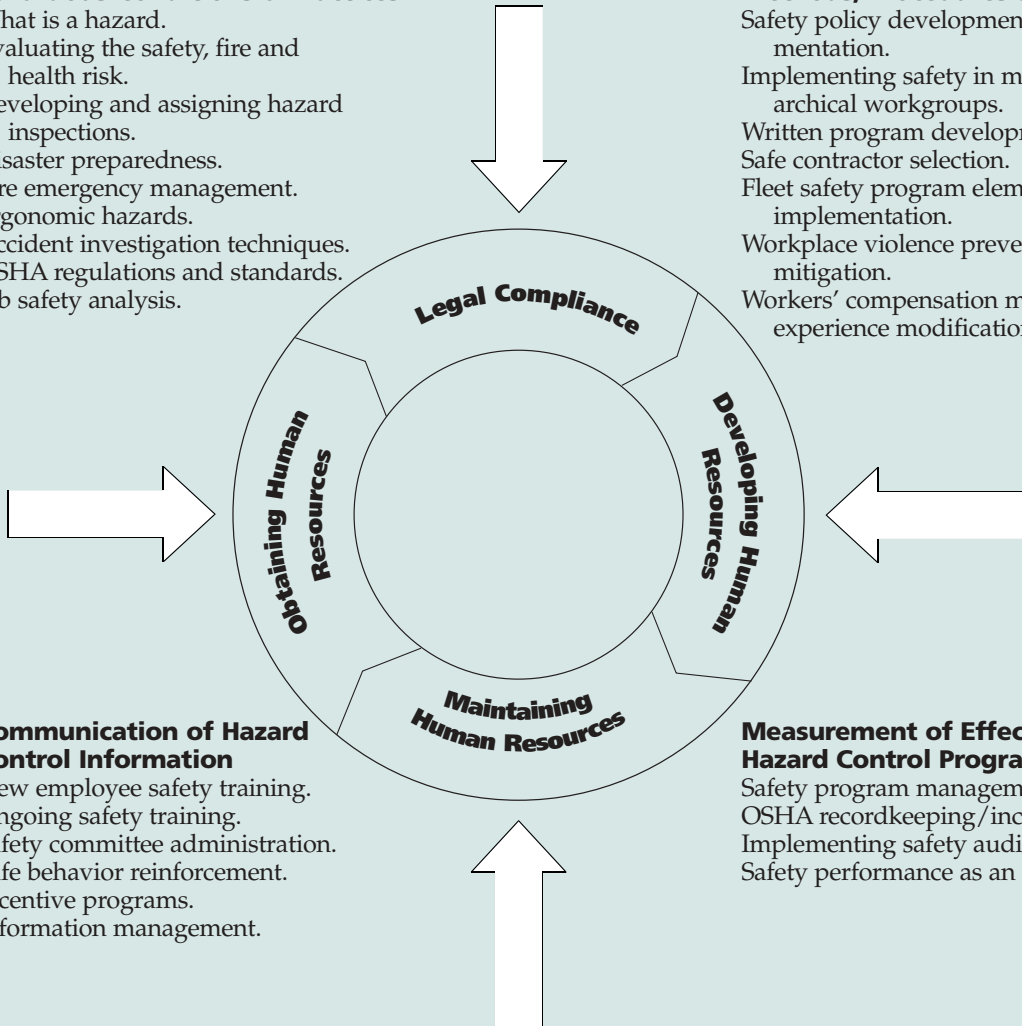
Safety Curriculum Needs for the Human Resources/Industrial Relations Professional

Identification & Evaluation of Hazardous Conditions & Practices

What is a hazard.
Evaluating the safety, fire and health risk.
Developing and assigning hazard inspections.
Disaster preparedness.
Fire emergency management.
Ergonomic hazards.
Accident investigation techniques.
OSHA regulations and standards.
Job safety analysis.

Development of Hazard Control Methods, Procedures and Programs

Safety policy development and implementation.
Implementing safety in modern, nonhierarchical workgroups.
Written program development.
Safe contractor selection.
Fleet safety program elements and implementation.
Workplace violence prevention/mitigation.
Workers' compensation management/experience modification.



Communication of Hazard Control Information

New employee safety training.
Ongoing safety training.
Safety committee administration.
Safe behavior reinforcement.
Incentive programs.
Information management.

Measurement of Effectiveness Hazard Control Programs

Safety program management.
OSHA recordkeeping/incident rates.
Implementing safety audit activities.
Safety performance as an indicator.

OSHA regulations. Size also seemed to influence the presence of a separate safety department or unit, separate budget from human resources, the presence of a safety committee and frequency with which human resources interacts with the safety department. Chi square analysis was performed on these data. Many fell within the 0.01 confidence level (Rhodes 3084).

3) Do graduates identify similar deficiencies, regardless of organizational size or sector?

Respondents perceived themselves as "inadequately prepared" to handle the safety function (Table 5). However, there were exceptions to this perception. Most indicated that they were well-prepared to handle "safety grievances/disputes" and "workplace violence." Regardless of organizational size or sector, graduates identified similar deficiencies. Based on data, along with respondents' narrative comments, it became evident that the inclusion of safety coursework would be beneficial to human resources students. Chi square analysis was not performed on these data as cell sizes were too small (Rhodes 3084).

4) Are graduates performing safety functions as defined by ASSE?

ASSE's "Scope and Functions of the Professional Safety Position" provides the basis for a series of questions. Respondents were asked whether they performed *any* of the four segments of the profession: 1) identify/evaluate hazardous conditions and practices (38 percent); 2) develop hazard control methods, procedures/programs (32 percent); 3) communicate hazard control information (39 percent); and 4) measure effectiveness of hazard controls (25 percent).

Participants were then asked to identify which of the four functions was a *primary* job activity. The most-frequent response was identify and evaluate hazardous conditions and practices (43 percent), followed by communicate hazard control information (28 percent), develop hazard control methods, procedures and programs (19 percent) and measure effectiveness of hazard controls (9 percent). Researchers concluded that graduates are performing the functions outlined by ASSE. Primarily, they identify hazards and communicate hazard control information.

Academic advisors should encourage human resources students to seek out safety-related coursework.

Recommendations for Improvements— The Next Step

Based on survey results, academic curricula for human resources professionals should include safety-related topics. Figure 1 shows the intersections of the human resources and safety professions based on the definitions of the professions as established by SHRM and ASSE. It also shows the curriculum needs identified by respondents. Those in higher education, particularly human resources management curriculum writers, and those who create certificate programs for nonsafety professions such as human resources managers should use this as a list of priority topics to be incorporated into their programs or certificate content.

Certainly, preparing human resources professionals for hazard identification must be a top priority, a fact emphasized in respondents' narrative comments. Many shared their concerns and support for safety coursework suited for the human resources and labor relations professionals.

In addition to specific coursework at the undergraduate or master's level, colleges and universities should consider offering safety certificates to *non-safety professionals*. Most safety professionals would agree, as does established literature, that it is not just the safety professional who should be "doing safety." Many professional organizations (such as ASSE) have created certificate programs, yet few universities have ventured into this area.

Another recommendation based on survey data is that academic advisors should encourage human resources students to seek out safety-related coursework regardless of the size or sector of the organization for which they plan to work. In other words, no matter where the human resources person lands, s/he will likely be responsible for some safety activities.

A better dialogue between professional organizations should be established. For example, there should be greater committee involvement between organizations dedicated to safety, such as ASSE, and those serving human resources professionals, such as SHRM. Results also show that qualified consultants such as CSPs and CIHs must do a better job of availing themselves to human resources professionals.

Avenues to Pursue

As mentioned, some nationally recognized organizations have acknowledged the need for safety certificates. For example, ASSE offers the Certificate in Safety Management (see www.asse.org) that covers safety management fundamentals and a variety of related topics.

To date, however, few universities have developed such programs. Old Dominion University offers a Certificate in Occupational Safety as a part of its program in environmental health (see www.cee.odu.edu). IUP recently created the Certificate of Recognition in Safety Sciences, an online program of study available to post-baccalaureate nonsafety professionals (see www.hhs.iup.edu/sa/programframe.htm). Other avenues for safety and health education exist at many local community colleges.

Conclusion

This survey showed that human resources professionals are expected to handle safety functions, yet many of these practitioners are not academically prepared to do so.

Human resources professionals across all industry sectors are dealing with safety-related issues. The frequency with which this occurs seems to be influenced by organizational size—those in small organizations perform more safety activities than those in larger organizations.

Overall, respondents indicated a need for greater academic safety preparation. Human resources practitioners who are performing safety functions do have avenues in which to pursue academic support. Certainly, colleges and universities, professional organizations and qualified consultants can help these managers perform these functions by developing high-quality programs that emphasize applicable professional skills identified. ■

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