



How to escape your niche

CHRIS PEACE challenges readers to study towards a management qualification so they can aspire to senior roles of greater influence.



Chief executive and general manager are roles with real influence on health and safety and wider areas of risk management – but how many health and safety practitioners make it to this level?

I think we are at risk of educating health and safety people to fill only their defined niche, making it hard for them to move into general management roles.

Is there a problem with purely vocational OHS qualifications? Are we educating and training people to do health and safety management but also giving them future-proof skills?

Senior managers are accustomed to managing risks – the uncertainties in business life. By contrast, OHS practitioners work on the claimed certainties of hazard elimination. I could write an entire article about the significant differences in thinking between managing hazards as against managing risk, but these few words may help set the scene:

- Hazards have the potential to cause harm and thus are each a single dimension; they can only be analysed in terms of their consequences.
- Risk is the effect of uncertainty on objectives; risks are analysed in terms of the likelihood of the consequences of events. Many causes, many consequences, each consequence having a different likelihood.

Risk management is therefore much richer than hazard management and aligns with the bigger picture in organisations.

I regularly ask OHS practitioners about the risk assessment techniques they use. Many claim

to use the 5x5 matrix, sometimes because “that’s what the risk management standard recommends” (However the current risk management standard, AS/NZS ISO 31000:2009 *Risk management – Principles and guidelines*, makes no mention of a matrix).

I also ask managers how they assess risks. Some use brainstorming, but it is rarely semi-structured using SWIFT or similar techniques. Across all groups, a few use bow-tie analysis, a small percentage use PESTLE or SWOT. Flowcharting processes is rare.

Feedback from some Massey University students shows that few have been taught how to use the 29 techniques described in ISO 31010: 2009 *Risk Management: Risk Assessment Techniques* (to be published by Standards NZ as HB 89 *Risk assessment techniques*.) Most are unaware of other techniques – another 60 by my count – that might be used to help understand business activities and risks.

Matters are worse with OHS practitioners. The consequence vs likelihood matrix – heavily weighted to include lots of red or extreme cells – is used to justify hazard elimination, or possibly hazard isolation, with no real understanding of the correct design of the matrix and, usually, no understanding of the context of risks or the organisation. Whatever happened to risk modification, a wider business approach to managing risk than simply eliminating it?

Does all of this explain the performance of some organisations and sectors? Do managers – not just OHS managers – lack



an understanding of the context of their organisations, let alone the risks they are exposed to? These are large research questions but the available evidence is quite striking.

I think OHS management should be seen as a stepping stone in a career where analytical techniques are used to better understand the business, including the risks it faces. For those aspiring to the title of risk manager, a deeper knowledge of risk assessment techniques is necessary. Such knowledge will subsequently be of great value in general management roles.

Assuming I’m right, where does this leave anyone aspiring to be a qualified OHS practitioner? I believe they should see OHS qualifications as but a part of their lifetime journey. What is learned now should link with future learning and contribute to future roles – hopefully senior roles.

For example, people aiming to take Massey University papers towards a GradDipOSH might be better to use those papers towards a Bachelor in Business Studies. This would add to a growing pool of qualified, knowl-

edge-based managers, better able to draw on greater skills than just risk or safety management. They would have the ability to work across and with specialties, even if they lack in-depth knowledge of them. Eventually, some of those managers will make it to the top and use their generalist skills to better manage risk, including safety risks. And that will contribute to better managed organisations that are not reliant on a few specialists.

But what of the converse situation – how many people studying for management qualifications include OHS papers? It’s unthinkable that an aspiring general manager or CEO would not have learned about financial management, so what’s wrong with learning about OHS and its management? But that’s another story.

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