

Education of OHS Personnel

Learning for Life: Preparing Occupational Health & Safety Practitioners for the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

In the past decade or so, and more particularly in the past few years, the role of occupational health and safety practitioners has changed significantly. In common with other professionals, such practitioners, particularly those working within organisations, have had to deal with rapid and pervasive change both within and outside their organisations. In this paper some of these many changes are discussed, leading to a consideration of what this means both for the initial preparation and ongoing education of occupational health and safety professionals.

It is no secret to anyone working in contemporary organisations that things are in a constant state of flux. At the broadest level, our society is undergoing significant and dramatic transformations, particularly as a result of globalisation and other environmental, cultural, technological and economic 'mega trends.' Most occupations are subject to constant turbulence in the legislative domain which, in conjunction with the impact of modern information and communication technologies, necessitates continuous adaptation and change in many aspects of work.

In response to, and in the context of this turbulence, organisations themselves have been undergoing rapid and sometimes continuous transformation in order to be more competitive. It is not uncommon to find organisations that are decentralising at precisely the same time that other organisations are centralising their activities. Likewise, some organisations are outsourcing certain functions and paring down to a lean set of 'core business' activities, at the same time as other organisations – even in the same industry - are engaging in vertical and horizontal integration.

In a recent book entitled *Blur: The Speed of Change in the Connected Economy*, Davis & Meyer (1998, p. 7) describe this phenomenon as follows:

In the BLUR world, products and services are merging. Buyers sell and sellers buy. Neat value chains are messy economic webs. Homes are offices. No longer is there a clear line between structure and process, owning and using, knowing and learning, real and virtual. Less and less separates employee and employer. In the world of capital - itself as much a liability as an asset - value

moves so fast you can't tell stock from flow. On every front, opposites are blurring.

In response to these events - new technologies, changed legislation, social and cultural adjustments and organisational transformations - people have had to redefine their roles and adapt to a life of more or less continuous turbulence. Central to this adaptation is the need for continuous learning, and there is abundant recent literature dealing with the concept of lifelong learning, particularly in organisational settings.

Basically, such learning may be one of two types, and sometimes a combination of both. Some of this learning is 'anticipatory' in the sense that it involves pre-empting change and establishing a readiness to welcome and embrace it. Some of it, on the other hand, is more adaptive or responsive in that it involves altering how things are viewed and habitual ways of behaving or acting, in reaction to, rather than in anticipation of, external changes.

Whether adaptive or anticipatory, the capacity for such learning is increasingly significant for organisations, and for the people who work in them. It is increasingly untenable, if it ever was, for people to fill up with a static or only slowly-changing stock of knowledge at the beginning of their careers, and to rely on this over a period of perhaps thirty or forty years. In short, changing career patterns along with the 'white water' of organisational change means that everybody needs to be a lifelong learner.

Of course, such adaptability is not limited to individuals, but has increasingly become the hallmark of organisations as well. The most successful organisations are increasingly those which are themselves attuned to the need for change - both proactively and responsively. Indeed, the concept of the 'learning organisation' has been coined to capture precisely the qualities and attributes of those fast-moving, fluid and adaptable organisations which are most likely to flourish in the 21st century.

There are many features of the learning organisation. Some of the most important are:

- alertness to the need for change;
- decentralised decision-making;
- rewards for initiative;
- recognition of the value of people;
- shared responsibility;
- innovative use of technology; and
- excellent lines of communication, vertically and horizontally.

Intriguingly, organisations that manifest these types of values are likely not only to be more successful and more competitive, but also to be healthier and more concerned about wellbeing than their more traditionally oriented counterparts. In other words, being a learning organisation is not just good for business, it is good for the people who work in the business.

But an emphasis on learning does not begin and end either with individuals, or with organisations. As more and more organisations embrace the notion of continuous learning and as more and more people become lifelong learners, it is likely that collectively this will begin to transform our communities, and even the very fabric of society. It is not impossible to envisage a situation where we would move towards

becoming a learning society or learning community; in fact, some social commentators and policy analysts have already predicted that the twenty-first century will be one that is characterised by a commitment to learning.

As with the learning organisation, in the learning society there is an overall emphasis on psychological as well as physical health and wellbeing, on individual empowerment, on corporate 'good citizenship' and on providing opportunities for employees (sometimes referred to as associates) and their families to engage in a diverse range of learning activities and opportunities, both formally and informally.

What does all this mean for the practice of Occupational Health and Safety? At one level, it is a very favourable trend, because after all, OHS practitioners tend to be predominantly concerned with attitudinal change at the individual level, and with cultural change at the corporate or organisational level. Hence, a global shift towards lifelong learning, learning organisations and even a learning society would seem to be providential from the point of view of assisting OHS professionals with the broader aspects of their role.

At the more micro level, however, OHS practitioners are themselves subject to exactly the same trends and influences as their colleagues and clients. It is therefore necessary – perhaps even more necessary for them than for others – to be active lifelong learners. What does this actually imply?

In recent years, there has been considerable attention to the attributes of the lifelong learner and, to a lesser extent, how these attributes might be developed or enhanced through programs of formal education and training. In 1994, Candy, Crebert and O'Leary undertook a study on behalf of the Australian Higher Education Council into 'The Enabling Characteristics of Undergraduate Education with Respect to Lifelong Personal and professional Learning.' When published under the title *Developing Lifelong Learners through Undergraduate Education*, their report identified five principal qualities of the lifelong learner as follows:

- An inquiring mind
- Helicopter vision
- Information literacy
- A sense of personal agency
- A repertoire of learning skills

In addition, and following feedback from a number of sources about the excessively individualistic focus of these attributes, a sixth was added, namely:

- Interpersonal effectiveness

In their report, Candy, Crebert and O'Leary went on to discuss how these attributes might be developed, particularly through undergraduate education. Based on their work, and with particular respect to the initial education of occupational health and safety practitioners, there are five major domains that can be affected by those responsible for developing and teaching courses:

- Content of the curriculum

- Structure of the curriculum
- Teaching methods
- Assessment approaches
- Student learning support services.

However, the attributes of the lifelong learner are themselves subject to continuing change, and being a lifelong learner is a journey rather than a destination. It is therefore increasingly apparent that the initial preparation of professionals is not sufficient in itself; programs and systems of continuing education must pay attention to the ongoing development of these attributes in practice.

Those engaged in providing Continuing Education programs for OHS practitioners - including universities and colleges, professional associations, consultants, manufacturers of safety systems software and equipment, government authorities and agencies, as well as others – need to concentrate at least part of their efforts on the continuing development of learning competencies. In particular, there is considerable opportunity for these skills to be developed through work-based placements and activities, using information and communication technologies as well as through conventional face-to-face presentations. There is also considerable potential for interdisciplinary learning, as this emulates the realities of professional practice in organisational, community and other real-world settings.

In short and in conclusion, therefore, it is argued that OHS itself needs to be viewed as fundamentally a matter of creating a climate or context of openness to continuing learning, and modelling such learning in one's own professional practice. As a result, both the initial and continuing education of OHS practitioners needs to be framed within the context of lifelong learning, the place of lifelong learning in the context of the learning organisation, and of the learning organisation in the broader arena of a learning community.

The challenge of preparing OHS Practitioners for the 21st Century is therefore twofold: to ensure that they are technically competent subject-matter experts and, perhaps even more importantly, that they develop and demonstrate the attributes of skilled and committed lifelong learners.