

# Coast control

We spend a huge part of our adult lives working, so we should pay serious attention to how we can build careers that both stimulate and satisfy us. **Gerry Pearson** offers practitioners some useful tips and advice on how to fulfil their professional potential and avoid the pitfalls of coasting through their career.

BY ITS VERY NATURE, HEALTH AND safety is a profession in which many have already made progress towards a satisfying career. To protect the safety, health and welfare of other human beings while at their place of work is intrinsically satisfying, and one of the reasons high-calibre individuals are drawn to the profession.

However noble and satisfying protecting lives is at a basic level, most individuals require more from their careers. Take an infantry soldier who rises up through the ranks to general. The passion for protecting their country may be similar to that of an 18-year-old entrant, but with different stimuli – e.g. the leading of men and women into military action.

Health and safety professionals also want to go beyond the call of duty to satisfy their own interests and motivations. Such interests could be: to experience new sectors, projects, or companies; to explore new geographies; to manage people; or to rise to the top of the profession as the global health and safety director of a blue-chip company.

So, is it possible to design a grand plan that, if followed, will realise your wildest ambitions? I do not believe so. However, it is possible to increase your chances of realising your ambitions as a health and safety professional via thoughtful planning and devising some simple strategies.

## Have ambition

First things first, if you can't put your hand on heart and state any kind of career ambition then you are drifting.

Some people find it hard to think too far into the future; that's fine – just think about what you might like to do with your current employer and what the next step to get there might involve. If you really want to progress, don't drift – instead, set some goals, no matter how short-term.

## Get qualifications

Plan your route to Chartered status. Every health and safety professional should be aiming to achieve this level, both for the purposes of professional development and career advancement.

With a plan set to achieve CMIOSH status, you can also then consider if there are any specialist areas in which you wish to become an expert, or whether you wish to stay broad-based in your skills and approach to professional development. For instance, if you wish to become an expert in fire, you can enrol on the NEBOSH Fire Safety & Risk Management Certificate or, if you wish to climb the corporate ladder, you may consider devoting significant time to obtaining an MBA. The point is that, after general health and safety qualifications, you should give strong consideration to which qualifications you need – or do not need – in order to achieve your ambition.

## Develop your soft skills

Read up on leadership, management and influencing, and seek out courses that offer tuition in these areas.

As a health and safety professional, simply 'knowing your onions', staying

abreast of legislation, and keeping up to date with CPD is what employers expect. Knowledge is of little use without also having the ability to influence people to be healthier, or behave safely. Behaviours and cultures can only begin to change if you are engaging and influencing effectively.

This ability to transform behaviours and cultures is of great value to organisations, so possessing great soft skills is of the utmost importance whether you are an advisor, manager, or director.

Finding a good mentor to coach you in improving your soft skills is also advised. Someone who has risen to a leadership position will nearly always be happy to talk through their experiences, listen to your issues, and

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'hold up a mirror', so you can see how you come across to other people.

Be smart by going to the people who are at the level at which you want to be at as early as possible. You will get there much quicker that way and avoid some of the mistakes that they made. However, be sure to choose your mentor wisely.

### Develop commercial awareness

We work in a market economy and, consequently, the people who understand best the workings of commercial enterprises and markets tend to be the wealthiest and most influential.

By that rationale, health and safety professionals need to be commercially-aware if they truly hope to exert influence and advance their career to the benefit of themselves and their employer. Read business and industry news, network with people across your organisation, and start thinking holistically, rather than with a narrow focus on your department, or project. Practitioners need to be pragmatic – health and safety is only going to take its rightful position as number one on the business agenda if it fits with the commercial ambitions of the organisation and is truly viewed as an enabler.

### Seek out new experiences

Search for jobs that allow you to expand your transferable knowledge within diverse environments.

Let's say you take a job working for a roofing contractor. It's possible that in a few years you could become one of the world's experts on health and safety within the roofing industry. However, this specialism might not help you move with the freedom you may need in order to realise your ambitions.

By contrast, if you take a job that allows you to experience a variety of environments and projects, then you will have more to offer both your current and any future employers. Put yourself forward for tasks you have not previously encountered. For instance, if you work in a food manufacturing plant, and the company decides to embark on a major upgrade that falls under the CDM Regulations, and requires a major contractor to come in to carry out the work, then make sure you are heavily involved. Adding a £5m construction project to your experience is only going to open up new avenues.

Gaining experience outside your home country is another way to develop transferable knowledge. Through these types of experience you will learn to deal with different economic, cultural, and political



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environments, which will later enable you to improve your influencing skills and shape the behaviours of different groups of people.

#### Grow your network

I'm not talking about LinkedIn here; instead I'm talking about real, physical relationships.

To paraphrase a slogan: "Organisations don't hire people. People hire people." The more people you know, the more people will think of you when a job pops open – even when it is not publicly advertised.

Spend time getting to know people in your own company and all the companies with which you come into contact, whether they are in your supply chain, client organisations, or joint-venture partners. Not only will you create bonds that will serve you well in the future but you will gain new insights, ideas, knowledge and skills.

To some degree, you can also build your network outside your job – you can attend health and safety conferences, or participate in IOSH committees at regional branches. Getting involved in industry bodies

will also help you develop new skills and raise your profile. Undertaking roles such as treasurer, secretary and chair as part of groups or committees will only enhance your prospects.

Be careful, however, as employers will want to make sure they are number one when it comes to your commitment, and that any extracurricular activities are of benefit to them rather than a drain on your productivity.

#### Summary

In this tough economy and ever-changing world, it is more important than ever to be smart when evaluating each step in your career.

To prepare for whatever surprises lie ahead, try to make choices today that will maximise your options in the future. But before you do anything, devote some time to considering how you can make your current job work for you.

The following six recommendations can be applied to build a platform from which you can push your career forward:

- 1 have an ambition – link it to what stimulates and motivates you, and

- 2 what makes you happy;
- 2 get fully qualified – achieve CMIOASH status and identify qualifications relevant to your ambitions;
- 3 become influential – find a mentor, read up on the subject, and attend courses, as being able to influence people will not just boost your career but help you influence safety cultures;
- 4 be commercially-aware – employers value individuals who 'get' their business and their industry, so take time to understand the big picture;
- 5 broaden your experiences – seek out ways to expose yourself to new industries, skills, roles, companies and countries; and
- 6 pull yourself away from social media, such as LinkedIn and Twitter, and instead talk to real people face to face. Build real relationships and use these as a springboard to realise your career ambitions through mutual benefit.

It shouldn't be a straight choice between working to live or living to work, but it makes sense to give yourself the best chance to be fulfilled in all areas of your life. Unless you win the EuroMillions, then work will play quite a significant part of your life. Give it the attention you deserve! ■

Gerry Pearson is associate director at Shirley Parsons Associates – see page 4 for more information

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