

# SEVEN SKILLS EVERY SAFETY PROFESSIONAL NEEDS

By Henry Skjerven

Many of the certifications that safety practitioners require involve learning and demonstrating a solid foundation in the technical side of occupational safety. In addition, safety professionals must be able to interpret and apply the countless legislations, standards and regulations applicable to their workplace and industry.

**For example,** those who wish to be certified as a Canadian registered safety professional must demonstrate knowledge in areas such as auditing, management systems and occupational hygiene.

While that technical knowledge and skills that come with it are critical to the work safety professionals do, they do not cover every aspect of the profession. Effective safety professionals must, among other things, collaborate with executives, secure buy-in from workers, and present and deliver projects within a reasonable budget and time frame. This requires a set of soft skills generally not found in textbooks or on exam reading lists.

With that in mind, this article presents seven skills that every safety professional needs. While not found on certification exams, these skills are essential for safety professionals who want to excel and truly create a safe work environment.

## 1) Corporate Finances

To some degree, financial management is part of every safety professional's job. We are given a safety budget to manage, and we must be able to put together a rough estimate of expenses required for proposed safety initiatives or programs.

That is essential, but is it really enough? Safety professionals know the cost of the necessary equipment and materials, but do they typically have an understanding of the actuarial tables that are used to calculate a company's risk exposures and insurance premiums? We can run a fairly accurate set of numbers to give estimators or financial planners the information they need for a bid or next year's budget, but do we also know the financial impact an aging workforce will have on the organization or the costs associated with risk mitigation of an aging workforce?

We also need to become comfortable with and adept at using the language and jargon of the boardroom and financial officers. Money drives business and we must be able to speak at that level.

Often, safety professionals addressing the boardroom will discuss the consequences of investing or not investing in safety. Learn to discuss return on investment, cost-benefit analysis and risk-reward models as well. If these concepts are mystifying to you, rest assured that it is within your reach. Taking a course in basic business finance will give you the tools needed to make a business case for safety.

## 2) Compassion & Empathy

Compassion and empathy are guiding principles in the safety business. The majority of what safety professionals do concerns people (e.g., injured, ill or greatly distressed people) and we need to be able to relate to them.

If a workplace fatality occurs, an OSH professional can run the numbers and calculate the exact costs of the event. S/he can perform an inspection and analysis to determine what went wrong and what it would take to prevent such an event from recurring. But the safety professional must also practice empathy and demonstrate great compassion when dealing with those affected by the event. We may not be trained as ministers, grief counselors or nurses, but we still must make compassion and empathy part of our work.

## 3) Ergonomics

A safety professional who has not had much exposure to ergonomics should add it to the study list. It is one of the most important subjects when it comes to proactively preventing injuries.

In the late 1990s, workers' compensation boards and large insurance carriers became increasingly concerned with the high incidence of carpal tunnel injuries. They predicted that this would be one of the most common conditions workers faced because of the overuse of hand assembly in the electronics industry and as people became more reliant on computer use in the workplace. They were right. Now, soft-tissue and musculoskeletal injuries are a daily occurrence in most organizations. Unless assembly tasks can be automated, employing sound ergonomic designs and processes is the best method for preventing these types of injuries.

Having a professional ergonomist in the workplace is a great asset. However, safety practitioners must have an applied level of knowledge and must be competent at two things:

- 1) managing a successful ergonomics program element in a safety management system;
- 2) explaining to management why ergonomic interventions are cost effective



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and why ergonomic equipment is worth investing in.

## 4) Fatigue Management

Tired at work? That is not surprising; studies show many workers are. Fatigue may be common but that does not make it benign. It can result in everything from poor production and quality of work to catastrophic failures and high potential for sentinel incidents (CCOHS, 2017).

Safety professionals must be able to explain the cause-and-effect relationship between fatigue and workplace incidents to an organization's decision-makers. They must understand why it is important for workers to get enough rest. Consider a 10-day mechanical maintenance shutdown at a coal-fired power plant. Employees who take part in that shutdown will work a series of 10-, 12- or even 14-hour shifts. Not only are these employees working extended hours, they are also potentially operating on as little as 6 hours of sleep.

We must teach our peers and bosses that fatigue has a cumulative effect. The longer people stay awake and go without solid sleep, the higher the risk of fatigue-related incidents. Fatigue can kill. It also costs millions in losses, results in low product quality and causes problems with work-life satisfaction (RMT, 2017). Safety professionals must understand this and effectively communicate the facts and the prevention methodology across organizations and the industry.

## 5) Labor Relations

Labor relations is no longer the sole purview of human resources and labor relations departments. More safety professionals are in the thick of it with respect to complaints, investigations, and even grievances and arbitration. This skill matters because safety and health issues are frequently included in collective agreements. Even organizations without official union affiliation are required to compete with the articles in agreements to attract staff.

As basic demands hit the bargaining table, we have to be ready to provide our senior management teams with information that will become the position we take at the table. Safety professionals may even be at the table or be called to testify at arbitration. We will also be called upon by human resources, labor relations or legal teams to produce and provide information related to the latest safety rulings from mediators, arbitrators and

human rights tribunals. That means safety professionals must know where to look and how these systems operate procedurally. For example, in some jurisdictions in Canada, it can cost as much as \$70,000 to register a case for arbitration and can involve teams of human resources and management staff in the preparation and delivery of cases.

As workplace harassment and human rights complaints increase, a sound understanding of labor relations, their processes and the related laws is becoming essential. Safety professionals will be a part of, or even take the lead on, investigating complaints and be involved in collective bargaining in relation to OSH.

## 6) Records & Information Management

Records and information management is not a soft skill; it is a hard-dollar skill. The safety professional who can manage and mine information is well ahead of the game. Software and data entry cannot answer all the questions, but a highly educated and well-trained safety professional can use the information to be:

- legislatively compliant;
- proactive in system and program development;
- purposefully and successfully reactive to incidents;
- accurate and professional when presenting information and data to decision-makers;
- an able assistant to human resources in job document development, defining safety-sensitive work and being proactive in recruitment;
- capable of version and document control as well as due diligence.

It is no longer enough to simply have or use information as statistics. Safety professionals must tie it to budgets, training and education as well as to the hiring process. Keeping records related to safety is simple legal due diligence; using them appropriately in a company is a best practice.

## 7) Leadership

Being a great safety professional means being a great leader. This means possessing and exercising leadership skills such as being a great listener, a great com-

municator and even being likeable. But these skills on their own are not enough. Having them will make a competent professional, but being a true leader also means knowing that the number-one job is to create more leaders. Why is this so important? A single person can drive improvements to workplace safety but ensuring a truly safe work environment and a functioning safety culture will require leaders throughout every level of an organization who take on the responsibility of keeping themselves and others safe.

As safety professionals, one of our greatest skills is knowing how to react to a situation to mitigate loss and prevent the recurrence of incidents. But true leadership also requires the emotional maturity to recognize how we lead, why we lead the way we do, and how that shapes and influences the safety leaders we create and influence within our organization.

The business world is full of people who consider themselves leaders. They value leadership and often work to develop the skills they think are needed to bring others on board with their beliefs and vision. It should be no different in the world of safety. Not everyone is convinced of the value and importance of safety systems management and, unfortunately, this is true from the boardroom to the shop floor.

Safety professionals have to be great leaders; the good news is that people are not born to lead. Leadership, like any other skill, is something that can and must be learned and practiced. Leaders are made by education, experience, professional development and the desire for personal growth. We learn to lead by being mentored and supported by our leaders, and we create new leaders by mentoring and supporting others in turn. **PSJ**

## References

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**Henry Skjerven has worked in safety since 1985. He has worked on the private and regulatory side of safety for union and management, and has worked on major projects across Canada, including enterprise software systems implementation projects. Skjerven has provided expert and legal opinion in OSH, human resources and labor relations, and is a regular contributor to Safeopedia ([www.safeopedia.com](http://www.safeopedia.com)). He is a member of Canadian Registered Safety Professionals, Board of Canadian Registered Safety Professionals and Canadian Society of Safety Engineering, which he serves at the board, national and local levels.**

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