



Credentials versus competence

Does obtaining a designation make you adequately qualified?

What is the most important leading indicator of capability, competence and career success in the field of occupational health and safety? Is it a formal university education? Is it the number of years of field experience? Is it having a particular credential? Or is it something else? Ask these questions at a reception of safety practitioners and you'll get a firestorm of opinions and positions on the topic.

Credentials matter. There are thousands of credentialled safety professionals in Canada. Certified safety professionals complete a course of study, pass a written examination and are required to undertake a never-ending program of continuous professional development. Credentials represent commitment and follow-through; a goal that was set and achieved. That stamp of approval with third-party validation is without equal as a means of officially recognizing a specific level of professionalism. And professionalism is exactly what the safety profession needs.

Competence is very much about having the necessary skill or knowledge to do something successfully. The typical regulatory definition of competence is being "adequately

qualified, suitably trained and with sufficient experience to safely perform work without supervision or with only a minimal degree of supervision." In effect, this means to have the knowledge, skills and abilities to do the work anticipated by the job and effectively work with others.

Senior leadership teams in organizations across the country are often well educated and many of them hold bachelor's degrees, master's degrees or doctorates. As a result, they have the ability to manage strategic planning roles requiring them to undertake tasks involving extensive data collection and analysis. As safety professionals, we need to be able to work with them and be seen by them as capable contributors.

It used to be that OHS practitioners got their basic training from the school of hard knocks. The injured worker often became the company safety officer. Credentialling is more commonplace now in occupational health and safety with thousands of safety practitioners obtaining one of many available designations and certifications, such as the Canadian Registered Safety Professional (CRSP), National Construction Safety Officer (NCSO) or Registered Occupational Hygienist (ROH).

Credentialling in the field of

occupational health and safety is definitely a step in the right direction. Credentialling leading to a certification, such as CRSP or ROH, requires pre-requisite academic requirements. It also requires specific health and safety work experience. In the case of the CRSP, three years of relevant experience in a safety-intensive role is required. To obtain the ROH, five years of experience working in the field of occupational hygiene is necessary. Both of these certifications require candidates pass a formal standardized exam that assesses knowledge compared to a published competency profile or body of knowledge.

Individuals who achieve these certifications must abide by a code of conduct or ethics, and both of these certifications require continuous professional development evidenced by having to participate in a regular re-certification process.

So does all of this ensure competence? To answer this we must consider how competencies should be assessed. The key to competency assessment is that it needs to be based on actual skills and knowledge that a person can demonstrate in the workplace or other contexts to an observer. This is different from other approaches where there

is no requirement to demonstrate knowledge and skills, for example, where individuals answer questions on a test, which does not guarantee a person will be able to perform a task; it just verifies she possesses the knowledge. This is a limitation of current credentials in occupational health and safety insofar as they all assess the basic knowledge with the use of an exam.

What is missing is the assessment of the soft, transferrable skills — or what I refer to as the leadership skills — needed to succeed as a safety professional. These transferrable skills include pure leadership, communication, consensus building, conflict resolution and problem-solving. We need more leaders. A leader is someone who influences good decisions and positive behaviour. Leaders see work that needs to be done and do it even though they know someone else may get credit for it. Leadership is hard, but leadership skills can be developed. What we need is access to formalized leadership development — this is the leadership imperative.

Competency is only achieved when an OHS professional maintains certification and the associated hard skills and has the opportunity to continue to practice and develop leadership skills. It is only through commitment, continuing education in these hard and soft skills and practice that an individual can fully develop and then maintain the knowledge, skills and abilities required to serve as an occupational health and safety professional.

So why not seek to be it all, both credentialled and competent on the job? When it comes to claiming our spot at the boardroom table, we need to be able to offer a credentialled and competent professional service. Certifications and education are invaluable. Coupled with experience and the leadership skills requisite to achieve full professional competence, they are without equal. There are thousands of credentialled safety professionals in Canada. What we need is thousands of competent safety professionals.

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