



How to become a VP of safety

Expect 'work-life integration' if you want to get to the top

At some point in your career, you may wonder what experience, certifications, education, skills and attributes are needed to be the head honcho of safety. In your organization, that might be the vice-president of safety or the chief safety officer (CSO).

What exactly would this job look like? The VP of safety or the CSO role is a six-figure salaried position that will typically report to the president, chief operations officer or another member of the C-suite. In this role, you will be responsible for developing a robust health, safety and environmental (HSE) strategy appropriate for the scope of company operations, whether that is local, provincial, national or global.

You will be required to provide direction and guidance to the divisions in the deployment of the HSE strategy across the company. Learn buzz words like "enterprise risk management" and "total worker health" and be ready to incorporate this language into your lexicon and programming. You will be tasked

with ensuring that HSE is scalable to accommodate anticipated growth and is sustainable over the long term. The HSE management system and related procedures and processes need to maintain a heightened profile in line with all other strategic objectives of the business. These efforts will establish — and continue to maintain — a culture and drive towards sustained improvement in HSE performance that supports overall corporate excellence, builds shareholder value and contributes to the development of a company that exceeds overall performance expectations.

So, what does a VP of safety or the CSO really do? Those far from the top and without senior perspective may think they do very little. The reality is quite the opposite. A common theme for members of the C-suite is that they work hard and are tireless. Once you arrive at the big table your job is no longer a 40-hour grind or even a 50-hour grind. The boundary between work and home becomes blurred. It is no longer about finding a work-life balance but settling into the

new work-life integration. Work-life integration is the necessary approach that creates increased synergy between all areas that define "life" including the work itself, home and family, the community, personal well-being and general health. Those most successful employees at the VP or CSO level recognize the boundaries between one's professional and personal life are constantly blurring. It is impractical to think in terms of work-life balance because this requires a complete separation and compartmentalization between worlds. Reaching the most senior levels of HSE requires the careful integration of all areas of life.

What skills will they be looking for? Although there will be some variability, in general, you will need a university degree. Rightly or wrongly, the C-suite values professional degrees such as engineering, law, business management and accounting. An advanced degree is preferred, so you should start thinking about a master's degree of some kind. Combined with a strong undergraduate degree, a master of business administration (MBA) is coveted even if your focus has been more on administration rather than business. A master's degree in science, engineering or even arts is a demonstration of capacity to master a specific area of professional practice. This capacity is a valued attribute.

You will need to be a certified professional. This is an essential measure of having the requisite hard skills for success. Likely, as a minimum, you will need a Canadian Registered Safety Professional designation (CRSP). If the parent company is based in the United States, a Certified Safety Professional (CSP) designation will be viewed highly, too. If you hold additional certifications, such as a Canadian Certified Professional Ergonomist (CCPE) or a Registered Occupational Hygienist (ROH), it will add to your credibility as a candidate for the senior role.

Typically, you will need at least 10 years of experience at progressively more senior positions. Although education and certification are a demonstration of a range of skills, an overall capacity and well-rounded broad experience is essential to being successful at the senior level. You will need to be able to demonstrate appropriate development of transferable skills (or soft skills) and leadership attributes. These are core competencies — they are not optional — and would typically include:

- Entrepreneurial aptitude: A negotiator,

- innovator and strategic thinker
- Team player: Team builder, motivator, collaborator, mentor and coach
- Communication skills: Excellent speech, verbal, interpersonal and writing skills
- Financial literacy: Skilled in budget preparation and fiscal management
- Analytical capabilities: Highly developed analytical skills and the ability to provide sound recommendations based on the outcome of analysis
- Visionary: Looks for application of new technologies, virtual communication and networks
- Marketing skills: Ability to build brand and goodwill, engage stakeholders and manage relationships
- Resilient: Ability to work in a fast-moving, and at times, intense environment.

How do you get there? Many safety professionals never reach this level and those who do, do so very late in their careers. If you want to get there sooner, discipline and careful planning are the keys.

Be thoughtful about the jobs you take in the next decade. Seek jobs based on the opportunity to be challenged, to learn and be mentored. Make sure you get a range of experience and in progressively more complicated roles. Take time to differentiate yourself while at those lower echelon positions. Take on extra projects whenever possible. The senior people will take note, and this will lead to increasingly interesting opportunities that will help you develop.

If you don't have a degree, start working on one now. There are many options available, including online and part-time. Once you have an undergraduate degree, look for opportunities to take an advanced degree. Many master's programs have been set up with you, the mature student, in mind.

Look for opportunities to develop your transferrable and leadership skills. There are project management and leadership development programs available in every centre. Look for volunteer roles at work, in the community or within your profession. These allow you the opportunity to practice your senior leadership skills in a supportive and safe environment.

Climbing the ladder takes time but becoming the VP of safety or the chief safety officer is not out of reach for you. All that is needed is preparation, hard work and determination. If you want the title, it is waiting for you.

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