



# Safety must seek true 'profession' status

Big push needed to be legislatively on par with engineers

In Canada there are only a few true professions. Engineers, architects, physicians and a few others work within a defined and well-described space enjoying the protection and liberties reserved only for true professionals. Safety is merely recognized as a "quasi-profession." We need to work hard to change this and seek full "profession" status.

The idea that safety professionals, even Canadian Registered Safety Professionals (CRSPs), only enjoy status as quasi-professionals surprises many, including most CRSPs. Contrast this with engineers. Their exclusive scope of practice is defined in provincial legislation. Only professional engineers may engage in work that fits with this exclusive scope of practice.

Action is required sooner rather than later. Safety professionals need to work with educational institutions, certification organizations and trade associations to articulate their body of knowledge, a minimum educational requirement and a strict competency framework for OHS professionals. This will entitle them to the recognition of their scope of practice so it may be protected in legislation.

According to university sociologist professors and authors Peter Blau and W. Richard Scott, there are six major characteristics of all professions:

- Professional decisions are based on a distinct body of knowledge possessed only by those representing that profession. Can anybody else do what a physician does?
- Professionals possess a level of expertise in a specific, limited area. This expertise allows them to exert authority in only their specialized area.
- Professionals' interaction with their clients is characterized by "affective neutrality." This entails adherence to a specific code of ethics that directs behaviour.
- Professional stature is predicated on the individual's performance in relation to standards determined by her colleague group.
- Professional decisions are not based on self-interest or personal gain, but on the altruistic goal of helping others.
- Professionals are members of an organization that requires self-control of their professional behaviour, training and practice.

We have parts of this. Safety practitioners holding the CRSP designation, the Canadian Society of Safety Engineers' (CSSE) Certified Health and Safety Consultant (CHSC) designation and the Canadian Federation

of Construction Safety Association's (CFCSA) National Construction Safety Officer (NCISO), Construction Safety Coordinator (CSC) and Construction Safety Officer (CSO) designations all share some of these six characteristics but none have taken up the case to become a full profession and seek protection as such in legislation.

Each organization has a process to grant applicants a designation based on their individual self-defined process but these processes have not been accepted by society as the defining element.

There remains two major pieces of this puzzle yet to be confirmed. A distinct body of knowledge for safety professionals has not yet been defined and declared by any specific safety organization, such as the Board of Canadian Registered Safety Professionals (BCRSP), CSSE or CFCSA. The CFCSA has recently agreed upon a competency framework that could be used to define its body of knowledge but it has stopped short of doing so. Someone will need to fully define the requirements for self control of the professional behaviour, training and practice of safety professionals. Right now, anyone can call themselves a safety professional. Right now, any institution can offer a program of study in occupational health and safety and issue a certificate.

But some progress is being made. The International Network of Safety and Health Practitioner Organisations (INSHPO) recently launched the *Global Capability Framework for Occupational Health and Safety Professionals*. The framework describes the activities that an OHS professional can be expected to undertake and the required underpinning knowledge. It also details the personal, professional and technical skills required for effective health and safety practice along with performance criteria for each skill.

The framework is the result of three years of development and consultation across 11 countries with input from OHS professionals, educators and certifying bodies. The framework brings clarity to the generalist OHS role. Adoption of this framework, or something similar and suitable for Canadians, would be a necessary next step.

The BCRSP has been in discussions with CSSE to explore the opportunities that may exist around elevating the profile and the professionalism of the safety profession.

The executive director of BCRSP, Nikki Wright, said the two boards are reviewing what is happening in other professions and organizations to see how they can learn from those examples in "defining a journey for the safety profession."

The president of CSSE, Jim Hopkins, said establishing safety as a fully recognized profession within the various provincial legislative bodies is not a quick or easy undertaking. It will require Canada's safety leaders to agree on the value of doing so. Once full agreement is reached, the next steps will include collaboratively defining the process and beginning the journey towards the recognition for safety as a full profession.

If these two groups are to be successful and are then able to get the educators on board, it may create a pathway that could lead to seeing safety joining engineering, architecture, medicine and others as true professions. A big push is needed. Safety professionals need to send a message to their certification issuing organizations that full professional status is required and desired.

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