

Research Outlook

EHS Succession Planning

The topic of EHS succession planning encompasses the issues and processes of identifying, developing, and training the next generation of EHS leaders. How to train and maintain EHS professionals is of particular concern to both growing and established companies that are at various points in their safety journeys. While current research has not focused on the succession planning of safety professionals specifically, the literature on talent management and knowledge transfer sheds some light on how best to approach this topic.

The concept of talent management goes beyond traditional human resources management, which broadly encompasses the recruitment and leadership development of all employees, to specifically focus on the identification of “pivotal talent positions” (Collings & Mellahi, 2009:306) that give an organization a competitive advantage, the identification of individuals to fill those positions, and the maintenance of talented individuals in those positions. Collings and Mellahi (2009) recommend a strategy for talent management that combines the internal development of employees with external recruitment, a tactic that high-performing organizations are likely to utilize.

Detuncq and Schmidt (2013) agree that internal development of employees through mentoring is crucial to transitioning individuals into key work roles, but add that a further function of talent management is to engage and retain the employee, thus reducing turnover. Employees should feel that the organization is invested in their wellbeing and that their roles and duties are essential to the company’s operations. Rather than viewing the employment relationship as a purely economic exchange, treating the relationship as a social exchange

(one in which employees are seen as people, not just actors) can motivate workers and encourage them to remain with the company (Thunnissen et al., 2013).

Knowledge management (KM) in general is the capture, storage, and dissemination of information that is necessary for the functioning of an organization. Safety-specific knowledge management is the acquisition, storage, and transfer of safety information that helps companies adapt quickly to change and prevent injuries and incidents. Hallowell (2012) found that organizations that manage knowledge most effectively are those with multiple safety-KM activities related to knowledge acquisition (OSHA guidelines, trade publication, safety meetings, accident analyses), knowledge storage (company intranet, JHAs, written safety plans, training videos), and knowledge transfer (safety committees, newsletters, mentors). Specifically, high-performing organizations are those that recognize the value of tacit knowledge and have found ways to convert tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge. The effective storage of knowledge, both tacit and explicit “is required for continuous improvement and to ensure that safety knowledge can be transferred to new employees even after knowledgeable individuals leave the organization” (Hallowell, 2012:210). Safety knowledge transfer is thus not only important to ensuring the safety of an organization and its employees in the present, but also into the future.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) conducted case studies of several nuclear power plant (NPP) operations to determine how NPPs are addressing the issue of keeping nuclear operations safe and reliable in an era of aging workers and a shortage of potential new employees. To aid in the external acquisition of

talent, the IAEA recommends the nuclear industry's funding of scholarships, research, and internships; providing training through universities or vocational schools; and participating in career fairs. To retain current workers, particularly young and qualified personnel, some NPPs have tried increasing salaries, providing social benefits (housing, transportation), and offering opportunities for learning and advancement.

The IAEA also recognizes that effective knowledge management is key to managing an aging workforce and training the next generation of NPP workers and engineers. Judging from its case studies, the IAEA recommends developing databases for training materials; maintaining an electronic system to collect, store, and present plant operations data; and easing the process to update procedures in databases. While these actions are effective at collecting and disseminating explicit knowledge, tacit knowledge is usually acquired and passed on through coaching and mentoring. Like the organizations Hallowell (2012) studied, the IAEA recommends that tacit knowledge be converted as much as possible to explicit knowledge through structured on-the-job training, systems guidelines, and individual development plans. Organizations should be open to tacit knowledge sharing by maintaining a good communication structure and encouraging learners to possess an inquisitive attitude. Finally, the IAEA stresses that tacit knowledge is shared in groups, not by working

in isolation. Involving young employees as full members of workgroups is an important way of preparing the next generation of NPP workers.

The Campbell Institute is already engaging in efforts with Member organizations to transfer EHS knowledge to the next generation and ensure that younger employees are ready to succeed aging or retiring EHS professionals. In partnership with several universities across the country, the Institute and its Members seek to pique student interest in safety careers and influence course curricula in an effort to recruit, develop, and retain talent in the EHS profession. Events at the National Safety Council Congress and the Campbell Institute Symposium with the Young Professionals and Rising Stars divisions represent concerted efforts on the part of the Institute and its Members to relay safety knowledge and transfer it from experienced, retiring professionals to up-and-coming safety engineers.

The Campbell Institute welcomes thoughts and comments about your organization's EHS succession planning strategies. What tactics are being used to maintain the current level of EHS knowledge? What methods of recruitment, retention, and mentoring are in place? How else could the Institute contribute to this emerging topic? Share your thoughts on the Newslines or by joining the Campbell Institute's LinkedIn group.

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