Hugh Maxwell might have spent 30 years working in the same steel-industry business, albeit in different guises as the company was variously bought, sold and subject to management buy-out – but in that time he covered the broadest spectrum of risk management disciplines – including quality, health, safety and environmental – at strategic and ‘hands-on’ level, and across the globe.

"People need to focus on ‘total risk management’; Hugh reflects, ‘and things are really aligning that way. In my new role at ESAB [specialising in cutting, welding technologies and refurbishment] we aim to develop a more aligned and integrated approach to safety, quality and environmental risks. After all, managing risk shouldn’t cost money; it should save money.’

Hugh graduated with a degree in chemistry and in 1987 took up his first job as Chief Chemist Designate at Foseco, a leading manufacturer of products for the foundry industry. ‘The role was very much about quality control,’ he explains. ‘I loved the business – the people and the products – so when 12 months later the opportunity came up to apply for the role of Quality Control Supervisor, I took it.’

‘It was great, because it was hands-on experience of how the materials were used, the processes, and the materials-based risks: we were dealing with corrosives, resins, powders – it was applied chemistry up to apply for the role of Quality Control Supervisor. I later supported the implementation at other sites globally.’

Hugh was appointed to the new role of head of global HSE, including COSHH and safety risk assessments. In 1995, Foseco was bought by Burmah Castrol, and this promoted an even stronger focus on environmental risk management. ‘Burmah Castrol specialised in lubricants and oils and there were lots of environmental risks to consider, so I developed a much stronger understanding of environmental risk management, and I was responsible for implementing ISO 14001 in 1999, the first Foseco business to gain this accreditation. I later supported implementation at other sites globally.’

Safety breakthrough

After a short spell of ownership by a finance house, there was a management buy-out of Foseco in 2004. Hugh moved to the role of Group Health and Safety Manager. In 2008, Foseco was bought and merged into molten metal flow engineering specialists Vesuvius. Hugh was appointed to the new role of Global Health, Safety and Environment Director. At this time, the larger company lacked a formal framework for safety. Hugh was plunged in at the deep end in April 2008 when in his first few days a worker in Brazil lost his hand in a mixer. ‘It was an extremely emotional and pivotal moment for Hugh and the company. The accident was the impetus for change, and Hugh was able to gain buy-in for a new initiative to drive safety improvements and shape the structure of safety management, known as ‘Safety Breakthrough’. The aim of Safety Breakthrough, which launched in October 2008, was to raise awareness throughout the business of the pre-eminence of safety in everyone’s daily actions. It was led by Hugh and the senior management team and supported by a new health, safety and environmental policy and simple, clearly defined standards. ‘I did a gap analysis, built a team, and we did it ‘top down and bottom up’, we trained the managers in auditing, reporting and behavioural safety, while working on engagement with the employees.’

The initiative had a measurable effect: in 2008, 184 people suffered an LTI, by 2012, that number had dropped to 50. Hugh also worked to ‘decentralise’ safety at Vesuvius: “I loved the business – the people and the products – so when 12 months later the opportunity came up to apply for the role of Quality Control Supervisor, I took it.”

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Flying the flag

Hugh says his greatest frustration when he looks at the risk management landscape is the stubborn persistence of certain types of accident. ‘For years as a country we’ve been established as a world leader, but there are still too many fatalities, especially in construction, and it’s the same common causes. “We lead the way in the EU – we’ve very much a pioneer – and I hope Brexit doesn’t allow standards to slip. I hope we can still fly the flag and play a major role. We need to get people to face up to the fact that everyone has a responsibility for their own safety and others’. Still many multinational companies turn a blind eye to poor safety practices overseas. Life is still perceived as being cheap in too many countries. This much change.’

It’s about raising awareness and expectations – tapping into people’s core values. For many people, family is the thing they value most. “If you put your hand on your heart, it’s a chance, it’s not just you that you’re taking a risk with, it is the much further reaching than this. A reality I sadly experienced first-hand in 2008”.

Hugh was awarded Fellowship status by the Institute of Risk Management (IRM) for his ‘Safety Breakthrough’ achievements. “It was lovely to be nominated and then just great to get the award. What I esp. was that IRM is that as an organisation it’s very engaged with its membership and that’s reflected in the range of specialists its members have. It embraces risk as well as safety, and that greater scope makes the institute a good fit for me. The IRSM is the go-to organisation for making things happen; they walk the talk.”

While he was away from the workplace, Hugh did a course in mental health awareness – something he believes all safety professionals should do. He is also an advocate of mentoring and coaching. He views mentoring as a two-way partnership – a relationship in which the mentor can derive as much benefit and personal development as the individual they support. He has been involved in the IRSM mentoring programme since it was first piloted at the start of 2018 and is currently mentoring a number of individuals. One is an HSE training manager in the food manufacturing industry who was ‘recently selected as one of Health and Safety at Work’s 40 under 40 achievers’.

“He’s doing a great job,” says Hugh. “He’s got lots of ideas, he just needs someone to bounce off. He’ll try things out and will tell me how well it worked, and what didn’t work. We enrich each other’s knowledge and awareness: it’s a learning partnership.”

Hugh Maxwell was the winner of the IRSM’s Best International Risk Initiative at the Institute’s inaugural Risk Management Awards in 2018. To find out more about the Institute’s annual event taking place in May, visit www.irsm.org/world-risk-excellence-awards-2019