As any practitioner will know, the role of the health and safety professional has grown significantly in the past 15 years – with an acronym-happy employers adding first E (environment), then Q (quality), before attaching A (assurance), Sec (security) and, more recently, W (wellbeing) for good measure. “The profession has had a lot thrown at it,” agrees Chris Rowlands, Director of recruitment firm The HSE Recruitment Network, “and it’s come a long way now from just H&S – which was always more safety than health.”

With the traditional health and safety manager role expanding to encompass so many different disciplines, Rowlands foresees “almost a breaking point”; and what may emerge, he suggests, is a trend for companies to recruit for genuine experts – that is, for risk managers with specialisms.

“If you look at HR recruitment over the past 10 to 12 years, we’ve seen a move to what’s known as the Ulrich model. In this model, you have three different layers. You strip out the transactional elements of the function and they’re dealt with by a service centre. Then you have a ‘centre of excellence’, which contains your functional experts; in HR you might have experts in talent management, reward and recognition, resourcing, and employee relations. And the third element is the business partner function, with partners offering support and guidance to the different business streams to enable them to perform better.”

“The idea is that you identify the different areas that are important and recruit genuine experts in these areas [creating the centre of excellence], and it could work the same for health and safety. At the construction firm Mace, for example, there’s director of health and wellbeing. And the sector in which it operates. In the past there was the perception with employers about candidates.”

Identity crisis

Of course much depends on the company and the sector in which it operates. In the hotels sector, Rowlands points out, if the health and safety manager has security as part of their role, it might take up 60% or 70% of their time. “The beauty of risk management is that it’s about applying the same thinking to different ideas,” he notes.

Within the profession there are many who see the role of health and safety practitioner evolving to become a risk-management role, and this is a trend Rowlands does detect. “We are starting to see risk management underpinning roles in health and safety – they are becoming more risk-based, but they’re not necessarily defined as such, we’re not seeing job titles that include the word ‘risk’ yet.”

Rowlands believes that, to be successful, practitioners need to understand a company’s appetite for risk, and he insists that risk shouldn’t be viewed only with negative connotations. “People hear ‘risk’ as ‘risk assessment’, but that’s not necessarily defined as such, we’re not seeing job titles that include the word ‘risk’ yet.”

Rowlands offers the example of the media company ITV. “It’s interesting as a risk management example, because ITV makes The Jump, and – as we’ve seen in different series – some of the celebrities have been hurt. But, on the other hand, it’s accepted that part of the programme is the peril. So ITV has to look at the health and safety risk; the reputational risk, the financial risk – balanced against the basic aim which is to make programmes people want to watch.”

Seeing risk as an opportunity

Chris Rowlands, Director of The HSE Recruitment Network, talks to us about how recruiters view the role of health and safety people as becoming more risk based.

Broadening horizons

If recent years have brought an expansion in the technical knowledge employers expect practitioners to have, they have also brought greater demands for so-called soft skills: communication, negotiation and persuasion, and the emotional intelligence that produces more rounded leaders. Health and safety practitioners must also be able to demonstrate an understanding of different areas of the business – their demands and priorities.

“In the past there was the perception that the health and safety manager was an expert in health and safety, and any conversation outside that, they weren’t interested in,” says Rowlands. “But you should have views on the overall activities of the business. You might be able to quote the legislation inside out, but you also need to be able to engage. Everything has to be integrated into the business strategy.”

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