

Career spotlight: John Nelson

In this interview, John Nelson shares his career path and advice on successfully managing risk and making an impact at work to inspire those up and coming in their careers.



How did you get into health, safety, risk management as a career?

It was a career choice, the stage was set up by my Depot Manager, Ray, who believed in my potential and my passion for this 'health and safety stuff'. It was late 1992/1993, health and safety was new and not at all as we know it today.

The deciding factor though, through Ray's support, was a conversation that I had with a Safety Officer, Pat. Pat told me about a case, the British Railways Board v Herrington (1972), and I was hooked.

The first steps I took were:
To actively focus on health and safety in my work role, actively making sure it was in the forefront of my mind and my behaviour.

BRIEF BIO/ KEY CAREER MILESTONES:

A career in health and safety, then risk management was a career choice, it was either that or become a Quantity Surveyor!

I made a choice, as I looked ahead I knew I couldn't see myself working on the tools (as a bricklayer who also sustained injuries, but that's another story!), be it medium to long term and certainly not in the twilight of my working life.

I recall it quite vividly, do I become a QS or do I pursue a career in health and safety? Particularly as at the time, 1993, health and safety was new and not the obvious career choice for many.

Name:
John Nelson
Position:
Head of HSQE
EMEA
Organisation:
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Industry/ Sector:
Tech

To attend college one day per week (unpaid) successfully completing my NEBOSH General Certificate.

To be elected as the Safety Representative with my Trade Union, UCATT and simultaneously successfully complete several TUC safety related courses.

To attain a full time health and safety role - this took a lot longer than I anticipated but it was not detrimental to my career.

I guess the combination of my upbringing, my appetite for risk and the intrigue of the court case all combined into risk management.

What Qualifications do you have, which have proved most valuable and what advice would you give those starting out or considering a career in risk management?

Every course or workshop I have attended has been worthwhile. There is always a takeaway.

All too often, more so now than before, people can become consumed by the qualification but the most rewarding courses I have attended have been around problem solving, for example Kelvin TOP-SET Senior Investigator course, the IIAI Lead Accident Investigators Certificate and Lead Auditor training (OHSAS 18001 & ISO 45001). It's fair to say, the IIAI Lead Accident Investigators Certificate was pivotal and a defining moment in my career.

Too many times, I have come across safety personnel who conduct audits, inspections and other monitoring activities yet they do not know how or why or what to do. They have not shadowed, been coached or attended training. That has been the same for investigations too.

How can we as a risk management profession preach to others about competence, training etc. if we ourselves cannot walk the walk?

The training, competence and skills that a risk practitioner requires will be dependent upon where they are in their career and what they are striving for but the fundamentals are paramount.

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The PDP must be reviewed regularly, but I suggest an annual adjustment is a must. The IIRSM Risk Management & Leadership Competence tool is extremely beneficial and something that I promote with the mentees I work with and my direct and matrix management reports, along with membership of a professional membership organisation. Mainly the IIRSM but also others that are more specialised to a particular subject such as safety, environmental management, quality, asset management etc.

Whether you are biased towards health and safety, environment, quality or more of a general risk manager, successfully completing a Level 3 (RQF) qualification as a minimum is a must. Then depending on your career plan, you can further develop your underpinning knowledge with higher training, be it a diploma, a degree, a masters even a doctorate. Whatever you choose, ask yourself what do I want to achieve and why?

You must also consider developing other skills. For example, influencing others and the art of negotiation or managing others along with other softer skills. All too often in my experience, those who are academically focused lose sight of risk management in the work environment.

Finally as per your PDP, practice, learn and reflect on your short term, medium and long term career aspirations and adjust as is necessary and make full use of relevant professional membership bodies. Is there a specific 'job title' that you want, or perhaps it's about the level of responsibility and accountability and/or the fact that you want to be at the top table, then map out how you can achieve your goal. Your mentor and line

BRIEF BIO/ KEY CAREER MILESTONES:

It was the right choice then and still is. Something clicked. For example as a child, a young lad, a youth and a young man I experienced first hand risk decisions and made some myself.

One of the first things I did was to research a career in health and safety and wider risk management along with the most relevant professional membership organisations, including IIRSM. Mapping out what I needed to do to attain a particular level of membership, the IIRSM has helped me structure my career path. I had and still have a thirst for information, for knowledge. I'm an avid believer in continuous professional development. This is one of the strengths of the IIRSM.

Although not exhaustive my personal milestones include:

Being one of about 4000 IOSH Members with RSP status that, then, meant I was in the very first batch that transferred to CMIOSH (2003) following the introduction of Chartered status for IOSH members.

A couple of years later, becoming a Fellow of IOSH in 2007.

In terms of role, I was the lead health and safety person for a business that employed circa 12,000 staff across 13 contracts with approximately 30 plus sites, then went onto become the 'Head of' for a business that employed circa 8,000 people across the UK following an acquisition. Both roles were for the same Plc.

manager should be able to assist you, though in some instances that could depend on your line manager's own goals.

What are the benefits of joining professional organisations such as the International Institute of Risk and Safety Management (IIRSM)?

The IIRSM has afforded me the opportunity to connect on a professional level with people globally more so than any other organisation. It has enabled me to develop and to mature as a risk practitioner, from solely focusing on health and safety.

Membership has opened doors for me, opportunities have arisen due to my connections for myself and for others including those that I mentor, not only through the IIRSM but also other professional membership bodies.

I have always felt a personal connection with the IIRSM, the opportunities have always been there where I could speak to and liaise with the CEO, the Trustees and it has never felt 'stuffy' or 'cliquey' like some other organisations. Everyone past and present has been personable.

I guess overall, the IIRSM has consistently given me a voice, invited me to get involved and genuinely welcomed my feedback my thoughts and my suggestions.

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I have been involved as much as I had wanted. From the time of judging award entries, to leading on a project to working behind the scenes on a number of initiatives right through to conversations about change management that have tapped into my experience and involvement of business planning, business transformation, start ups etc.

The relationship with the IIRSM is a collaborative, mutually beneficial one whereby there is a sense, a feeling of being in it together and most definitely one with shared values, beliefs and goals and in my experience more so than any other professional body.

What advice would you give to build a strong professional network and how important is this for someone starting out on their health, safety and risk management career?

They say never answer a question with a question, however what are you looking to achieve, what's your short term goal(s)? For example, are you looking for a new role, seeking experience, contacts within a given industry or company that your are interested in? You may be in need of specific or specialist advice. Consider what your needs/interests are now, they could change in the future.

It's imperative that you focus on the right people, and where possible provide good reasons why you want to connect. When doing it remotely sometimes it can be awkward, but making it personal to them can set the tone.

Become the connector. Replicate with your wider network the way we already share information within the businesses we work.

Do consider other professional membership bodies, there is a cost but it may prove beneficial for you and it then allows you to connect with others.

Even early on in your career, if you have

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Since then, my roles have involved working across EMEA with frequent trips to Australia thrown in, start up businesses as well as organisations that have been under-performing in both financial terms and operational risk.

Another business I worked for was under the impending threat of prosecution when I joined. I helped mitigate the risk, and from an agreed management reserve of about £5m, the fine was just under £100,000. The measure of success was quite significant along with dealing with several other HSE interventions particularly following the FFI.

some spare capacity do consider volunteering opportunities. These do not need to be too time consuming, it is based on what you can give.

Ultimately, the connections you make, the relationships you build and maintain are about being mutually beneficial for you and others. This will require you getting to know people, those whom you can assist and, by return, potentially help you.

What does a typical week look like for you?

There has never been a typical week, it is dependent on who I'm working for, the target operating model of the business, where it is regarding their overall business maturity, strategic, tactical and operational objectives, the products, goods, services it provides, financial performance, HSQE performance, risk, beginning/end of the tax year, business planning, my time in the role etc.

Presently, my current week is made up of about 22 hours of meetings that range from several client meetings (global brands), weekly informal chats with the team I'm responsible for, business performance review meetings etc.

The remaining time afforded gives me the elasticity to adapt to the reactive needs of the business and actively work on actions that I have acquired, work on strategic objectives, tactical issues and support with operational matters (this is more about coaching others) and also the mentees I'm working with. Currently I'm working with 5 mentees.

What is your approach to leadership and what advice you would give to those starting out on their career to develop their leadership skills?

I believe that leadership is not just about health and safety leadership and nor should it be, leadership is much broader than health and safety. Leadership is about influencing and guiding others to be leaders, this has been proven (in my experience with some of

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those whom I've worked with).

For those starting out, I would ask them to consider and name three people who they admired, looked up to, wanted to model themselves on.

Regardless of where you are, it's imperative to be self-aware, who do you see when you look in the mirror and what do others see in you?

Be aware of your behavioural traits, remain modest, be humble, be an active listener, engage with others, build trust and respect, be empathetic to others, show compassion, lead by example and remember to be the host not the hero! After all, your purpose as a leader is to serve rather than be served, your purpose is much higher than you.

As a leader you must set the direction, build and promote an inspiring vision, and create something new. Leadership is about mapping out where you need to go to "win" as a team or a business and it is dynamic, exciting, and inspiring. You will need to be an effective communicator, be able to see the potential in others, develop them and coach them and build relationships internally and externally along with being able to make a decision, and some will be tough. Do foster a creative environment, a learning culture and instill your confidence in others. Allow people to 'fail safely'.

Have you ever watched the following? Field of dreams, starring Kevin Costner or perhaps Invictus with Morgan Freeman and Matt Damon.

How do you manage client/stakeholder expectations whilst encouraging commitment to continuous improvement in risk management?

It is imperative to be clear on whom the client/stakeholders are and be mindful to remember your internal customers.

For all of them, based on order of importance (top 3 clients, spend, risk etc.) it all starts with that first conversation, the shake of the hand, the eye contact, speaking in a calm manner, listening to what that individual wants to achieve, what their expectations are and to gain understanding about how I (you), the team can help, staying true to my (your) word, actionable management.

You don't have to be aligned, but you certainly need clarity in what the end goal is and how you can help them achieve it.

It's important to touch base, not just on a professional basis but getting to know the person also and find the time for a coffee, some will like a beer (in moderation), or perhaps a meal. For some clients/stakeholders there will be opportunities for entertaining and hospitality.

Get to know your client/stakeholder so you know where to keep it light when it needs to be more intense, how exhaustive you need to be in your communications, when to up the pace when it's needed, how to give positive and encouraging feedback etc.

One example I can share, was on the back of an investigation whereby potential exposure to asbestos was brought to my attention and the client's attention 3 months after the event. Noting for context, the client was under an ongoing investigation by the HSE for matters concerning asbestos. What did I/we do? I invited the client into a meeting, and in the room all the walls were covered with post it notes, flip chart pages, a slide deck to explain our investigation methodology, our approach, action taken to date, actions to be taken etc.

A second example was where I had been brought in to provide support to an under-performing business (globally) with a history of events (accidents) whereby my first meeting was with the client (a global brand) when they asked, so what are you going to do about it?

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The first objective was to instill confidence, to give them the assurance we had a plan in place.

I have always found success by nudging the client/stakeholders in the right direction and always being prepared for the conversation and keeping on top of the metrics (just like a Finance Director does).

If you ever go into the board meeting, Financial Directors always know where the P&L is. As risk practitioners we should be aware of the KPIs etc.

Finally, maintain relationships (relationship management). Prioritise them and have an understanding of those that require more or less effort.

What is your proudest achievement so far?

For me its about the team, the people I work with, from the Board, CEO, COO, Ops Directors, HR, Marketing, Operations, Supply chain partners etc.

To deliver goods, a service, or a product is a team effort.

In every role I have had for about 15 years, its fundamental to talk about Celebrating Success and its the plan to bring it to life.

I believe in stepping back when praise and or reward is given, and to step forward, in front of others when things don't go so well. After all, it's on my watch!

What/ who inspires you and why?

I have taken and continue to take inspiration from a variety of life experiences (in my lifetime, before my lifetime), from people I have read about, researched, from films based on true events, a variety of books, people I have met living on the streets, others re-building their life after trauma, ex-military personnel, business etc.

What and who inspires you can be dependent upon where you are as a person, what is going on around you. It's what you take from it and how you use it to inspire others. Pass it on!

As a father, I recall being inspired by my two girls. I recall quite vividly how they were behaving in ways that my wife and I have behaved, doing things that we did. The youngest, April-Rose, was then modelling her behaviour of her older sister, Sofia. It's all about role modelling behaviour.

What are your most important tips for someone starting out on their health, safety, risk management career?

Always remain humble, be honest, actively listen, be an action orientated person, become familiar with and understand your own style, be self aware, learn all that you can about the company you are working for - how commercial success is realised, how money is made, margin, how much income is required to keep the business afloat on a monthly basis, understand thoroughly the end to end process for delivering services or goods. As practitioners we are there to enable the sustainable success of a business so understand the business and how it does business.

Where possible, think and work strategically, tactically and operationally. Work out the quick wins, and deliver on them and focus on no more than 5 stretching objectives annually. Do not run more than 3 initiatives in any 12 month period. There may be the odd exception but do be careful.

Be clear about what success/what good looks like within your own organisation, and determine how you can drive the business forward to achieve it. As practitioners, we must drive things, it's not just down to top level and senior management. Confirm how progress will be measured, noting that the KPM and KPIs will change as the company matures and report progress, highlighting if you are on track, and if not confirm the plan

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to get back on track, what action(s) have been taken etc. Regarding your fellow Directors, always prepare your fellow Directors before you walk into the Board meeting, show them you have their back. Never compromise them, or any person. If you want to share some positive news, praise them and their team: do it as a surprise. There should be no surprises if the news is negative!

Be familiar with developing and implementing a structured approach to all that you do, one where you can demonstrably track the maturity of the business (not just safety) and be mindful if you are a safety person, safety is just one of the risks that must be managed.

What are your career aspirations now?

My career aspirations have not changed for more than 10 or so years.

Regardless of title, it's all about the company and a role that affords me the opportunity to develop and maintain relationships at every level, though granted some people are more accessible than others.

It's all about a collaborative approach so that the business is/becomes sustainable, that it behaves in a way that is the right thing to do, ethically and morally right, not because it has to, but because they want to.

Regardless of role, it is paramount to be able to demonstrate value, the value of the team and the service that they provide being cognisant of the return of investment (ROI).

Therefore, always from day one confirming factually and perception wise where the 'baseline' is, so from that point onwards sustainable performance improvement can be measured. What you do, how you do it, measure, report etc. will be down to several things inclusive of business maturity, the people within, their needs etc.

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Some find it difficult to assess and report on the culture of an organisation, and those climates within business units, divisions, regions, project teams, departments etc. There are ways though.

You do not need to conduct a cultural survey in the first 3 months, you can collect demonstrable evidence, factual, so you can say from that point onwards how you, as a leader, helped influence the overall culture of the company.

Please share any other details you feel relevant.

If you haven't done so already, do sign up to the IIRSM Mentoring scheme. Working with mentors is invaluable.

Over the years, I have been fortunate to have a couple of mentors. These have been a mix of health and safety and non health and safety personnel.

One the stand out mentors I had was the Director of Safety & Sustainability (Carillion Plc) and an ex Principal HSE Inspector (Construction), Neil. I learnt so much from him.

Neil was supporting me when the HSE wanted to serve several Improvement Notices. Through his mentoring I challenged the HSE on a technical issue and no Improvement Notices were served. Interestingly, the client had three served on them. It wasn't just the technical issue Neil helped with, he also helped me prepare

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for the conversations with the HSE and my MD, Adrian, the Board and one or two others. They needed to be informed of the plan, and had to buy into it!

Neil also helped me tremendously with introductions, connections both within the organisation of about 34,000 people plus supply chain and many others.

Another time, I also worked with Christian, an Executive Coach. I got so many key take aways from our conversations (over about 2 years) and to this day, I quite often go back to what he shared with me.

Do learn from all your experiences and if there are tried and tested methods or approaches, do use them, but do so wisely. Do not say anything like “when I was employed with xxxx we did this, or when I was Head of, Director etc. I did this”.

Use your experiences, but do not become complacent, even from a CPD perspective. Keep focused on the journey ahead of you, your professional journey and that of the business you work with.

Stay true to who you are, your beliefs, values, remain self-aware, do not jeopardise the respect that you gain, the trust and faith others put in you, stay humble and modest most of all, strike a balance between work and your personal life. Learn to switch off, and

About IIRSM's Emerging Risk Leaders Network

The IIRSM Emerging Risk Leader Network (ERLN) is a working group of ambitious professionals who are proactively looking to get ahead in their careers or support others to do so. The purpose of the Network is to:

- Support its members in developing their influence and profile within their place of work and the wider risk community.

- Empower members to build career success by learning from and supporting others from different industries, risk disciplines and geographical locations to cross-pollinate ideas, knowledge, best practice and lessons learned.
- Facilitate opportunities to showcase member capabilities through delivering informative and novel

ideas and solutions through different channels.

- Promote the importance of developing risk and leadership skills early on in careers.

To find out more and for sponsorship opportunities, visit:

www.iirsm.org/iirsm-emerging-risk-leaders-network