

Career spotlight: Matthew Cox

In this interview, Matthew Cox 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?

Following my A levels in the UK, I opted to not further my formal education by way of University and instead took up Department Manager role at my local Retail Superstore, for whom I'd been working in a defacto supervisory role for the previous two years.

Without realising it, I assimilated a significant amount of knowledge of processes and methodology, underpinned by inbuilt risk and opportunity based thinking, such is the

Name:

Matthew Cox,
FIIRSM

Position:

QHSE Manager &
Trustee

Organisation:

Veolia Water
services & IIRSM

Industry/Sector:

Environmental
Services / Water
Treatment

nature of the retail sector. My inbuilt and unconscious affinity towards compliance and public safety in the forms of trading standards and environmental health legislation, along with such things as fire safety allowed me to take stock of things when I finally decided to move to the Middle East, joining my family who had lived and worked there for many years.

At the time of my arrival in the region, Health and Safety was in its relative infancy and as a consequence, Western Expats were being readily sought to fulfill management roles, to satisfy client demands.

I was afforded an early opportunity having completed some basic qualifications and through being able to demonstrate an aptitude for delivering change and driving compliance.

Upon securing that first opportunity, I challenged myself to justify my employment through the seeking of detailed technical knowledge of the construction processes I was overseeing and naturally the key health and safety concerns related to the same. This journey was supplemented by securing of further subject matter qualifications to underpin my existing knowledge base.

BRIEF BIO/ KEY CAREER MILESTONES:

A seasoned professional, boasting some 32 years of management experience across the FMCG and construction industry sectors.

Following a successful career in the highly competitive retail sector in the UK, Matthew relocated to the Middle East and was afforded the opportunity to move into the field of construction health and safety.

Over the course of the last 17 years he has played an integral role in the development and successful implementation of a variety of QHSE related plans and management systems for a number of global organisations operating across the GCC, both as an incumbent QHSE Manager and consultant.

He is currently working in the State of Qatar, as QHSE Manager on a major operations and maintenance framework contract on behalf of the Public Works Authority.

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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?

I have achieved the following qualifications:

- NEBOSH International Diploma
- NEBOSH International General Certificate
- NEBOSH Environmental Award
- Lead Auditor - OSHAS 18001
- Lead Auditor - ISO 9k, 14k, 45k
- Significant task specific certifications

I was very fortunate to have received help securing health and safety roles at the start of my career in the region, however for me personally, the most valuable qualification was the NEBOSH General Certificate for two reasons. Firstly, it reinforced my primary understanding that health and safety is, in essence, about the application of common sense, and secondly, it gave a broad introduction to a whole host of topics.

In terms of career progression, clearly further, tertiary level qualifications at Degree level or equivalent helped to provide more detailed knowledge and opened doors in my career. But without the reassurance that the

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General Certificate provided me, I perhaps would not have stayed on my current path.

As the world has diversified away from a pure 'health and safety' mindset, to a more holistic risk management approach, I would encourage those considering such a career to seek as broad a portfolio of skills and qualifications as possible. I would caution all that they never stop learning and that everyday in the field can bring about challenges not covered in text books and consequently, securing qualifications by themselves, does not make a rounded risk management professional.

I would advise anyone to accept that they do not have all the answers and be prepared to undertake research on a variety of topics

BRIEF BIO/ KEY CAREER MILESTONES:

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Upon completion of his NEBOSH International Diploma, Matthew joined IIRSM and other bodies and following attendance at several regional events found a closer synergy with IIRSM than with other organisations. He joined the local IIRSM Branch Committee in 2012 and as Chairman of UAE Branch (2013-2020), he oversaw a significant increase in membership numbers throughout the GCC and established lasting partnerships with some the regions Regulatory Authorities, culminating in the signings of Memoranda of Understanding or Letters of Agreement, whilst additionally, representing IIRSM at numerous international conferences across the region.

In July 2014, he became the first overseas recipient of the prestigious IIRSM President's Commendation Award, in recognition of his services to the Institute.

In August 2014, he was recognised by the UAE Ministry of Labour for his contribution to occupational health and safety in the Emirates following works to review/revise the federal construction health and safety legislation.

Since June 2018, he has been registered with the UK Charities Commission as a Trustee of the Institute and serves on its Council, which strives to devise and oversee the implementation of Institute policy.

to supplement formal qualifications in order to provide competent advice or allow for decision making to be appropriate to the risks at hand.

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

With employment markets becoming ever more competitive and industries converging, access to knowledge is of paramount importance. Through the joining of professional bodies, you can gain access to a significant volume of peer-reviewed information on a host of topics to aid your continuing professional development.

With people readily pursuing qualifications, the employment playing field can be a minefield and consequently, memberships of professional bodies can set aside prospective candidates from other applicants.

As regards the joining of such a 'community' of members, many may have gone through similar challenges to those that you face in your role and have found solutions that you may be able to take note of, to apply in your own workplaces. This having been said, you can obviously also provide advice and offer support to others on topics you have experienced.

With their close association with Regulatory Authorities, professional bodies can also aid members by providing advance information on industry trends and legislative developments which can keep members current.

The varied networking opportunities can also lead to long lasting professional relationships developing and in some cases these can lead to employment opportunities in and by themselves.

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strong professional network and how important is this for someone starting out on their health, safety and risk management career?

With a variety of platforms available through IIRSM, be it membership, local branches, Emerging Risk Leaders' Network or mentoring, there is ample opportunity to develop a professional network. What for me set IIRSM apart from other bodies was a willingness of its members to share their stories or knowledge to others without seeking plaudits or recognition for doing so in the first place.

Our ability to provide competent advice is limited only by our ready access to relevant information and consequently, the building up of a portfolio of contacts from across a broad spectrum of industries and sectors can sometimes prove to be of vital importance, even years down the line, when a particular challenge presents itself.

I would advise anyone starting out to consider themselves as a blank page, and to consider the meeting of other professionals as opportunities to fill in the blanks or teach information. It is however important to independently verify such information, such that multiple perspectives are taken into consideration.

What does a typical week look like for you?

As many will experience as their careers progress, I spend far less time in the field engaging with individual operatives than I would like. A lot of my time is spent on client interface, either directly in a variety of meetings or indirectly through correspondence and reporting demands. I am fortunate that my employer values the importance of effective risk management and thus, those client facing demands are mirrored internally through scheduled meetings with multiple departments, from

Operations and Maintenance to Procurement, Contracts, Customer service, HR and Finance.

Within my own sphere, my role is to drive continuous improvement and this stems from a programme of field interactions during site visits, meeting and receiving feedback from operational teams and the inputs of my own team of HSE professionals.

These informal interactions support formal process compliance evaluations and where applicable, help to drive change as required.

I would say that my work life is typically split in the ratio of 80:20 between the office and the field.

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 would like to think that my overall approach is that of being both visible and demonstrative - my first roles in management from my days in retail saw my taking charge of colleagues who I had worked alongside 'in the trenches' for the previous two years. Accordingly, I've never knowingly asked anything of my subordinates that I either haven't or wouldn't be prepared to do myself. This ethos has stayed with me and consequently rubs off on others.

I have worked in multicultural environments for around 20 years and consequently have developed my awareness of the needs of a variety of cultures and religions. I try my best to engage with employees accordingly and, often times where possible, educate myself in order to break down language barriers.

I try to put the needs of others before my own in the workplace and this has allowed me to forge strong and lasting relationships with colleagues, to the point of having many seek to join me around the region, whenever

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I have moved employers.

I would say one of the most important aspects of effective leadership is to develop active listening skills, such that you can understand differing perspectives and needs and incorporate these into day to day operations and processes. No ideas offered should ever be dismissed as others may well know more than you do.

What is the biggest career challenge you have faced, how did you approach the challenge, what was the outcome and would you approach it differently with hindsight?

In general terms, I prefer to think of challenges as opportunities to improve.

I have faced multiple challenges, such as being engaged on new projects without prior experience in the field. An example being the construction of a new sewer network in Abu Dhabi without any prior tunneling experience in my career. This led me to research the industry such that I could drive compliance with accepted best practices resulting in operational HSE performance on a par with Crossrail UK (managed under same Project Management Consultant).

Regrettably, I have also faced challenges of professional conflict with clients on matters of principle that, if given my time again, I may have approached differently. One such example is resigning from a role on principle, after learning of attempts to hide or misreport OHS related incident occurrences.

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Whilst I may console myself with knowledge of having been proved right, after the fact, given the turbulent and transient nature of the market in this region, there always remains the chance that paths may cross again with the source of such conflict in the future.

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

The most important aspect of managing client/stakeholder expectations is early and regular communications to establish baselines and to enable all parties to understand respective needs and expectations.

Engaging multiple stakeholders across differing departments is pivotal to ensure relative expectations of differing stakeholders are aligned to a common goal.

As long as the vision of continual improvement is shared, a blue-print for the achievement of the same can be mutually agreed and realised.

Internal stakeholders can present a different challenge as operational demands and pressures can cloud vision if not managed transparently, hence cross departmental dialogue is vital.

What is your proudest achievement so far?

Within my professional career, I've been singled out for recognition and praise through a variety of means such as receipt of the IIRSM President's Commendation, being elected and re-elected as an IIRSM branch Chair and latterly as a Trustee, being called upon to speak at around 40 conferences and recognised as Health & Safety Professional of the year by PASMA in the Middle East, but whilst these are things to be somewhat

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proud of, these all pale into insignificance when considered against the achievements of others thanks to my involvement or interaction.

In my time in the Middle East, as a peer, mentor and NEBOSH examiner I have touched, influenced or furthered the career of literally 100s of HSE professionals but the one case that sticks out is that of a young Indian gentleman who was involved in a Lost-Time Injury back in 2010.

As would have been the policy of many organisations in the region at the time, he would ordinarily have been sent back to his home country following initial treatment, since he would likely be unable to continue in his role for several months.

Instead, I brought him into the HSE department to work under me as a trainee and advocate for good safety practices, living proof of the potential consequences of non-compliance.

Over the course of the next 3-4 years, we mentored him via a defacto internship within the department, enabling him to not only pass his NEBOSH General Certificate but also to be approved by the UAE Government as a HSE Professional allowing him to be fully employed as a HSE Officer in his own right. He still communicates his thanks to me to this day, almost 12 years later.

What/ who inspires you and why?

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As the father of a critically disabled child, with severe learning difficulties, I am inspired by her determination to achieve milestones that everyone else takes for granted and naturally, such admiration applies to all who overcome such personal challenges or work tirelessly for the betterment of others.

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

- Always try to relate situations to prior experience - it's surprising how often an apparently new challenges can be related to an experience in your past.
- Never stop asking questions to improve knowledge.
- Never be afraid to admit you don't know something - it is better to admit this and

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seek guidance than to act as if you know something, and give bad advice or take a decision yourself without all the necessary knowledge.

- Listen as much as, or more than, you talk.

What are your career aspirations now?

I've spent the last 32 years or more in management roles so have always sought to impart or pass on my knowledge to others. I have had the opportunity to influence hundreds of others in the profession and will continue to do so through IIRSM and other bodies.

My personal aspiration would either be to take on a Board/Director level QHSE role depending on the organisation, or should finances ever allow, to operate a day care centre for children with special needs.

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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.