

Life Cycle of a Safety Career – A Modern Path

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Preface

I will “do” safety until I can no longer walk around a jobsite. Heck, even if I can’t walk around, I’ll probably still be at my desk doing phone surveys, webinars, or writing programs! The life cycle of a safety career can be long if you’d like. I don’t care how you entered the profession, you can make it last by doing some important things.

My vision for you as a safety professional is that after years of hard work in the corporate world, you are able to enjoy a flexible lifestyle by transitioning to a consulting or independent contractor role. You know, write your own ticket and set your own hours.

Even if your transition from corporate life is many years in the future, start planning NOW. And on the flipside, if you’re approaching retirement, it is not too late for you to take my advice so you can put your best safety self forward.

A challenge to the participant

This presentation will challenge the attendee to look at their current career and goals in a different way. I will guide attendees to take a personal and individual look at their career to identify how they can maximize all opportunity available to them. Attendees will learn to take stock of themselves as safety professionals. This is important for those who have worked for companies their entire career, and are now looking at a future in consulting. I will provide tools for assessing skills as a well-rounded safety professional, with information on how to sharpen skills that are identified as needing improvement.

A large part of the presentation will focus on planning for “alternate employment” instead of traditional retirement. My vision is that all safety professionals will be ready at any time for a transition from corporate life to a flexible consulting or independent contractor role. This “alternate employment” can be a goal for retirement, or used as needed between positions, especially for those in construction and similar industries with frequent movement.

In recent years, I have seen many peers and colleagues approach their careers in a traditional way – work for one or a few employers, max out the employer’s contributions to their retirement plan, retire at 65, and become bored. This is no longer a reality for many.

I have also observed a trend of baby boomer-aged colleagues watch their intended retirement age come and go. This has been due to the stock market’s impact on their retirement plan or LIFE. I have seen LIFE happen to people in different ways: their children have moved back home, or they are now taking care of their grandchildren as their own, or other unforeseen family-related commitments that have required my peers to stay in a job they do not enjoy for longer than they intended so they could continue to receive a paycheck and benefits.

Baby boomers are not the only population this presentation will benefit. Generation X and Millennials must also broaden their view of their career path and what the future holds. These two generations tend to be motivated by a work-life balance, making a modern career path a necessity.

A third population that will benefit from this presentation are those who are interested in safety, but are not currently safety professionals. This angle will be explored by giving attendees tools to identify those with safety aptitude at their company and how to develop these people into safety personnel within the company’s culture. The skills gap is upon us, and safety professionals must understand how to grow their own safety departments within constraints of the modern workplace.

The demand for safety professionals

The National Safety Council published results of a NIOSH survey in late 2011 that found that employers planned to hire at least 25,000 safety and health professionals from 2012-2017. In that same time, 13,000 new graduates were expected from academic programs. This projected shortage appears to be coming true as employers often scramble at the last minute to find a site safety manager or to fill a position vacated by retirement. To fill the void, many workers without occupational safety and health training were put in safety positions.

In 2012, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics predicted 11 percent growth in the number of health and safety “engineers” through 2022. I put quotes around engineers because this term is often used to describe a safety professional, regardless of engineering education, degree, or registration.

The stats point to this being the best time to be a safety professional, and that is the key – *professionals* are in demand. I get LinkedIn messages and emails everyday from people asking me what they can do to make themselves an attractive safety professional. The issue is that they do not have an explicit safety background. This does not have to be the end of the road. This book will provide a path for those seeking to enter the amazing career of safety, whether you are a recent graduate, experienced safety professional, or a professional from an unrelated discipline.

Who are you?

Each of these identities will be explored further in a forthcoming publication by the speaker.

1. The book smart safety grad

Recent graduates are entering the safety job market every year. Students graduating from safety degree programs, whether undergraduate or graduate degrees, may still be unprepared in the eyes of employers. A college grad with no field experience can set themselves apart from the pack by having a foundation of leadership and communication skills in addition to “book safety” knowledge. This is especially important because a safety professional in any capacity must lead, guide, and influence on a daily basis.

2. The possibly jaded, yet experienced professional

You may have seen it all and have a story to tell to back up any training topic; and you may think you know it all, but you do not know for certain where your next project, assignment, or career move will be. You’ve been a manager, director, or consultant or you’d like to be a manager, director, or consultant! The world is yours, because you can take your safety experience and package it in many ways to achieve your career path goals.

3. Safety as a second career

This is my favorite population of future safety professionals. Usually, they are not jaded like the experienced safety pro nor are they “green” like a recent grad with no field experience. These folks have chosen safety as a career to aspire to, and are lost on where to start in their job search. With backgrounds in any industry, the military, or as a tradesperson, the second career safety population actually has many advantages over a recent grad in the hiring process.

There is an emerging population of second career safety professionals who were reluctantly placed in the position due to staffing shakeups within the company or inability to carry out the functions of their initial position. Think of construction superintendents or foremen: often they are asked to take on a safety role depending on project needs. The role may start out as 50/50, then grow into more of a dedicated site safety role. Depending on their success, this person may now be deemed a safety professional by their employer!

Questions for assessment

Needs and wants, you’ve had to balance them your whole life and it’s the same with your safety career. I have many colleagues who find that their safety career only achieves two out of three goals they’ve set for themselves: money, flexibility, or consistency. In preparation for this book, I spoke with a former classmate who has the money and consistency he wants, but there is no flexibility in his hours. This is often the case for the safety professional. Especially for those who are dedicated to one site – you work when the workers work! On the flip side, in my experience as an independent consultant, I have the money and flexibility I want, but there’s the constant stress of maintaining your clients so you can achieve that elusive third goal, in my case, it’s consistency.

- What are your safety career goals?
- Work from anywhere.
- Work to fill the gaps in site safety employment.
- Keep working because retirement plans didn't pan out.
- Safety as a second career after the trades or other discipline.
- I'm a newbie, you tell me!

Honor your independence

Many safety paths can lead to independent employment. However, there are many safety professionals who find a "home" at a company and enjoy long tenure with that employer. A safety career path is not a fork where you choose independent consultant or full time employee status, though the profession does seem to have this divide.

If you're looking for stability but have an independent streak, you will need to keep yourself engaged with an employer or you will find yourself with many entries on your resume! In most industries, multiple past employers is a fact of life. Think of heavy industrial settings like construction and oil & gas. Many safety professionals in those sectors are perceived to "bounce" from site to site just like the tradespeople. It is the nature of the industry and easily explained in a job interview.

And let's face it - safety is a career that tests your values and conviction, in any industry. Often, multiple career moves are explained due to maintaining your values and integrity!

For those who want to honor their independence, yet crave stability, here's some ideas to stay interested:

- Find a passion project that you can work on that aligns with corporate, department, or location goals.
- Adopt an "entre-employee" mindset, act as if the company is yours and engage as you would if your reputation and money was on the line.
- Volunteer your safety skills to benefit your church, gym, or other community entity.
- Find Safety Side Hustles that are within your employer's guidelines: teach OSHA 10 Hour classes at night, teach CPR/First Aid on the weekend, find quick gigs through Fiverr or ODesk that can be done in the evening or weekend.
- Write! Use LinkedIn's Publishing feature to write about issues facing the industry and areas that you specialize in or have particular interest.

The next generation of safety professionals

To round out the Life Cycle of a Safety Career, let's talk about the future. My friends and family do not understand what I do. They usually think it's something to do with OSHA, so I'm satisfied they know what that is! The safety profession has been the best and the worst. It's the worst because we see loss, injury, suffering, frustration, and all kinds of negative things. It's the best because we often are able to prevent those negative things from occurring!

As we keep increasing the level of safety and awareness in all industries, the demand for safety professionals will remain consistent or even grow. It is important that we give back to the industry that has been good to us. Some ways I've personally given back is by volunteering to present professional development topics at association meetings, conducting free OSHA 10 hour courses for Habitat for Humanity and similar charitable organizations and community groups, and speaking to students of all levels about the safety career. The last item is huge. Most people do not get exposure to the opportunities that are available to them in our profession. Safety impacts every industry, so a person interested in safety could enter virtually any type of working environment. Personally, I chose construction while I was still in graduate school – I didn't want to work in the same place every day and I wanted to wear jeans.

As demand for workers in science, technology, engineering, and math education (STEM) grows, safety should be presented as a career path that combines all of these disciplines.

Bibliography

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