



Are you experienced?

As the door opens on another year, many of us will be examining our lives and gauging whether we are really happy with the way things are going. Apart from the perennial promises to be healthier, many of us will also be looking at our working lives. Am I appreciated? Does my boss value me? Does he or she even understand what I do? If not, what else could I do? Where else should I be looking?

For professionals in the hazmat/dangerous goods sphere, these questions can be troubling. Too often, it seems – and even in those companies that make a great deal of noise about operating to the highest standards of safety and environmental protection – the role of ensuring compliance with the regulations designed to ensure such standards are met is not given the weight it really warrants. Too often this function is slotted in somewhere within a broader SHEQ or occupational health department; too often it is allotted to whoever appears to be otherwise under-employed, or who mistakenly makes an offhand comment that suggests they might be interested.

As has been proved at many meetings and conferences around the world, this does have the happy side-effect of making this an enjoyable business in which to be employed. Those who do end up as hazmat professionals do so by chance, become interested and begin to care. They are not empire-builders or political operators. They are, generally speaking, a very nice

bunch of people to go out for a drink with.

This is all well and good, but unfortunately there is a more problematic flip side. Because there is little acknowledgment of the hazmat professional, there is no obvious career path and no way of attracting young people who want to become experts in what is, after all, a dynamic, engrossing and important area. And without a system of professional qualification and recognition, it is difficult for individuals to impress on their bosses the importance of what they do and the value they bring to their employers.

The DGSA system in Europe has provided a step on the road towards professional recognition, but in many companies the function is outsourced and the costs and bureaucracy of implementing the DGSA requirements mean that it is, broadly speaking, regarded more as a nuisance than a boon. Other attempts have been made to set up systems of qualification or certification, so far without any apparent success.

The situation is now getting critical. It has been clear for some years that those experienced people in the business who have reached retirement age – or, as often happens, are retired early by companies eager to reduce their wage bills but who lack any appreciation of the value provided by the know-how they are shedding – are not being replaced quickly enough. Or, if they are being replaced, the reserve of knowledge they are taking with them is disappearing.

It is against this background that PHMSA and COSTHA have teamed up to look at ways of raising the profile of the hazmat professional. But it is not just a US problem – as Jack Currie, COSTHA administrator, remarked, "At the 29th Session of the UN Sub-committee of Experts on the Transport of Dangerous Goods, the Netherlands submitted their concern regarding a decline in the experts on the transport of dangerous goods regulations, not only on the side of government but also on the side of industry. Furthermore, it is getting more and more difficult to find new persons who are interested in spending many years becoming an expert."

Jeanne Zmich, vice-president of Labelmaster and co-chair of COSTHA's Education and Training Committee, will head up a task force made up of representatives from government and industry. Its brief is to develop a strategic approach for enhancing the value-added and key-role image of the hazardous material employee, with a goal to elevate that role within the industry.

It cannot be stressed enough how important this initiative is. Without a proactive approach to clarifying a hazmat career path and attracting new blood, there is a clear danger that industry will starve itself of the expertise it needs to discharge its pledges to carry out its activities safely.

Peter Mackay