

My Story

Safety+Health readers share how they got into the EHS field

DURING MY CAREER in environmental, health and safety, it's been interesting to tie together my many different professional experiences with my upbringing to make things relatable to the people I work with and understand their perspectives. Prior to becoming a safety pro, I had been a volunteer firefighter and emergency medical responder, maintenance technician, carpenter, corrections officer, and operations supervisor. I also worked in several roles in operations, including as a computer numerical control machinist.

Growing up, the Boy Scouts gave me my initial training in numerous emergency and rescue topics. Spending part of my childhood years on a farm helped me recognize that there were always hazards and I had to be respon-

sible for my own safety. A bachelor's in business finance gave me the understanding of how a business operates and that EHS is one of the many critical roles that must come together to help a business operate effectively.

During my career in EHS, I've worked in a foundry, chemical and urethane manufacturing, food manufacturing, agriculture and fuel distribution, and more. It's always exciting learning how products are made and how different industries have their own best practices. Many of the same principles and practices tie them together, despite each company having people in operations who want to say their job is different and the normal rules don't apply to them.

Today, as I build my own safety and environmental consulting company, I rely heavily on my experiences in different industries and the fire service to provide great service to different companies. As a firefighter, I had the opportunity to get exceptional training not just in fire suppression, but in hazmat response, being an effective instructor, medical response and more that I utilize every day. This helps me be an effective instructor for topics such as HAZWOPER, confined space entry and rescue, and more.

I'm able to take what I learn in private industry to the public sector as a board manager for our local watershed to help make decisions that affect the water quality of our community. I'm also a member of the Minnesota Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management committee that evaluates county emergency response plans for conformance with FEMA standards.

EHS is such an interesting field. It ties together many aspects of operations, responsibility to employees and the community; can make a company more efficient; and affects the morale and productivity of employees. Although every department certainly plays an important role in the success of a business, EHS is very intertwined in every aspect and really separates the bad from the great companies.

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MY DAD WOULD BE LAUGHING right now knowing that his son became a safety officer in the U.S. government. My father was a retired Army officer, an avid hunter and a "safety nut." In fact, when my brother and I were teens, he would require us to wear steel-toed shoes, long pants and long-sleeved shirts, as well as gloves, ear protection and safety glasses, while mowing the lawn. We looked like robots in plain sight of our neighbors, family and friends. Of course, our friends laughed at our expense, but his method worked because we still retain our extremities and eyesight.

A few years ago, I was asked if I wanted to take over the safety program in our office. Our office consists of around 2,000 federal and contract employees in three facilities located in two states. I informed those making the offer that I had no experience running a safety program (other than some common sense and the experience dealt by my father). I was told, "Doesn't matter, no problem. We'll get you some training." I was working in the security field and never walked away from a challenge, so I volunteered. While I was walking out of the meeting, my supervisor said, "Oh, by the way, next week is our annual safety inspection by headquarters."

That annual inspection was brutal. The inspector found numerous noncompliance issues, from recordkeeping to electrical safety to egress. My first reaction was, "Oh my, what have I done?"

Well, I picked myself up by my bootstraps, started fixing those "low-hanging fruit" issues, then began researching how to abate the more serious findings. It's taken a couple of years, but thanks to a total commitment from our management team, we've become the model safety program in our agency. I attribute this success, in great part, to our supervisors who support the program while truly caring about the safety and well-being of their employees.

However, for me – the lonely "Safety Czar," as I call myself, the man who is on an island, the bearer of bad news and the man no one wants to see coming – it's been an educational and, dare I say, fun experience. I'm now regarded as the safety subject matter expert by the workforce. Little do they know, I'm still a safety rookie!

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What's your story?

Email us at safehealth@nsc.org with the subject line "My Story." You may be featured in an upcoming issue of *Safety+Health*.