



# Feeling Green Around the Gills?

*It is time to check the health of the environmental profession*

*By Richard MacLean*

The results of the 2001 salary survey, conducted by Environmental Protection magazine (see "2001 Salary Survey", August 2001, under "Archives" at [www.eponline.com](http://www.eponline.com)), found environmental professionals to be an overworked, ignored and generally frustrated lot. Without question, the reaction of nearly everyone caught up in the current economic downturn would be, "So what, things are rough all over." Indeed they are, but is there more to this story than just growing cynicism and negativity found by the survey?

This month, Manager's Notebook examines an issue that many readers of this magazine have sensed at a gut level over the past decade: something is seriously wrong. If our profession is to successfully meet the challenge posed by emerging global environmental issues, we must increase our effectiveness and influence. But how?

In the 1960s, environmental professionals were graduates of civil engineering programs who specialized in sanitary engineering and built wastewater treatment plants — not very glamorous. The scenario is simplified of course, but the point is unmistakable: the profession has come a long way, very quickly. But, where is it headed? Where should it be headed?

So where do we begin? Robert Jacob Goodkin once said, "Look to the past for guidance into the future." I have been working in the environmental profession "since the beginning" (i.e., the inception of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)) and have witnessed the following major transitions over the past thirty years.

Getting focused in the 1970s — With the formation of EPA and the rise of public interest in the environment, business managers recognized the need to assign more resources and "make this issue go away." Because they did not recognize the true extent and financial impact of environmental issues, management did not assign their star performers to manage the issues. Very few employees had

environmental experience and many that did were in transition jobs prior to retirement. I can vividly recall going to conferences and listening to very unhappy folks who felt like outcasts, pushed aside into positions working on projects that they considered to be a waste of business resources.

As the decade continued, these individuals retired, and management realized that environmental issues were not going away and

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would involve serious future investments. A new breed of very focused and competent professionals began to emerge in business, government and environmental organizations.

The rise of professionalism in the 1980s — A series of major environmental disasters, revelations of massive site contamination and escalating regulatory demands forced management to devote both significant resources and their personal attention to environmental issues. New "Vice President of Environment" positions were created and the management systems commonly used today were developed. The environment was a hot issue. The best and the brightest were now working directly with executive management, driven by a sense of social activism from their college days.

Similarly, regulatory agency and environmental organizations became staffed with dedicated, skilled employees. They had the "fire in the belly" to do the right thing, even if it meant pushing the envelope and taking some personal risks. It was a heady time for the profession and society memberships grew exponentially.

Loss of innocence in the 1990s — In the first half of the 1990s,

the most significant environmental problems were largely resolved to the satisfaction of the public and the politicians. Environmental regulations were leveling off and environmental management systems had matured to the point that entry-level individuals could perform many of the functions that once required seasoned professionals.

Many of the environmental leaders in the industry during the 1980s were reaching the pinnacle of their careers. They had become business professionals themselves, yet a "green wall" still separated them from management's inner circle.<sup>1</sup> In effect, by dedicating themselves to environmental, health and safety (EHS) issues, they had become isolated from manufacturing and business operations. Vigorously challenging the status quo was now becoming risky stuff and personal concern over retirement was looming on the horizon.

Joel Hirschhorn, one of the earliest visionaries and proponents for pollution prevention, summarized the loss of innocence from the bold days of the 1980s as follows:

*"Implementers replaced visionaries. Implementers became incrementalists. Vision was replaced by practicality, negotiation and compromise. Conceptualizers in government were replaced by bureaucrats. Dreamers in industry were replaced by managers. Rapid technological change and progress were replaced by words, newly named programs and endless new phrases that people invented to feel good and important."*<sup>2</sup>

Budgetary strangulation and personal worry created a kind of "green arthritis," causing progress to creak along with difficulty.<sup>3</sup> It was beginning to take all the available resources just to focus on compliance, public relations, program maintenance and incremental improvement.

The transition era begins in 2000 — The "old issues" of pollution control and regulatory compliance have largely become part of the status quo as we begin the new millennium. Ironically, some of the grumbling that is now voiced is a direct result of the tremendous success over the past thirty years.

Compounding this reality is the fact that the business management landscape has changed. Today, most environmental professionals work for mid- to lower level managers, usually less than 45 years old. Most of these managers have never personally experienced a serious, ugly environmental, occupational health or safety event. Essentially no one in this new generation has been fired, disciplined or arrested for environmental incidents or violations. EPA and the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) were started in 1970 and 1971, respectively, which was so long ago these new managers have no first-hand knowledge of the "way it used to be." Bhopal and Love Canal are just events from a distant time.

In stark contrast to the marginalization of the profession today, there is a growing awareness of global environmental and human health concerns. These issues may not be on management's radar scope currently, but environmental professionals at a gut level know the future "battle to save the planet" will make past environmental challenges seem trivial.

Therein lies the heart of conflict. If we were all specialists in vacuum tube engineering in the 1940s, we may not like the evolution of the times, but we would at least realize that our services were no longer needed in the transistor world. Get over it — move on for goodness sakes! Today's environmental professionals are caught in between the old command and control paradigm that brought us to where we are today and some future, as yet an undefined state gen-

erally labeled as sustainable development or social responsibility. We are truly in a transition state and transitions are never comfortable.

### Who Cares?

Indeed, all professions face a degree of uncertainty and dissatisfaction as the demand for their services shift with economic, technological or supply and demand swings. What is the issue here?

At some point in the future, the need for full integration of sustainable development principles into every aspect of business, government and daily life will become both apparent and vital. In effect, we know the elements of the next stage; it's the current one we are struggling through. These issues have not, however, reached the critical "in your face" stage that triggers the public support that would lead to successes paralleling those of the past three decades. Sustainable development is still at the talking stage — a fuzzy concept at best. Significant shifts in resources have not taken place, in spite of all the hype, spin and photo-ops with giant Sequoias in the background.

A great deal of the media's (and therefore the public's) understanding of global environmental issues is supplied by scientists that the media listens to, reports on and interprets throughout the lifecycle of the "story." What is universally ignored, however, is the role that environmental professionals play inside of business, consulting firms and regulatory agencies to translate the science into actionable projects, programs and governmental interventions needed to solve these problems.

Environmental professionals are the first line of defense. The current general malaise within the profession — the green around our gills — has potentially slowed progress. If the patient (i.e., the planet) is very ill, there is little hope for recovery if the doctor is also sick. Because the issues are not recognized as immediate, few are worried. It is the classic dilemma of human nature: no obvious and immediate crisis — no action.

In a perfect world, one would anticipate and gradually implement the precautions needed in order to avoid these problems in the first place. If you reach the critical stage on global issues, you may have reached their irreversible stage. Unlike the regional or local pollution issues that can be resolved by regulations, global issues are societal issues that have, on occasion in the past, been resolved through warfare. This is not about movie stars saving cute critters; it's about what future conflicts will be fought over — declining resources. Even the "new war" on terrorism has its roots in the fanatical rejection of so-called "Western secularism" (i.e., spirituality vs. materiality) and resentment over the perceived exploitation of oil resources from Muslim nations.

Because the stakes are high and the time spans are long, we need well-functioning systems and people in place. Clearly, new skills will be needed, but what is being seen today is that many of the very best environmental professionals are eagerly accepting (or even aggressively seeking) positions that are totally unrelated to EHS.

This "talent migration" will, no doubt, yield benefits as these professionals take with them a knowledge and sensitivity of sustainable development. But the profession as a whole appears to be in a funk, without strong leadership and inspiration, as it wallows through this period of uncertainty.<sup>4</sup>

### A New Prescription

First, we do not even know for sure if there is a chronic disease or just a bad flu brought on by the current business downturn. There

has never, to my knowledge, been a systematic evaluation of the state of the EHS profession along the lines suggested by this article. The professional organizations see the symptoms in the form of diminishing memberships and lower attendance at professional meetings. It is a reality that the organizations are now starting to deal with. For example, the National Advisory Committee on Occupational Safety and Health (NACOSH) is worried that "the 'graying' of occupational safety and health professionals, with mass retirements in the next few years," will lead to a lack of trained professionals.<sup>5</sup>

From a personal standpoint, the most compelling evidence is the feedback I receive from scores of senior professionals, whose experiences essentially mirror these observations. For example, read the letter I recently received from a senior professional, Don Hensch, President of Centerpoint Environmental Services, Edmond, Okla. (see "Eco Forum," Web exclusive on [www.eponline.com](http://www.eponline.com)). Anecdotal information from contacts may not be a statistically sound method for measuring the issue, but it is very compelling, nonetheless.

### A Unique Partnership

In order to fully examine this issue, a systematic examination of the current state of the EHS profession is needed. Fortunately, one is underway in the form of a unique partnership between the Center for Environmental Innovation (a university-based, non-profit research center) and the prestigious Wharton School in Pennsylvania. The nation's professional organizations are becoming involved, and the Air and Waste Management Association (AWMA), the American Industrial Hygiene Association (AIHA), the American Society of Safety Engineers (ASSE), the Environmental Law Institute (ELI), the National Association for Environmental Management (NAEM), the National Association of Environmental Professionals (NAEP) and the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) are early sponsors.

Dr. James Leemann, project manager and Adjunct Professor at Tulane University and former DuPont safety health and environmental manager, states, "Until we understand these perceptions and strive to overcome the differences, it will remain increasingly difficult for the EHS function to excel in providing the necessary value to society. Through an understanding of the current state of the profession, we can identify prac-

tices that can be used to sustain a vigorous professional workforce. We will also clarify the profession's expectations and the value perceived of the EHS function within companies and organizations."

The investigation is using a two-phased approach. In Phase One, the program will quantify the issues and gain insight into possible solutions. In Phase Two, the program will more fully explore possible solutions with the management of business and government agencies and also examine which problems extend to other areas outside the United States.

Five data-gathering techniques will be used: (1) a survey of current literature; (2) surveys sent to the members of collaborating professional organizations; (3) internet surveys using linkages from professional organizations' web sites; (4) focus group sessions; and (5) face-to-face interviews and telephone surveys.


### Conclusion

Like the Rodney Dangerfield line, "I get no respect," EHS professionals are marginalized to the sidelines and ignored by the public, the politicians and business executives. But, as with the cure for any potential disease, one has to first admit that there may be problem. Face it: things are not getting bigger and better at an ever-accelerating pace.

Regardless of who is at fault, it is our problem. Clearly, EHS professionals cannot solve this problem by themselves; others must be involved. If management, the public and the politicians do not see a problem (and they don't seem to now), they will not spend any time, effort or resources on it. A true resolution to these issues must address communications among all stakeholders, and if our profession is not experienced enough to communicate these issues adequately, nothing will happen.

For the past decade, I have heard countless speakers and authors, myself included, call for EHS professionals to "become more business like" and "communicate in the language of business." Yes, we should, and we certainly have improved. Yet, if anything, we seem to be losing ground. The problem is much more complicated and challenging than any of us anticipated. We need systematic research and creative solutions if we are to excel. It is time to act.

If you or your organization is interested in supporting the CEI - Wharton School research investigation, contact Dr. Leemann

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### References

- <sup>1</sup> Robert Shelton, *Hitting the Green Wall: Why Corporate Programs Get Stalled*, Chapter 2, The Role of Upper Management, Environmental Management and Business Strategy: Leadership Skills for the 21st Century, Edited by B. Piasecki, et al., John Wiley & Sons, 1998.
- <sup>2</sup> Joel Hirschhorn, "Why the Pollution Prevention Revolution Failed — and Why It Ultimately Will Succeed," *Pollution Prevention Review*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New York, NY, Vol. 7, No. 1, Winter 1997, Page 14.
- <sup>3</sup> For more information, see the article by R. MacLean, F. Friedman, "Green Arthritis," *The Environmental Forum*, Environmental Law Institute, Washington, DC, November/December 2000, Pages 36-49, available on the author's Web site in pdf format.
- <sup>4</sup> For an interesting discussion of this phenomena, see Cark Frankel, "Twilight of the Champions," *Tomorrow*, September/October 1997, Pages 28-30.
- <sup>5</sup> *Occupational Safety Expert Retirements, Departures Prompt Concern for the Future*, Bureau of National Affairs Inc., Volume 31, Number 37, September 20, 2001, page 867.