Sustainable Careers — PART 3

Positioning oneself in a changing job environment

By Richard MacLean

In the first article in this series on environmental, health and safety careers, we examined the need to take direct responsibility for one's future job security. In the second, we examined the major trends that may deadend some careers and raise others to new heights. (Manager's Notebook, "Sustainable Careers," Environmental Protection, January/February 2003 and April 2003, respectively, accessible at no charge under "Archives" at www.eponline.com). This month, we examine how to better position yourself in an EHS job market that is undergoing an extraordinary transformation.

In ancient times (i.e., about a decade ago), most professionals did not aggressively manage their careers. The operative word is aggressively. The company, university or government organization formed a safe cocoon in which management had a major sway over an individual's career development. Bosses from hell, business conditions and news of greener pastures elsewhere would, on occasion, provide sufficient motivation to change either jobs or careers.

Many, if not most, continue today along this same path of opportunistic least resistance, but there is growing recognition that career management should not be a happenstance endeavor. As *Fortune* magazine recently stated, "The mass layoffs and shorter job tenures that followed the Internet bubble mean that executives now have to juggle two careers: their current position and the ongoing search for the next one."[1]

The need for career management is not limited to managers and executives; it's now affecting John and Jane Q. Public. A May 2003 cover article in *Time* magazine reported that, "[Companies] will outsource more work — to cheaper labor markets." And the cheaper markets are overseas. "Computer programmers are the textile workers of the future…Technology not only allows fewer people to do the jobs of many; it allows their skills to be taught fairly quickly, anywhere in the world."[2]

Historically, environmental, health and safety (EHS) professionals have done an excellent job of improving their technical skills, but this is only one tactic of career management. Grabbing a higher paying job, a more impressive title or an assignment that will broaden your experiences are other tactics, but the strategic question is, "Am I heading on the right, long term career path?" Career management involves keeping a sharp eye on the "end game," not just the next move. How will these moves and contingency plans play out to your benefit (or detriment) over the long haul?

Identifying the Right Moves

Very competent people have taken radically different career paths (or invested a lot of money) under the assumption that current conditions would not radically change over the long haul. Bad assumption. For example, a recent *Wall Street Journal* front-page story described the dismal state of steel industry workers. Those entering the steel industry in the 1960s thought it was "inconceivable that the industry would wither and implode under the pressure of its own debt and foreign competition."[3]

Right about now, you are probably concluding that MacLean thinks this is all hopeless, since it is impossible to predict

the future. Quite the contrary. While the future is always chaotic, there are many career-positioning moves that will remain extremely good strategies, no matter what the future holds. For EHS professionals, the danger is to be blinded by cherished beliefs (see **Table 1,** Working in Denial).

What are these moves? The tactics vary depending on your career stage: entry, mid or end. Clearly, the most flexibility exists at the beginning of one's career, so let's start there. To facilitate this examination, let's consider two case studies, both of which are intimately familiar to me; my son and daughter who are just beginning their professional careers.

Richard works for the Arizona State Police as a forensic scientist and Jeanette is beginning post-doctoral work, specializing in pediatric dentistry after graduating this May with a doctorate in dental surgery. There is no doubt that they both have positioned themselves for successful careers *all the way through to retirement.* They have the opportunity to not only advance to the pinnacle of these professions but also, depending on their ambition level, become quite wealthy along the way.

The relevance of these case studies to EHS and lessons learned will soon become apparent, so please don't discount this as just the ramblings of a proud daddy. They figured this stuff out on their own; I had little to do with it, which brings us to **Note 1.** *A new generation of savvy career managers is emerging because of all the current job stressors. If you do not keep abreast of these dynamics, you face stiff competition on a scale never experienced before.*

Both made conscious decisions when entering college that they would not seek the degrees typically obtained by those seeking these career paths, namely pre-med or biology for dentistry and criminal justice for forensics. They majored in chemistry because this (a) allowed flexibility if they chose to change career goals; (b) made them stand out from the competition; and/or (c) was considered more rigorous and thus, better able to demonstrate competency to future employers or graduate schools.

I get frequent inquires from students wondering which major is best for entry into the EHS field. **Note 2** is what I tell them. *Do not specialize early, and do not get a degree that labels you as an EHS specialist. Go for the hard sciences and engineering.* Having a minor in environmental studies or sustainable development is a positive, of course, but do not make it your exclusive focus.

Table 1. Working in Denial

- EHS technical people will always be superior to those in foreign countries because the environmental, health and safety movements started in America; we have more experience.
- Only Americans can understand and interpret U.S. regulations.
- EHS services can never be completely outsourced.
- My industry sector/company/job security will remain stable over the rest of my career.
- They will always need EHS specialists; it can never be fully integrated.
- Management's concern over risk/liability/image/governance will protect my job.
- U.S.-based companies, not foreign competition, will drive EHS strategies because U.S. companies are more influential and powerful.
- Regulations will always dominate EHS dynamics.
- Technology can only go so far; they need EHS specialists "on the ground" to take care of these issues.

Jeanette recognized that getting into dental school would be phenomenally difficult. Good grades would not suffice. She was aided by numerous extracurricular activities, including volunteer work in local dental offices, which brings us to **Note 3.** *Understand the overall dynamics of your particular field so that pre-emptive action can be taken to successfully position yourself over a period of years.* And **Note 4.** *Employers are looking for something extra; technical competence as demonstrated by grades is not sufficient.*

Richard started work after graduation at the County Medical Examiners office. It was low-paying, grim work but it allowed him to gain experience at crime scenes, meet the people in the profession and take the qualifying exams. This was a brief stint; he never "got stuck" in the job. This brings us to **Note 5.** *Sometimes you need to take a less than desirable position to better position yourself for the future, but do not stay too long and become trapped or labeled by that position.*

Richard was interested in forensics long before the recent wave of high profile criminal cases and television shows such as *CSI, New Detectives* and *Forensic Files.* There is currently a flood of students, majoring in forensics, who want this "cool" career. (There are direct parallels to environmental studies over the past decade.) He would have faced entirely different odds if he were searching for a job today. What no one may be telling these students is that open positions are relatively rare, and people who get into the system usually stay until they retire. Also, no one may be telling these eager students of the strenuous background screening, including polygraph tests that probe things such as drug use.

The barriers for entry are really quite stringent and Richard was greatly assisted by a timely grant to the state laboratory from the FBI that brought him on as an intern, which was then followed by a retirement within the lab. This brings us to **Note 6.** *Thoroughly research the supply and demand plus the entry and exit dynamics of your career path.* Talk to people currently in the position you ultimately desire. And to **Note 7.** *Recognize that success is often dependent on being in the right place at the right time.*

Note 6 — entry and exit dynamics — is extremely critical and has parallels to predicting the stock market. The most successful professionals are those who anticipate "where the puck will be" as Wayne Gretzky says. Individuals who enter four years of college based on what is hot at the moment can be very disappointed upon graduation. Anticipating trends cuts to the heart of career management; this was covered extensively in part two of this series.

Who are These "EHS Professionals"?

Jeanette faces a different set of entry dynamics. The medical and dental professions in the United States have barriers to entry based on the available slots at the universities, the extremely high cost of education [Do I ever know this dynamic!] and strict licensing controlled by powerful professional associations that can rival the Teamsters Union for their influence in Washington. EHS professionals have few such dynamics in their favor. Indeed, anyone can claim to be an EHS professional. My colleague, Robert Pojasek, runs an excellent four-day "The Environmental MBA" course that helps transform individuals inside organizations to take over these

responsibilities.[4]

There are notable exceptions. Occupational health physicians need to be licensed. EHS attorneys need law degrees that you don't get in four days. Not surprisingly, both have more optimistic job prospects than the typical EHS professional. It also is instructive to examine the background of the individuals who typically occupy the top slots in our government for the U.S. Security Exchange Commission, the U.S. Department of Treasury, the U.S. Department of Justice and the Surgeon General's Office. Compare this to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, where the top spot has a recent history of going to individuals whose environmental credentials appear to be a history of politically correct photo ops with Mother Nature. Unfair? Sure, but do the comparison and you will see the disparity.

Problem solvers who consistently improve every day will always have work and be in high demand.

All this brings us to **Note 8.** *As long as there are no stringent qualifications and licensing requirements for EHS professionals, the supply side will continue to be completely wide open.* The EHS profession is too splintered and has no single, cohesive association such as the American Bar Association or the American Medical Association to affect change. Non-career EHS professionals who have no interest in changing these supply-side dynamics often occupy the top slots. If anything, they would ensure that no restrictions continue indefinitely (while at the same time demand greater professional control over their personal physician).

The wide-open nature of the EHS profession impacts both salaries and job security. I'm a firm believer in capitalism and unrestricted supplies, but not at the expense of professional competency. Would you want just anyone representing your interests in a jury trial or operating on your brain tumor? I feel that the health, safety and environment of workers, the community and the environment also deserve skilled professionals.

What about the demand side? As described in part two, there can be specific areas where the demand could surge. Consulting services for small and mid-size companies may be one such growth area for EHS entrepreneurs, especially in the U.S.-based construction industry. Again, timing and positioning are everything. If there is a surge, the supply side could very quickly respond to fill the demand. On the bright side, there will always be pollution and natural resource pressures, just as there will always be crime and people getting sick. Within all three of these professions, the issues and the technologies to deal with them will shift continuously. My generation needed amalgam fillings; today's generation needs composites.

This brings us to **Note 9.** *It is risky to specialize, especially in areas that are technology intensive. On the other hand, these areas can offer the greatest promotion and monitory rewards.* The trick is to anticipate and keep these issues and technologies at the leading edge. Nonetheless, there are sure bets. Few dentists do post-doc specialties. By specializing in pediatric dentistry, Jeanette sets herself in a better position, even if the supply/demand picture changes for dentists in general.

There are parallels in EHS. Getting a law degree will, without a doubt, better position someone to withstand life's career ups and downs in the EHS regulatory and public policy area. Obtaining a PhD for someone wishing to enter academia may be a wise move. On the other hand, obtaining an MBA may or may not be as valuable as a high visibility work assignment in a respected corporation, a non-governmental organization (NGO), university or government organization.

Does Experience Count?

As noted in part two of the series, opening up the supply side to "foreign competition" will have a major long-term effect on EHS professionals, especially in the technical areas. You had better be unquestionably world class and at the cutting edge of technology. Technology shifts also have profound implications on the value of experience. Who would you hire, a 55-year-old computer programmer with 30 years of experience previously earning $100,000 or a 26-year-old programmer with five years of experience and earning $40,000? In intense technology areas, "stale" experience can become a liability!

Keeping an eye on the "end game" is essential in this regard. Experienced dentists typically build a client base and achieve a level of financial security where they can open their own practice and bring on junior dentists. Experience is a positive. The same holds true for forensics. The real value of a forensic scientist is in the credibility of his or her court testimony. Forensic specialists who have built reputations over the years can retire with full government pensions and sometimes operate as consultants providing expert testimony. It's a lucrative practice, but they can only do this based on decades of *experience in the field.*

For EHS professionals, decades of experience do not always work in their favor. Because of the nebulous view of what constitutes "an EHS professional," the highest-paying, top slots often go to non-career professionals. This is a source of enormous frustration among career professionals who are passed over for top positions that are filled by people who cannot even spell EHS. **Note 10.** *Improved technologies and management systems have had the net effect of allowing lower-level (read: less expensive) employees to do EHS work.*

Career professionals over fifty are particularly vulnerable, unless they have achieved a level of financial security and competency that permits them to say those magic words to their employer, "You can take this job and shove it!" This is the exception rather than the rule. My consulting colleagues are able to thrive on their own because of their widely recognized competency. Experience helps under these circumstances, but because of supply/demand pressures, only the very best can survive. Thoughts of "I'll be an EHS consultant," may sound like an end game to a career EHS professional, but it is totally unrealistic for most.

Technology shifts have profound implications on the value of experience.

The bottom line is that experience can both add to or detract from your planned end game. Ask yourself the question, "Are people 55 sought out and considered more valuable than someone 45 on my

career path?" Technology experience is valuable *as long as the technology remains valuable*. Experience in one field is valuable *as long as it translates smoothly* to another field you are entering. Lots of experience in one narrow field can "typecast" you, limiting your chances in another. Which brings us to **Note 11.** *Map out the value of specific job experiences in determining your chances for success at the end of your career.*

Developing a Career Strategy

Your overall strategy will depend on your ambition level and your tolerance for risk and need for job security. Government jobs generally pay less than industry, however, the security and benefits at retirement may be better. Jobs in academia were once relatively secure but now, security comes with tenure, an elusive goal for many. Even the concept of tenure may evaporate over the next twenty years.

There is no universal formula for career success, and as **Note 7** indicates, a sobering portion depends on sheer luck. Part one and two of this series plus the preceding eleven notes may help build your strategy. Putting all these pieces together, I offer the following career strategy assessment that, while specifically for industry, has relevance to all organizations.

The professional EHS expert has to work with all the departments in a company, especially on business expansion (or contraction) activities. They must have access to the big picture and many of the details and problems of operations. They must also field complaints and concerns from stakeholders outside the company. More and more are working on social issues. Environmental impact assessments used to be a technical evaluation but social impacts can be pivotal. These added dimensions will require more ongoing management than traditional EHS issues.

Safety issues can get the EHS professional involved in labor relations and tough negotiation issues. This drives professionals to help find solutions to problems far outside their normal technical realm. Their roles can expand greatly into public relations, communications, investor relations and dealing with the most senior managers in the company and the board of directors. It is this broad exposure to people and issues across companies that attracted me to the profession in the first place.

Savvy EHS professionals are always working to improve written, spoken and computer skills. They move mountains of paperwork, respond to e-mails and correspondence, spend hours on the phone and in meetings and develop skills at managing people and budgets. Most of all, they solve problems and keep the process moving forward. Problem solvers who consistently improve every day will always have work and be in high demand. Which brings us to **Note 12.** *While the entry barriers are low, the exit barriers are also lowering for top EHS performers.*

Many career professionals are passed over for top positions filled by people who cannot even spell EHS.

This is the exact opposite situation for Richard and Jeanette, who faced strong entry barriers but will face thorny career consequences if they choose a different profession later in life. EHS professionals face stiff competition, but their background and skills make them ideally suited for a myriad of opportunities that may shift them in and out of the EHS profession.

Taking on opportunities outside the traditional EHS area may be a good career move, but for this to happen you must constantly develop your technical and business management skills. Additionally, you will need to have your radarscope permanently on at maximum sensitivity. All this takes effort and courage, but the rewards are potentially there, maybe more so than for many other professionals in industry.

Concluding Remarks

My colleagues and I have extensively discussed current career dynamics facing EHS professionals. Our collective advice for those who wish to make a career in this field is the following: (1) hone your skills at communicating with key decision makers both inside and outside your organization; (2) read the latest technical *and business* literature to keep abreast of emerging business, societal and technical issues; (3) take maximum advantage of professional development opportunities, including assignments outside the EHS field; (4) carefully listen to the concerns and problems that come your way, probing what is really going on; (5) stay focused on finding solutions, not fixing blame or hiding information; and finally, above all else, (6) view the world realistically, as it is, not as you wish it to be.

This kind of EHS professional will be in front of senior managers in short order. In time, these are the very people that should be the CEOs, chief administrators and on boards of directors because they understand how the entire organization works, who all the key management people are, who the key stakeholders outside the organization are and how to get people to work together to solve problems and achieve targets and goals.

Best wishes and good luck. EP

Richard MacLean is President of Competitive Environment Inc., a management consulting firm established in 1995 in Scottsdale, Ariz.; a Principal at Independent Perspectives, a virtual consulting network supporting business management; and the Executive Director of the Center for Environmental Innovation (CEI), a university-based nonprofit research organization. He can be reached via e-mail at maclean@competitive-e.com. For Adobe Acrobat® electronic files of this and his other writings, visit his Web site at www.Competitive-E.com.

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