

Scott Fowler

Hello everyone and welcome to the Case for Safety podcast. Appreciate you being with us today for a conversation about AI and EHS. This is, you know, we've been talking about a lot for the past year or so, but we'll always want to make sure we have the latest and greatest information out there for safety pros to use at their workplaces. And here to get us up to speed, I'm very happy to welcome Arianna Howard. Arianna is an EHS technology consultant and managing partner and co-founder of Syncra Group.

And leader of ASSP's AI and Safety Standards Based User Group. Arianna, welcome. Thank you so much for being here.

Arianna Howard

Hi Scott, happy to be here.

Scott Fowler

Excited for the conversation. A lot of really exciting things going on with AI in the industry and always interesting to talk about. But to start things off, I thought we could kinda look at, you know, the ten thousand foot view of where we are now. When you look at, you know, where we sit today and the impact that AI is having in EHS, what comes to mind?

Arianna Howard

I think it's everywhere, right? You can't you can't go to a conference, you can't open LinkedIn, you can't open an email, you can't look at a product without hearing about AI, whether that's at the organizational level, just within your domain. I mean everywhere you look, turn, Spotify, everything, everyone is talking about it.

I think that there's a big paradox right now between what we should be doing and what we're actually capable of doing right now. Companies are excited. They're investing in training. I'm doing a lot of kind of up uplift, AI uplift and coaching right now. And I think it's really interesting to hear what people are talking about versus kind of what we're where reality actually sits, either from a capability standpoint or just data, right? I know we talk a lot about data quality. I'm sure we'll get into that.

But we are starting to see some trends. I think most companies, regardless of the size that you'll talk to, a lot of companies are starting outside of EHS with, you know, company level GPTs where their programs and processes and things are getting uploaded. And then you start still see, I would say, the safety domain kind of lagging a little bit behind. You definitely see some champions emerging, some power users.

That are really starting to start that conversation or saying, like, hey guys, we need to make sure we're in the room when these things are being discussed. but it is changing the way that we do work. it's changing the way that we think about our work, how we implement processes. And we're not just saying like, let's automate step one to step four. It's do we need step one to step four? How are we doing that? So we're definitely still in that assistive AI era. I wouldn't say I know we hear a lot about autonomy.

I have truly not seen that come to come to life yet in the in a in a practical sense. you know, so I think we know we should be doing something, we're just not maybe exactly sure what or what everyone else is doing.

Scott Fowler

Perfect segue into my next question. You know, with those conversations you're having right now, you know, what are the problems safety leaders are trying to solve and you know, how often is, you know, AI the right tool for what they're trying to accomplish?

Arianna Howard

Yeah, I always say that AI, I'm happy to take it as the as an open door conversation because I work across the spectrum of EHS technology, digital strategy, data centralization. I've implemented pretty much every major system that most EHS professionals tend to work in when they're buying something off the shelf. we've worked with companies that are building their own, which has become a lot more common in the age of AI. And I think we've as humans think like AI is supposed to make us like quicker, faster.

Smarter, you know, it's supposed to enable us. but we're not really, we're not rethinking our process, right? I call it shifting left. We wanna plug in AI in a place where we maybe don't like doing that thing and we're not taking a look at how that work actually gets done. So I think we talk about black line, blue line and work as done versus work as imagined, and there's

Regardless whether technology is at play or not, there's definitely a gap between those. and until we kind of take a step back and evaluate what that looks like, how does that work actually get done on that line or out in the field with real people and real humans, you know, layering AI on top of that may create some efficiencies, but it is not an and all be all solution. it actually will just do the opposite and it will exacerbate whatever.

gaps in that process already exist. and you want to, you know, AI is going to create more data, especially when you're looking at physical AI or computer vision, sensors, wearables, things like that. Now you've, I mean, a hundred, a thousand times X the amount of data that

you have. And are you actually ready to address that? Do you have the resources to address that? So it starts to open up a lot of conversations. I feel very strongly about a problem first tech second approach.

And AI is no different than any other technology, right? You're gonna go buy a thing that you slap on someone's arm to do what? Right? What problem are we solving? Do we have MSDs? Do we have ergonomic issues? Do we wanna make it easier to report? And you know, we click a button and report things like what is the actual problem we're trying to solve? And I think if we looked at AI with that with that kind of lens versus shiny new object syndrome, which we're all prone to, we would have a different, we would have a different perspective.

And you know, I have some stories around how we're doing that with some real clients, but it's been really people are always surprised when the tech person is saying like, Mm, I don't really know if tech's actually gonna fix this problem. So yeah. I think we try to layer use it as a band-aid and it actually, it's not it will just it will rip apart at some point.

Scott Fowler

Let's talk a little bit more about that. You know, what are, you know, some of those examples you've seen where, you know, organizations are, you know, reaching for AI, AI's gonna fix this problem when, you know, there are other underlying issues, you know, that that they that they need to to get at first before just thinking AI's gonna solve their problem.

Arianna Howard

Yeah, I have two examples and it's mostly to try to speak to the spectrum. So I work with a lot of hard tech high growth startups. I spent about five years at Rivian Automotive, so it's a big startup. and a lot of my ex-colleagues have gone on to become safety directors, VPs, leaders, at other h high growth startups. So you're talking about lean teams of one to five safety people. usually solo. and

They want, they typically, it's great because we can start with like what a what a foundational safety management system may look like. but we're talking about safety management system across the board, right? So they when we're trying to implement something very familiar, like an incident management platform, and we always start with in that requirements design phase, okay, how do you report incidents? What's expected? Who's expected to respond? Who how long is the response supposed to take?

What do those notifications look like? Those are all very common questions that come up in design workshops for software. and a lot of that is just not figured out yet, right? We have

been like working through teams and and phone calls, and so that is a part of the learning process. and but I have also seen so but move up market to mid-market enterprise where these systems maybe have been established for 10 or 12 years, and that tends to be where we go for the solution first.

And let's take one of my clients, huge international client, eighty thousand employees, over a hundred and fifty, you know, subsidiaries. and one of the issue a way that we've worked through this problem first tax second approach is let's pick a problem and then let's try to solve it. And that problem was from their l safety leadership, we want to stop killing people in the roads, right? okay, that's a that's a problem statement, but is it?

So how do we want to stop killing people, when is that happening? Is it during the day? Is it at night? Is it during inclement weather? Is it in urban areas? Is it in rural areas? So you start to ask questions. Where would you normally go to get that? Right? The data. So then we open up the data and we realize that one, maybe three, out of over 150 companies have even been capturing data to answer those questions.

And so we go back to the basics, right? We go back to the team that manages the system and say, we gotta start capturing this data because we don't even know we can't even define a problem statement, right? And then you start doing different ways. It so if you can't go back to your raw data, then what do you do? You go learn from the people on the ground.

So you go do field observations, you go talk to people. and so we've worked on that project for over five months, and I and now we've kind of gotten to a place where we can say, Here are the eight

Different sets of problems. Some can be solved internally, some require legislative input, some require the industry coming together to solve, and then you can move forward, you know, with solving that. And I would say maybe two out of those eight problem statements may have anything to do with technology. But imagine the difference between approaching it with like, we need an AI app to teach people how to do traffic control plans. Do we?

Is that actually the problem, or is the problem that we didn't actually know about we don't know about 90% of our jobs until 24 hours before? So we have no way to pack up barriers and and you know actually get the equipment out to the field. So that's that's what that problem first tech second approach looks like in real life. especially in more established, I would say, organizations that have just been doing work the way they've been doing it. And no one's actually stirred up that and really asked harder questions, which is where I think like a third-party perspective can provide some insight.

Scott Fowler

Sure. So when you're, you know, meeting with clients, is that really where you start the conversation when somebody says, we want to use AI? Do you start with, you know, okay, what problem are you trying to what problem are you trying to solve? You know, how how do you how do you start that conversation?

Arianna Howard

Yeah, I think it a lot of it is listening, right? That director or that leader or that individual practitioner. I know we'll get into this, but I think individual practitioners are really the driving force behind a lot. I think organizations are really lagging. but assume that it is a director, right? I try to try to let them, you know, kind of convey what they're working on. if sometimes we're not doing anything with their technology stack and it's simply just coaching. And a lot of it is, my leadership is telling me we need to do something with AI.

We have access to Microsoft Copilot. I would I know that there's limitations to free, but I don't know if my team is even prepared. If I'm gonna shell out this money, what are they capable of doing? And so you learn more about their industry, you learn more about how they do work, what their daily workflows are. We always do accompany our trainings with a team profiling report because I think it's really important for leaders to understand where their team is starting.

And some of that is an interview with that leadership to say, do you have an AI governance policy? If we start coaching people and they start to hit walls before you pay for licenses, are you prepared to budget for that? We don't want to get people excited and show them how to use this tool and then they hit a wall because first impression, you know, first impressions. So we listen and that's where we kind of start. If we start thinking about it outside of, you know, LLM usage.

So the Chat GPTs and copilot and we start to think about where AI sits within their technology platforms or other tools that they are looking to procure, like computer vision or wearables or things like that. We do that then we start to look I would say that there's a difference between individual enablement and organizational enablement. and so I've seen companies buy computer vision and then they're like, Well, it's not really that good and I'm like, well what were you using it for? Was it a PPE issue? Was it

you know, forklift and person interactions and they're like, well, we want to use it for ergonomics. And I'm like, so you want a camera from, you know, twenty feet up to evaluate ergonomic positions, right?

Yeah, that we didn't have a clear defined problem because the technology probably would have led us down a different path. and there are tools purpose built for that, right? and that maybe would have not have been the right one. So you ask questions in a way that is encouraging and also, you know, really starts to make them question like why did you why did you think about that? And whatnot.

Scott Fowler

You mentioned there, you know, things like computer vision, LLMs, wearables, you know, that these tools take a lot of different forms. But when you think about, you know, on the whole, where do you see AI providing EHS leaders the most value in, you know, improving safety and health?

Arianna Howard

Yeah, I think we talk a lot about what it doesn't do, but there are definitely a lot of ways that it can it can help. I mean, obviously one of those low barriers to entry is the time and administrative savings. I really try to push repeatable process is probably one of the better ways to leverage that. So you'll see even companies are releasing you know, maybe there's safety GPTs, you'll see a lot of free tools kind of coming into the market.

I think those are good ways to get exposure. when we're working with teams, we really, really, really try to emphasize capture, curate, share, which is just a once you've done the work of working through a process and you know that there's a you in another site or another you know, in another region when it just needs some slightly different parameters.

It's a really, really good way to help each other kind of uplift together. So anything around documentation, administrative. I definitely say word of caution around regulatory crosswalks. AI is still heavily, heavily, heavily hallucination prone. and unless you're working with tools that are specifically trained on the language, on the process, standards are still copywritten, you know, it won't process that and it will make up things that look that look true.

So I always try to push like asking for links, asking for proof. You might find that it's linked to some like guy on Reddit. and those are very, very, very real, especially when you're working within the free version of tools. There's a massive difference between that and purpose-built regulatory technology tools. So one, I don't think anyone's losing their job

anytime soon because we haven't quite gotten that right yet. A big one and one I'm a big fan of is knowledge retrieval from the field. So, a lot there are tools out there that the power of voice is something that I think is coming back as we progress with AI as a technology. I use

voice, I would say ninety nine percent of the time I work from home, so I can talk and yap as much as I need to.

I have simply a hotkey on my desktop on my keyboard, and anywhere where there's a cursor I can talk, whether that's replying to an email, sending a LinkedIn message, commenting back on LinkedIn. I know we we're all very overwhelmed with AI slop and I think it's a good way to get our natural human voice back into things. But there are tools to capture that from the field.

So voice memos, recordings, there's physical AI note takers, you would be surprised by how much you'll learn from your workforce if you just talk to them. I was working with a VP in construction who got one of the AI note takers that I bring to conferences, and that's how he would do his site walks, right? You're engaging with people, you're looking at them, you're not writing down, maybe you need to take a few pictures, but then you're just capturing so much more context and nuance.

You also will get a lot further with AI if you can talk through what you're thinking. I know we always say like treated like an intern, but that truly is like what the con the context and the nuance that you're going through in your brain if you're trying to explain it to me goes a lot goes a lot further. one more than I know is like popping up everywhere is hazard identification, with photo, video, and I think it's an interesting paradox because I always try to say like who's using it, right?

If I'm gonna snap a picture and it's going to show me OSHA regulation, it's gonna tell me this is out of compliance, it's gonna designate corrective actions, that I think that that's great. Are we using it as a learning tool or are we using it as a dependency? are we working with lean teams and now we're relying on our front line? Who's verifying that information is correct? Because if I'm giving this to the front line, I'm not necessarily expecting them to know a specific OSHA regulation.

How do they know that it's true? But are we w doing a gimbal walk with them and showing them how this technology works and then saying, see, tell me what you see and then let's verify with that tool? So I kind of have a little bit of a buck t with with hazard identification. I think it's low hanging fruit from a technology vendor standpoint and everyone's selling it. I just ask, What's the purpose? Why why do we need that? Why would we put it on our glasses? You know, smart glasses.

I see that, you know, if people have asked me about that, like, why doesn't someone build that? so I think it's I think it's interesting, but I'm wondering what's the point. But I do think if you think about it from a 24-7 point of view, when we do talk about computer vision, that that could be solving a problem, right? We only see so much. and humans are only capable of reporting so much. So what happens when we when we turn it on? There's a lot that goes into that.

Are we communicating with how the data's being used? Are we doing de-identification? It's not just a switch light switch on, right? What kind of environments are we working in? Who needs to be informed? How would this data be used versus not be used? So you're definitely not just installing some cameras, layering AI on it and calling it a day. But I have seen that being used to help support capital investment in in you know machinery or guards or security measures, you know, seeing what's not usually seen.

Or converting, you know, when you want to change the layout of a warehouse, that's not something that's getting done tomorrow. But if you can show that over the last six months you've had over fifteen near misses, that's a different story, right? And you actually have the proof to show that. I think that there's definitely some benefit to that. So I would say that goes into the hazard identification but bucket as well.

Scott Fowler

Sure. And going back to like we talked about earlier, y what problem are you trying to solve and not just using technology for the sake of using technology, you know, how are you going to gather and use this data and how is it helping you create a safer workplace?

Arianna Howard

Yeah. Yep, yep, yep, yep, yep, yep, yep, yep.

Scott Fowler

Switching gears a little bit, I mentioned at the top you are the lead for our AI and safety standards-based user group. That's a new initiative we launched back a few months ago. Why don't you talk a little bit more about that, you know, what these standards-based user groups are, you know, the focus on AI and safety you're for your particular group just to kind of give folks a better idea about what this is what this initiative is all about.

Arianna Howard

Yeah, I'm super excited for this. I would say when I originally got a perch to work on this, it was I was like, What are we doing? AI doesn't have a standard. and it's been really fun to work with the team at ASSP to kinda really shape what this what this is. So I would say that, you know, it's it is a platform, a peer-to-peer learning platform, right? that will be augmented in a few ways, the virtual community,

I think we're saying at minimum quarterly meetups. I'm trying to push for four to six weeks. And it's really a way for us to connect and learn from each other. one of the best parts of when I do AI coaching and enablement is to hear what, you know, towards the end of those sessions is to hear what everyone's working on, where they got roadblocked, what they learned.

I love the generational differences and how people learn and you know how much more, you know, hesitant people might be and how more much harsher on AI that they might be, how many more questions they feel confident talking to their vendor about or asking, well, can it do this and can it do this? and what's working and what's not, right? And where we should be injecting our human technical expertise more. I was on a call this morning with a client and you know, one is working through a new initiative for asset tracking and for capital expenditure projects.

And one was like, I built a, you know, hazmat, you know, transport kind of flagger agent. And one of those has a lot more compliance you know, kind of protocols than the other one. One of them is brainstorming, the other one is like, if we get this wrong, what happens? And it was only through talking as a group that we were able to say like, I think that's a great place to start, but let's make sure we're still doing XYZ versus that that person that EHS manager working through that alone.

Fully trust, you know, fully trusting that he's gonna do the right thing. But it's always good to hear from your peers. So I think that that's gonna be a big focus. we're gonna focus on a few things. We're gonna focus on safety leaders, safety leader upskilling and enablement. What does the safety professional need to know going into the next decade? I think we're gonna we've already seen a shift.

I was working, talking to some recruiters and people from other organizations that help recruit EHS leaders is how much more often AI aptitude is showing up in job descriptions just for your typical specialist, manager, director. I very much advocate for EHS IT positions. That is how that is the world that I lived in before I started consulting. so having a person who sits within EHS but speaks tech.

Right, can talk to data teams, can talk to IT teams. That typically is the person that's stuck managing the system, but that mindset goes way beyond like being a clicker in a system, right? It is thinking about how digital technology sits within our overall management system for safety. And I think that that that role act actively is popping up a lot more across the domain. And because of the having to live in both worlds, the you know, the salary bars are higher.

The job opportunities are very, very niche. but they it takes the right kind of person who is kind of a unicorn. So I think it would be interesting to see to work with the group and figure out what that skill set actually looks like and how do we how do we develop that both at the college level, continue in education, and what do people need to feel empowered to apply for those positions and not feel and not feel left behind. the other thing is organizational readiness.

I talked a lot about how there's a difference between AI champions at an individual level and what the organization needs. and you I we actually are already seeing this in the SBUG with who's signing up. So you'll see that a lot of people are signing up as individuals that maybe work at corporations, but they're not quite one, they wanna this is a pilot kind of exercise right now, so they wanna see what they're gonna get out of it. But I think it's interesting that we have in individuals from large organizations that we all are very familiar with.

They wanna see what's happening so that they can hopefully take that back right to their organization say, hey, this is what we're doing over here, it'd be really great. And I think that's where you start to see those champions emerge. I'm curious in a year whether that table will flip and organizations will see this as an investment that they should be making. Because you can you can have the greatest argument in the business a great business case, but if your organization's not bought in on this technology, you're gonna be limited as to what you can do.

So we'll talk about what organizational readiness looks like, AI governance, which leads into kind of one of the bigger topics, what is responsible use, adoption, ethical use, what are the conversations you should be having before you layer this technology in, turn it on, procure it, you know, how to approach vendor conversations, which you should be looking for. because you can get sold a lot of things right now and it's not the same as buying like a software with databases and rows, right?

You're buying some different some different data processing agreements and just feeling comfortable navigating that. And then I would say the last one is governance and standards. and interestingly, with with the group, it's been, or are we gonna write a standard

for AI? I would say, not yet. I don't I don't think it's a complete no. I think what it's been really interesting, what's even been surfaced to me, is like as different standards are coming up for review.

45001 is up for review. What is what needs to be considered from AI. Z10 already has a subcommittee that is thinking about how to where AI fits in. And I think this group will be able to speak to this various standard committees that ASSP is working on and where AI fits into that topic, whether it's control of hazardous energy, fault protection, whether, you know, I think everyone's gonna have like a technology AI section and what needs to be thought about.

I think that's actually a better way to think about it versus being like, here's the standard for AI and safety, even though the tech changes literally every day. So it'll be exciting to work through that. So we'll probably focus on a different topic each quarter, but we'll have kind of subcommittees within the group that will be working on each of those topics throughout the year so that we're constantly making progress.

And then hopefully the outcomes of those are case studies and white papers and PSJ articles and just ways to share what we're learning. so I'm excited. There's already like a very enthusiastic group and people are asking me like, what is this thing that we're doing? I wanna sign up. So, well ask me again in six months so we'll see how we'll see how it's going. But I am very, very excited to to dive into to all of these different aspects of what I do in my consulting work and feel figure out how we can learn from each other better and what that looks like.

Scott Fowler

Absolutely, yeah, that's what these SBUGs are all about. And as you know, we have the AI and safety, we have control of hazardous energy and fall protection standard based user groups as this as this pilot program. And if folks wanna learn more, just want to mention real quick you can visit [ASSP.org/SBUGs](https://assp.org/SBUGs) And Arianna, I will give you the last word.

Arianna Howard

Yeah, no, I think, I mean it's hard to compress what we're talking about here into a short amount of time, but I'm always available. I'm very active on LinkedIn so people can reach out there to to talk through any of this. Join the S bug. This is exactly what we're gonna be what we're gonna be focused on. So plug there. you will have direct access to me and the and a whole cohort of people that that feel that same enthusiasm, maybe some hesitancy.

I would love for some people that are extremely hesitant or have concerns, especially other regions to join. that's how we that's how we make this, you know, figure this thing out together. none of us I keep saying don't call it subject matter expert, subject matter lead, because no one is an expert. Very few people are experts on AI right now. So I don't want to take that, take that title because I'm definitely here to here to learn. But I appreciate it, Scott. Thanks for thanks for having me.

Scott Fowler

Thank you so much, Arianna. I appreciate you coming on. I as I said that these these tools have, you know, tremendous possibility for the EHS field if used in in the right way and you know, aimed at solving problems to create safer workplaces. So really appreciate you coming on to share how EHS professionals can do that. So thank you again.

Arianna Howard

Yeah, this was fun. Appreciate it.