

DEBORAH ROY 2019-20 ASSP President-Elect

The experience she gained through a university co-op program led President-Elect Deborah R. Roy, M.P.H., R.N., CSP, COHN-S, CIT, FASSP, FAAOHN, to pursue a career as an occupational health nurse in the industrial sector.



Deborah Roy

Deborah R. Roy, M.P.H., R.N., CSP, COHN-S, CIT, FASSP, FAAOHN, president of SafeTech Consultants Inc., has more than 35 years of OSH experience and is past corporate director of health, safety and wellness at L.L.Bean. Roy has been a speaker, educator, mentor and trainer. She also has written for peer-reviewed journals and was a contributing author to *Consultants Business Development Guide*. She holds an M.P.H. in Occupational Health and Safety from University of North Carolina. An ASSP professional member since 1993, Roy has earned a reputation among colleagues for being a strategic thinker with strong business skills, technical expertise and a constant desire for improvement. She was honored as an ASSP Fellow in 2018 for her significant contributions to the OSH profession.

"It was a pretty sophisticated clinic for that time," says Roy speaking about her first co-op working for a large insurance company in an on-site clinic that managed 6,500 employees. "That was my first exposure to occupational health." A second co-op with a glassware manufacturer followed.

"After those experiences," she says, "I decided that I wanted to work in that specialty and was fortunate enough to get a job right out of school in occupational health." That first job was working in a large tantalum capacitor plant with 1,300 employees working three shifts, 7 days a week. After being promoted to the product division level covering five plants, Roy's experience expanded.

"I learned a lot about the field, about industrial hygiene and safety, and about environmental requirements," she says. "I found it to be a very rewarding career." But it was the prevention aspect of the occupational safety and health field that she found most rewarding.

"When I was strictly in occupational health, the area I was most intrigued by was preventing the injuries, as opposed to treating the injuries," she says. At that point, ergonomics was still in the early stages, and Roy quickly recognized that the company needed help in this area. She identified an opportunity to address workstation design to reduce the number of cumulative trauma injuries suffered by workers at the plant.

"I realized that there were opportunities to actually prevent those injuries," Roy says. She worked with the Harvard School of Public Health and Boston University to put together a NIOSH study conducted at the plant that examined ergonomics.

"That was very rewarding," Roy says. "To significantly reduce the cost of workers' compensation and, more importantly, keep people from being injured." This was a new type of reward for Roy, who spent her early career treating injuries. "It was intriguing to me to be able to solve the problem as opposed to just treat it," she says.

Her interest in prevention inspired her to pursue an advanced degree specific to OSH, and ultimately led her to focus on safety. Upon graduation, Roy worked for a large environmental consulting firm with responsibilities in both safety and health.

"That's really how I shifted over time," she says. "As I gained more exposure to the field, I realized that I could do more, and I could help people more appropriately that way." Ultimately, the prevention approach drove her to choose a school of public health for her graduate education.

"I really believe in the greatest good for the greatest number concept," she says. "I wanted to learn how to protect that larger population."

Volunteer Leadership

Roy's path to ASSP took a different route than many. When striving to learn more about her field early in her career, Roy became involved with American Association of Occupational Health Nurses (AAOHN) and began volunteer service in several chapter level roles, leading to larger regional roles and presenting at conferences.

As her career shifted to involve more safety and training in high-hazard chemicals, Roy began interacting more with safety professionals in the companies her firm worked for, and her involvement with ASSP grew. Armed with experience in volunteer leadership, Roy became involved in various short-term committee assignments and task forces at the practice specialty and Society levels.

Being involved in several OSH-related membership organizations—National Safety Council, as well as AAOHN, AIHA and ASSP—gave Roy a broad perspective. In a state like Maine, Roy says, OSH professionals in various functions work together more.

"I've been a member of all four of those groups for many years. There's a lot of crossover in these disciplines," she says. "We all work together because you really have to in a state that's spread out. You just don't have a large enough mass without doing that."

That broad perspective echoed her career path, which involved various aspects of the OSH field, as well as a variety of settings—corporate, industrial, consulting and senior leadership. Roy feels these experiences and the strategic skills she has acquired have enhanced her ability to see the bigger picture and address the external factors that may impact the Society.

"The safety and health field is a collaborative area," Roy says. "I see safety professionals as responsible for collaborating with these other disciplines because, just like the current situation that we're in, we're all in this together."

Total Worker Health

For Roy, one area of occupational safety offers an excellent opportunity for employers: total worker health.

"Total worker health is a higher level than traditional best practices in safety," Roy says. "It's beyond having safety management systems. It's beyond having risk assessment of our operations. It's really looking at the broader view of the worker, and all the inputs to that worker that may impact them." Traditionally, she says, safety and health make up one silo, work policies another, employee assistance programs, fitness or nutrition classes are in another, and so on.

"Normally, none of those are cohesive, and they're never together in one department or one area," Roy says. "With total worker health, employers have an opportunity for the different groups that impact the worker

to collaborate and look at the worker as a whole, and address all of those impacts holistically.”

That collaboration is what Roy believes will truly advance an organization, not just with worker wellness but with productivity. “If workers are supported from all the different disciplines, they’re going to be much more productive for that organization,” she says, “and, consequently, that organization will be better off economically.”

Advice for Future Generations

When asked what lessons her career has taught her that she can pass on to future generations of safety professionals, Roy advises learning not only from those in leadership roles, but also from those on the front lines.

“Early on in the electronics industry, I realized that I needed to work with the employees to understand their jobs to be able to identify the hazards and risks of those jobs,” Roy says. “The companies I’ve worked for have often had a whole variety of different types of industries within them and having that exposure is really helpful.”

Roy also points to the opportunity presented by the work she performed in consulting. “I was in thousands of workplaces to see how work is done and to understand the risks in each of those operations,” she recalls. “But also, I had the opportunity to understand how companies operate and how different it is from one industry to another, or one company to another.” All of that knowledge and experience becomes part of a skill set that the OSH professional can then offer to future employers as they move up in their career.

She also says OSH professionals must be open to opportunities to broaden their skill sets. “Your skills need to go beyond just technical safety skills,” Roy says. Many of the skills OSH professionals need help us understand how to operate in an organization. “They may be business skills, leadership skills or communication skills,” she says. “All of us need to be open to those opportunities throughout our career.” In her last executive role, Roy says, she needed much different skills than when she started in the field. “Interacting with executive leadership requires different communication skills and different business skills,” she says. “You definitely need different skills for the different points in your career.”

The Changing Practice of Safety

When asked how the safety profession is changing and what professionals should do to meet the needs ahead, Roy talks about a shift from compliance.

“Our field has moved from just compliance to more risk assessment, safety management systems and ultimately to a broader view such as total worker health,” Roy says. “For individuals still functioning at the level of just compliance, you must advance your ability to influence and understand what’s next to really help your employer move forward.” This is key to helping employers continually improve “because the reality is that the regulations in the U.S. and some other countries are not at the point that 100% compliance will get that company to zero injuries,” she says.

Among the skills that OSH professionals will need in their toolbox, Roy points to the ongoing situation with COVID-19. “I see pandemic planning as part of business continuity planning for an organization,” Roy says. “Safe-

ty professionals are likely already involved with their organizations in this way.” For those who are not, Roy sees this as a great opportunity to influence that situation.

“Our skill set is helpful to leadership of the organization, particularly in a time like this where the information needs to be appropriately interpreted,” Roy says. “I see safety professionals as able to look at the science and help leaders interpret that information so they can make the best decisions for the workforce and the organization overall.”

Connecting With Business

Connecting safety to business values is a common topic within the OSH community. Roy’s advice to safety professionals is to clearly understand the organization’s values and the metrics that leadership pays attention to. This is where business skills become critical.

“If safety and health is important to the business, there is more opportunity to be an influencer in that area,” Roy says. “But the fact is that if an organization allocates resources based on business planning and return on investment, and we don’t have those skills, then we’re not even going to get to the table to be able to offer our advice.”

Even in companies where the safety and health component is not part of the business’s core values, Roy says there are ways OSH professionals can be effective. “In some cases, there may be values that are adjacent to safety and health that you might be able to tag on to,” she says. “For example, if productivity is a core value, then a lot of things we do in terms of safety improvements will actually fit under productivity. Or, if there is a people-centric value, that would be another place where you could tag on safety and health.”

The important thing is to understand the organization’s values and the process leadership follows for allocating resources. “Knowing what the values are and then working within that framework will allow you to better move your strategies forward,” she says.

Looking Ahead

When asked what legacy she hopes to leave as ASSP president following her upcoming term, which begins July 1, Roy says the answer is simple. “I hope to leave the Society better than I found it,” she says. “Part of that is having each ASSP president—since we’re only in that role for a year—work together on a larger strategy that will move the Society forward long term.”

Roy sees that strategy as understanding that safety professionals need to evolve their view of the profession beyond focusing on compliance and moving toward examining what value the OSH profession brings to an organization.

“To do that, we need to be able to move ourselves, educationally and experientially, forward,” she says. “We need to look at best practices, we need to look at systems thinking, we need to look at total worker health—all with the idea that they will help our employers move forward economically and have a workforce that is more productive.”

This commitment to a common goal is critical for Roy. “The Society needs to have a long-term vision, and each of the leaders that come behind me must embrace the same approach to the organization going forward,” she says. “That’s the only way the organization is going to be sustainable for the long term.” **PSJ**

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