

# THE VALUE OF EXPERIENCE

By Justin Molocznik

**Foremost, I greatly appreciate the response to the most recent Good to Know article, “The Value of Education and Certifications” (PSJ August 2023 p. 39). As the article circulated on social media, many readers shared their philosophy on why certification and education are important.**

**The discussions** I saw included some debate regarding the idea that experience, not education and certifications, was the ultimate key to a successful safety career and knowledge. When I wrote the article, I suspected such a debate might arise. Where the article landed is that it is not a question of either education or experience, but rather a combination of both. I find it interesting that, on this topic, the opinion of the individual often relates to their own background. But it is not an “either-or” debate, it is an “and” discussion. Each holds significant importance in a safety professional’s ability to be successful and impactful.

I look at this in two ways: from an individual perspective and an organizational one. To create balance in an organization, you must employ a diverse population, some with an emphasis in experience, others with an emphasis in education. In a utopian situation, everyone would have both. As an industry, we are working toward that goal but have yet to arrive. While access to education and certification in the industry is evolving, experience is often considered to require time, a rather inflexible factor that bars access to some.

Putting such a great value on experience requires us to explore in greater depth what is meant by “experience.” This term can be broad, and individuals often hold their own definition. When someone says they have experience performing a task, does that mean they have mastered it or that they have done it once? I have experience making coffee, but in no way do I consider myself a master barista.

So, for the purpose of this discussion, I will define work experience in safety thus: experience is a combination of knowledge, skills and expertise that someone has obtained throughout their career. This experience may come through relationships, hands-on practice or, most importantly, trial and adjustment (popularly known as error). Soren Kaplan, author of *Experiential Intelligence*, provides a great example of the expansive power of experience by

through the example of riding a bicycle for the first time:

Consider how you first learned to ride a bike. You just did it. No matter how high your IQ, no matter how many books you may have read about the mechanics of bicycles, learning to ride involves the same process: experience. (Kaplan, 2023)

In other words, you become a competent bike rider through experience.

We all gain experience by asking questions and being present, patient, engaged and dedicated to continuous learning.

Kaplan’s overall discussion centers around the power of experience in developing experiential intelligence. Fundamentally, it explains the importance of experience in learning and overall development. The same principle applies to your safety career.

Depending on your role as a safety professional, you may be responsible for emergency response. Experience in emergency situations is critical, which is why such scenarios are often simulated through drills and training; even then, those who have experience in these situations know what to expect (which is the unexpected). Experience helps us to understand the behavioral side of things: how people will react and how to respond to unforeseen circumstances. This happens a great deal in applied safety, as a safety professional’s expertise is often required in a changing environment. With experience, practitioners gain knowledge and learn unwritten rules that shape practice.

**Justin Molocznik, M.S., CSP, CHST, CRIS**, is safety director for JTM Construction in Seattle, WA. He holds an M.S. in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from Kansas State University. Molocznik serves as the ASSP Region I Vice President and has previously served as Region I Area A director, Region I deputy regional vice president and president of the Puget Sound Chapter. He has also served on the ASSP Editorial Review Board and the Governor’s Industrial Safety and Health Advisory Board.

One of the most important skills that a safety professional can possess is an ability to tactfully, effectively intervene when an unsafe behavior or act is observed. Not addressing it in the moment or aggressively addressing it and alienating or embarrassing those involved can be disastrous. This also deprives the safety professional of an opportunity to find a balance in relationship building, learning and accountability. But developing this skill seems to be almost exclusively gained through experience. It takes time and practice to acquire the skill of effective in-the-moment intervention.

Experience is invaluable to you and those you serve in your safety career. It will not come as a surprise that many great thinkers, scientists, entrepreneurs and philosophers (from Aristotle to Einstein to Steve Jobs) consider experience as paramount to truly obtaining knowledge and expertise.

In my August 2023 article on education, I discussed how barriers have been removed from obtaining education and credentials through certifications (Molocznik, 2023). But how do we remove barriers to gaining experience? There is an optimistic way to look at this: We all gain experience by asking questions and being present, patient, engaged and dedicated to continuous learning. **PSJ**

## References

Molocznik, J. (2023, Aug). The value of education and certifications. *Professional Safety*, 68(8), 39.

Kaplan, S. (2023, Feb. 3). How important is a college degree compared to experience? *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2023/02/how-important-is-a-college-degree-compared-to-experience>

## Cite this article

Molocznik, J. (2023, Nov). The value of experience. *Professional Safety*, 68(11), 39.