

Professional Standards and Qualifications for Health & Safety Practitioners

How do you verify the level of a health and safety practitioner's knowledge, skills and competency if they don't have a formal qualification? Is employment history alone a reliable indicator of a practitioner's overall competence? How can health and safety practitioners demonstrate the value of their role and their contribution to the organisation?

In the past, many New Zealand health and safety management practitioners learned their role primarily on the job, mainly because formal qualifications were not readily available in New Zealand. Compounding the problem was senior management's lack of depth in understanding the true requirements of the role.

This does not mean to say that managers must be comprehensive subject matter experts in health and safety. Good managers often call on specialist services such as accountants, legal advisers and engineers. Likewise, it makes sense to draw on the advice and services of appropriately qualified personnel to handle specialist health and safety matters.

Does a health and safety management practitioner in a senior role require a formal academic qualification? As with nearly all mainstream professions in New Zealand today, and in line with predominant overseas trends, the answer to that question clearly is YES.

Given the increasing complexity of health and safety legislative compliance issues, it's now more important than ever before to ensure adequate professional competence before a candidate is hired or contracted to manage occupational health and safety activities. Overseas trends indicate increasing requirements for proof of professional competence as a prerequisite for working in the health and safety field.

The New Zealand Institute of Safety Management (NZISM) is an organisation formed for the purpose of promoting occupational health and safety management and supporting ongoing professional development of occupational health and safety practitioners. NZISM firmly believes that the health and safety profession in New Zealand is now mature enough to take the next step toward demonstration of professional competence, and NZISM is leading the way.

Paul Jarvie, New Zealand Institute of Safety Management (NZISM) National Manager and EMA's OSH Manager, welcomes the requirement for professional standards as an important step toward higher profile and greater credibility for the health and safety profession. Jarvie recently told NZISM members he fully expects that in 3-4 years time, accreditation to a professional standard will be a pre-requisite for working in this field—this is already happening in USA, UK, Australia and many other developed countries.

With this in mind, as well as the desire to provide career development pathways and professional credibility for its members, NZISM has now implemented a professional standards process. This gives members the opportunity to be assessed and endorsed by their peers as an acknowledgement of professional credibility.

Jarvie is one of the few professionals in New Zealand holding a formal qualification in occupational health and safety (University of Otago and Massey University). He was instrumental in facilitating the creation of the professional standards framework, assisted by other highly qualified and experienced occupational health and safety

professionals throughout the country. Through their efforts, NZISM members now have a solid framework to identify key professional requirements and begin the process of demonstrating their own vocational competence. For New Zealand-based occupational health and safety practitioners to keep pace with the international arena, and to receive industry endorsement and accreditation here in NZ, practitioners should seriously consider undertaking the 'best practice' pathway offered through NZISM's professional standards endorsement process.

What professional qualifications are currently available in New Zealand?

Fortunately, more opportunities are now developing for health and safety professionals to receive formal training and qualifications in occupational health and safety management. This helps to assure a more complete knowledge base from which safety management practitioners can work, and it gives safety managers in business the necessary tools, knowledge and skill sets to embrace this particular management function. Once the basic competencies are verifiable and acceptable, these practitioners can do what most managers do best – i.e., get out there and manage it.

Qualifications in occupational safety and health currently offered in New Zealand begin with NZQA unit standards at the lower end of the scale. These units build on one another and result in a qualification determined by the NZQA framework, usually at an undergraduate certificate level. However, there appears to be a giant gap between this level and programmes offered by local and international universities, which tend to address ongoing education at post-graduate level.

Qualifications in occupational health and safety currently available in New Zealand include those listed below. This list is not exhaustive and does not include NZQA programmes, but it provides a few examples of what is currently offered in this country:

Massey University - distance learning programme: *Graduate Diploma in Occupational Safety and Health*

University of Otago - distance learning: *Post-Graduate Certificate in Health Science, Post-Graduate Diploma in Health Science, Masters Degree in Health Science (MHealSc)*, Elective endorsements

Employers and Manufacturers Association (EMA) – in association with Massey University: *Certificate in Occupational Safety and Health* – three months with a 3-day module each month.

New Zealand Institute of Management(NZIM) / NSCA: *Diploma in Health and Safety Management*– two-week residential block course

University of Newcastle (NSW), distance learning, *Graduate Certificate OH&S, Post Graduate Diploma OH&S, Masters Degree OH&S and PhD in OH&S by arrangement.*

Auckland University, *PhD in OH&S by arrangement.*

What are professional standards?

As a first step, the professional standards are a framework designed to verify professional competence. The framework identifies key areas of professional competence critical to the role of an occupational health and safety management practitioner.

Applicants are required to demonstrate their grasp of critical legislation, and they must provide examples of the methodology they would use to manage important occupational health and safety issues. Applications must also be supported by

evidence of relevant work experience, ongoing professional development, and formal qualifications.

The first step to professional accreditation is a peer review and endorsement of an individual's current competency. Instead of relying solely on testimonials or references, NZISM has adopted a professional standards framework, which sets practitioners a range of basic tasks mirroring typical workplace health and safety management activities. Each task requires the practitioner to demonstrate his/her understanding of key principles and requirements, familiarity with relevant legislation and codes of practice, and competency in applying a suitable methodology for health and safety management disciplines. Practitioners and public alike have access to the required information in various approved codes of practice, which are readily available from the NZ Department of Labour (www.osh.govt.nz).

The NZISM professional standard is simply a starting point along a continuous learning pathway. Eventually further levels of endorsement and accreditation will be developed to support on-going professional development. NZISM is also in the process of consultation and developing links with many providers of health and safety management qualifications, aiming to assess and endorse health and safety management courses offered in NZ to ensure they remain relevant and appropriate.

Why are professional standards being introduced?

Professional standards are being introduced to raise levels of professional competence in health and safety management, thus raising the profile of the profession as a whole. These standards are intended to support professional excellence and encourage on-going development within the field, which will continue to set ever higher standards of competence and professionalism.

In addition, the introduction of professional standards supports candidate assessment and selection of health and safety practitioners –for both employees and contractors. Without professional standards as a benchmark, it can be difficult for prospective employers to properly assess practitioner competence. NZISM will work closely with industry to ensure employers understand the importance of practitioner endorsement and gain better insights about how the professional standards framework will operate. This will benefit both practitioners and employers.

How do professional standards work?

The framework is provided by NZISM (www.nzism.co.nz). Practitioners work through set criteria, producing examples of methodology requested for each section. Their work must be supported by evidence of relevant work experience and verification of any related qualifications.

The completed application is submitted (accompanied by a fee to cover costs) to NZISM. The application is assessed by a group of 4 qualified professionals in a different region from where the applicant is based – this is to allow a degree of anonymity for the applicant as well as avoiding any bias from assessors who might know the applicant.

What are benefits of professional standards to H&S practitioners?

Practitioners gain a career advantage with an industry-recognised endorsement validating their professional competence. Successful applicants gain a sense of achievement and increased pride in their vocation having been thus acknowledged by their fellow practitioners. Practitioners who have achieved endorsement to the

professional standards are accorded the special privilege of the right to use the designation 'MNZISM' on their business cards.

NZISM members endorsed to the professional standards are also automatically listed on the NZISM website, which receives daily enquiries from within NZ and overseas from organisations seeking occupational safety and health practitioners for permanent and contract work.

Eventually, formal qualifications and professional endorsement / accreditation will be a pre-requisite for working in the field. This is increasingly the trend overseas, and New Zealand industry is set to follow.

What are the benefits of professional standards to employers?

Through professional standards endorsement, potential employers gain an independent and consistent assessment of a candidate's relevant knowledge and competence before the person is hired. This can speed up the learning phase after the person is hired and reduce the chance of later occupational health and safety non-compliances or failures, which could lead to prosecution and fines for breaches of the Act.

So, if you're an employer and you want to assure yourself that you're hiring someone who is qualified to do the job, ask for a candidate endorsed to NZISM's professional standards. If you're the one looking for work – as an employee or as a contractor – professional standards are a great way to highlight your competence, know your own value and stand out from the crowd.

For more information on professional standards for occupational health and safety practitioners and information about formal qualifications, visit the NZISM website: www.nzism.co.nz



NZISM has produced a Professional Standard Framework for developing professional standards for OHS practitioners and Massey University encourages and supports your endeavors in this regard.

*Associate Professor Paul Toulson
Head of Department*



NZISM is leading the way in New Zealand with the creation of the Professional Standards Framework. This will begin the process of bringing New Zealand in line with other like minded international professional organizations. This global network and ongoing international interaction allows their members access to the most up-to-date global practices in the area of occupational health and safety.

*Ross Coulton
Head of Overseas Post Graduate Programs*