The Future Safety Leader

By Bertrand Gibert and Laura Aucott

Message from Dr. Andrew Sharman, Chief Executive Officer, IILSC

At the International Institute of Leadership & Safety Culture (IILSC), we are committed to empowering leaders to create sustainable cultures of care that drive exceptional organisational performance.

Our IILSC Insights whitepapers, crafted in collaboration with world-class experts in leadership, culture and workplace safety, offer valuable insights and actionable strategies for leaders and organisations striving to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

Through these in-depth resources, we aim to foster collaboration, spark innovation, and equip leaders at all levels with the knowledge and tools to cultivate resilient and high-performing teams.

Dive into these thought-provoking pieces to discover how you can influence change, shape safer work environments and build a lasting culture of care within your organisation.

Join us on this journey toward safer, more inclusive and future-ready workplaces.

Authors of this IILSC Insights white paper

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Bertrand Gibert is COO of the International Institute of Leadership & Safety Culture (IILSC) founded by CEDEP. In this role, he is responsible for setting, leading and developing all operations to ensure our programs consistently meet the needs of our clients and are at the forefront of future health, safety and wellbeing trends.

Prior to joining IILSC, Bertrand spent 25 years in the aerospace and life science sectors, including 13 years at United Technologies Corporation (now Raytheon Technologies), a US$60bn conglomerate with 250,000 employees, where he led global and local EH&S teams across dozens of sites and delivered people-based health and safety. In 2011, he then moved to bioMérieux, a US$4bn family-driven business with 14,000 employees, where he created the company's first HSE and sustainability strategy. As vice president, HSE, security, risks and sustainability, he implemented a pluri-annual strategic planning approach periodically endorsed and reviewed by the board of directors and the executive committee.

Bertrand graduated as a manufacturing and sustainability engineer from the Ecole des Mines de Saint-Etienne (France), holds the NEBOSH IGC (UK) and has obtained the business sustainability management certificate from CISL (UK).

LAURA AUCOTT

With 15 years of experience recruiting health, safety, and environment (HSE) professionals across the UK and internationally, Laura Aucott is a recognised leader in the industry. As Associate Director at HSE Recruitment Network, Laura studies HSE to gain an in-depth understanding of employers' needs and staying ahead of industry trends.

Laura is a sought-after speaker at safety conferences and roundtables, sharing her expertise with the wider HSE community. She serves on the IOSH Nominations Committee, where she helps appoint strategic board and council positions, and contributes to the IIRSM editorial panel for The Sentinel, the institute's membership magazine.

With an extensive network of influential and innovative senior safety and sustainability professionals, Laura has been named one of the Most Influential People in Safety by SHP Online.

Executive summary

The role of the leader in safety is undergoing significant transformation, driven by factors such as changing employment structures, ESG commitments, increasing digitalisation and technological innovations. Today's safety leaders must demonstrate adaptability and agility to navigate complex external and internal influences.

This IILSC Insights white paper offers two perspectives on the evolution of the safety leadership role. The first view is that of a senior HSE professional, the Institute's COO, Bertrand Gibert, who has held a series of senior roles in health, safety, environment and sustainability. The second is from a leading recruiter of safety leaders, Laura Aucott. The recruiter is positioned between industry and the safety profession and can therefore share valuable insights on what employers are now asking for in their senior safety roles.

This white paper cannot be an exhaustive account of the many and varied trends and developments that are shaping the future of the safety leadership role. It does, however, highlight common themes that are informing personnel and development decisions by organisations. You will read about the rise in demand for skills described variously as 'soft', 'human' or 'professional'. At the same time, rapid advancements in technology, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and wearables, are delivering both challenges and opportunities for workplace safety.

The future of workplace health and safety is calling for leaders with a blend of technical proficiency and strong interpersonal skills. Organisations must cultivate these multifaceted professionals to foster resilient and healthy work environments.

The future OSH leader:
The professional's viewpoint

By Bertrand Gibert

Introduction

The world of work continues to be transformed at a tremendous pace as considerations such as changing employment structures, Environmental, Sustainability and Governance (ESG) commitments, increasing digitalisation, technological innovations and geopolitical uncertainties shape the thinking and actions of C-suite leaders.

Increasingly in their profession, safety leaders (by this we mean those that operate in an EHS, OSH, SHEQ or risk management capacity) must demonstrate their adaptability and agility in the face of ever shifting external and internal influences. They must be ready to rise to any challenge and demonstrate their expertise, insights and skills to help C-suite leaders successfully navigate what will continue to be an array of competing demands.

Being in a position to influence C-suite decision-making is, and will continue to be, critical and requires senior safety professionals to deploy what is already an exceptional skills-set to drive health and safety gains that align with wider corporate objectives and values. Because there is no consensus on what denotes safety leadership, senior professionals will need to find allies at board level to maximise their impact, employing their soft skills to ensure a culture of care is embedded in the corporate fabric and EHS, OSH, risk management or SHEQ considerations are intertwined with corporate strategic goals.

The future world of work will also require these same professionals to master new competencies while fine-tuning existing hard and soft skills so they can make bold, effective decisions and demonstrate their importance to the wider organisation and the added value they bring. Matrix reasoning, transversal (an ability to adapt to changes) and cross-functional (an ability to collaborate effectively with colleagues) skills will grow in importance as these critical skills are required to make operational functions accountable in safety and wellbeing.

Work started by the International Network of Safety and Health Practitioner Organisations (INSHPO) in 2013 to develop the 'Occupational Health and Safety Professional Capability Framework: A Global Framework for Practice' has created a flexible roadmap that senior safety professionals can draw on, enabling them to be influential leaders who can provide specialist advice and advance superlative standards of health and safety practice at an international level.

This white paper explores globally how different organisations are recruiting senior safety professionals to ready themselves for the challenges that industry faces right now as well as those looming on the horizon.

So, what are some of the headline developments or trends that will shape the world of work and what competencies and skills will senior safety professionals need to deploy in order to thrive within it and wield the greatest influence at the C-suite level?

Artificial intelligence (AI) and automation; smart technologies that enable remote monitoring; delivering on sustainability and carbon neutral commitments; safeguarding against growing and more sophisticated cybersecurity threats; and expanding safety performance requirements to include health and wellbeing are a few of the issues that are already impacting or coming down the road.

These require senior safety professionals to develop or enhance, among many things, their digital skills (including demonstrating an acumen for analysing and acting on critical data); ensure there is a strong focus on ill-health prevention; and wield their considerable soft skills to set the foundations for a culture of care and then foster it throughout their organisation.

Let's explore these in more detail, before we gain the perspective of the recruiter of safety leaders.

Emerging trends and future challenges

C-suite leaders typically oversee multiple operations in a global economy that is highly competitive and where they are often required to meet different regulatory requirements that reflect the territories they operate in. This dynamic, corporate world is also subject to issues such as digitalisation, environmental (and sustainability) commitments and/or requirements and growing competition for resources. All of these factors and more will influence the future work of the senior safety professional.

At the start of this year, the National Registry of Environmental Professionals outlined the trends and skills for the EHS industry that it sees for 2025 (and beyond). Arguably, all of these considerations are equally pertinent for senior professionals with OSH, risk management or SHEQ responsibilities.

However, this white paper also outlines additional issues that senior safety professionals must consider if they are to be fit for purpose in a changing world of work.

Holistic strategies

The traditional safety role has long gone and nowadays senior professionals must be far more agile so they are able to deliver on multiple and often competing fronts — whether that is managing risk effectively across a diverse range of industrial sectors; in achieving EHS (and quality) goals; or exerting their influence to ensure ESG commitments are met.

This means safety professionals must be far more strategic in their thinking, able to see the 'bigger picture', and seize opportunities to shape corporate decisions more broadly, for example, through using their people skills to instil a culture of care. Safety culture is a relevant people pillar in many corporate responsibility strategies.

'The curriculum for development of H&S professionals is heavily biased towards non-technical skills,' says the ERM report. Leadership skills, for health and safety professionals (defining priorities, effective engagement and influencing skills, and driving change) was cited by more than half. Other, less frequently cited non-technical needs were high-impact training skills, basic understanding of business dynamics and change management.

In its leadership programs, the International Institute of Leadership & Safety Culture (IILSC) has responded to this demand from industry for a more holistic approach to safety and health strategies. The content, for example, of Leadership Through Health & Safety Culture (LHSC), recognises the need for H&S function leaders to be able to nurture and sustain a safety culture. They need to possess the skills to master behavioural economics, engage stakeholders and lead change.

Artificial intelligence (AI) and automation

Eighty-eight percent of participants in the ERM 2024 Global Health and Safety Survey said they had deployed new technologies in health and safety in the three years before the report's publication in 2024. Just over one-quarter of participants (27%) were using AI in H&S for data analysis, improvement in the quality of training materials, and enhanced computer vision and monitoring.

Perhaps the most profound and ground-breaking technology reshaping the modern workspace is artificial intelligence (AI) and, together with this, an ever-increasing move towards automation. This presents both challenges and opportunities for senior safety professionals.

On the one hand, the accelerated and widespread adoption of AI could inadvertently create new risks unless these are properly managed. As the IILSC Insights white paper Safety in the Digital Age: Old and New Problems explains, this is especially important in safety-critical environments such as hospitals, the rail sector and the nuclear industry where users must have a sound understanding of what software, machine learning processes or algorithms do when they interact with those operating them.

There also must be careful consideration of how increased automation will inevitably reduce the need to employ workers to undertake certain tasks and how this process is managed in a workplace that prides itself on promoting a culture of care as well as how those individuals can best be deployed safely elsewhere.

On the other hand, decision-making can be improved significantly by taking advantage of the data-driven insights that AI offers. Safety leaders can use advanced analytics and AI to scrutinise massive datasets with far more accuracy and at greater speed than ever before, freeing up their own time so they can focus more on preventative measures, for example, identifying gaps in safety policies and practices that can then be acted on.

This transformational technology enables senior safety professionals to become much more proactive in mitigating risk. For certain work environments, AI-driven inspections and remote monitoring can remove frontline workers from undertaking hazardous work in high-risk environments.

The growing digitalisation of EHS processes, however, will inevitably mean safety professionals must develop or enhance their digital skills. Only when they can demonstrate they possess the acumen to interpret critical data streams will they be able to make the most effective and informed decisions to the benefit of C-suite leaders and ultimately the wider organisation.

Wearable technologies

Innovations in wearable technology present huge opportunities for safety professionals to enhance workplace health and safety cultures and practices, most tangibly through the improvement of accident and incident statistics. Even at this early stage in the technology's development, it's not difficult to see the benefits that accessing real-time data, for example, on a worker operating close to a moving fork-lift truck can provide in flagging near-misses so action can be taken to prevent future incidents, including injuries and fatalities. There is also the potential to monitor more longer-term trends such as employee health.

The move to increased digitalisation is leaving its mark on safety training. Indeed, innovative technologies such as virtual reality and augmented reality are breaking new ground in the safety space enabling frontline staff to participate in immersive, hands-on training that delivers a suite of benefits – from improving risk awareness, which in turn reduces the likelihood of accidents, to arguably a greater retention of safety knowledge among those that are employed to undertake critical, albeit hazardous, tasks.

Once again, senior safety professionals will need to demonstrate they have mastered the digital skills required so they demonstrate their competence in using a range of cutting-edge technologies such as geographical information systems (GIS), AI and the Internet of Things.

As promising as digital technologies are in their potential to enhance health and safety practices, they also shine a light on cybersecurity and the need to develop practices for securing and protecting data and ensuring processes are not compromised so tasks can be performed safely. Safety professionals are well placed, however, to put in place the measures required, having a solid grounding in systems analysis and human-centred approaches.

Health like safety

The COVID-19 pandemic, changing work practices and a rise in reported cases of depression, stress and anxiety have driven employee mental health, occupational health and wellbeing up the corporate agenda as C-suite leaders have had to respond to rising levels of workplace absenteeism (and presenteeism) caused by ill-health.

Consequently, an increasing number of global organisations recognise the importance of psychological wellbeing and its positive impact on productivity as well as safety. The safety professional's role as managers, particularly how they harness their soft skills to cultivate a culture of care, has never been so important.

Now, and in the future, these professionals will need to go beyond physical safety and work with HR to build on decades of EHS risk-based processes to make sure mental health and wellbeing becomes an integral element of EHS, OSH, risk management and SHEQ programmes.

Psychosocial risk factors and the mental health challenges that arise from them remain a growing source of concern to nine in 10 companies, according to the ERM survey. More than half (54%) of function leaders are planning to adopt additional measures to address psychosocial risk factors and positively influence worker mental health in the next three years, the report says.

ESG compliance

As ESG | The Report explains, the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals and Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) are two interconnected frameworks that aim to promote sustainable development and responsible business practices. Consequently, a growing number of businesses globally are adopting both.

One of the reasons for this is that these businesses recognise the many benefits that adopting ESG principles brings; achieving a commercial edge over competitors through a more holistic consideration of operations is one example.

According to the multinational professional services network EY (formerly accounting firm Ernst & Young), ESG's emergence is creating new opportunities for EHS (and OSH, risk management and SHEQ) professionals, who have an instrumental role in leading tangible programmes that contribute to the ESG agenda.

EY explains how EHS and ESG directly overlap through issues such as waste management, climate risk, employee safety, as well as mental health and wellbeing. Importantly, it argues how an organisation's ESG agenda can be significantly enhanced by learning from the EHS profession's more advanced management system approaches, culture transformation initiatives, and data-driven monitoring and tracking of key performance indicators.

The multinational professional services network sees leading safety professionals adopting a 'contemporary approach' to managing EHS, one that combines the human elements, notably leadership, behaviour and cultural change, with providing workers with the processes, structures and tools to stay healthy and safe while also protecting the environment.

'Few businesses currently meet these transformational requirements for ESG, placing them at odds with the future of work,' argues EY. There is a massive opportunity therefore for safety professionals to take advantage of the strategic connections between the EHS and sustainability functions and ESG.

At the same time, investors, stakeholders and the public are showing increased interest in ESG disclosures and performance, so potentially there are huge costs in getting things wrong. Besides companies being handed costly fines for non-compliance, they also run the risk of losing existing and future business. An organisation that has had its reputation tarnished could also lose talented staff who won't want to be associated with an operation that isn't perceived to be practising what it preaches.

This is where the safety professional's leadership skills can add considerable weight. Although the hard skills — the regulatory and technical expertise — they possess are critically important for safely managing front-line teams, as the IILSC Insights white paper The New Language of Safety illustrates, it is arguably the safety professional's soft skills, in particular the use of effective communication, empathy and trust, that can unlock new levels of performance. This in turn contributes to a sustainable, thriving workforce and, ultimately, a more resilient organisation.

The future OSH leader: The recruiter's viewpoint

By Laura Aucott, HSE Recruitment Network

The future leaders in safety and health will be much more than accomplished technicians with a wealth of knowledge about management systems and how to implement them: they will be empathetic influencers who are brilliant shapers of work culture. Their prominence within organisations will continue to rise.

When I talk to employers about their requirements for a EHS / HSE / OSH leader, I see three common, interlinked themes emerge: leadership, influencing and mental health and wellbeing. The future leader of the safety and health function can stand shoulder to shoulder alongside their contemporaries on the executive board. They are true leaders by any measure, and will become known for their ability to lead, influence co-workers organisation-wide and shape cultures of care. Let's look at the trends.

Influential culture builders

Though 'hard' or technical skills are, of course, a requirement of senior HSE (health, safety and environment) roles, so-called 'soft skills' are much more in demand by employers who seek leaders to be influencers in their organisations, equipped to shape work culture. This paradigm shift is becoming increasingly evident in health and safety, particularly in high-risk sectors, and it is having an impact on the demands placed on heads of safety functions. Data collected by the HSE Recruitment Network in surveys and job adverts underscores this transformation and has revealed critical trends in the evolving landscape of health and safety recruitment.

For example, HSE Recruitment Network recorded a 13% surge in director-level vacancies between 2024 and 2025. Quantitatively and qualitatively, we are gathering evidence of a fast-growing demand for leadership that is transformational.

Notably, businesses that are operating in high-risk sectors such as manufacturing and construction are increasingly prioritising 'influential' as a top three desired skill for safety leaders – even above the traditional, technical safety prowess. We are seeing a fundamental change in what employer's need from their safety teams. No longer is technical expertise alone sufficient; the ability to influence, persuade and inspire behavioural change across all levels of an organisation is now paramount.

This emphasis on skills traditionally called 'soft' but perhaps best referred to as 'human' or 'professional', reflects a broader understanding that safety culture cannot be solely dictated from the top down. A truly effective safety culture must be nurtured from the bottom up, empowering employees to take ownership of safety protocols and fostering a sense of collective responsibility.

The ability to effect these sorts of cultural shifts requires a unique blend of hard / technical and soft / human skills.

Technical knowledge is, of course, essential for understanding risks and implementing effective safety measures. However, human skills – communication, empathy, active listening and conflict resolution – are critical for building trust, fostering collaboration and motivating behavioural change. Safety leaders who can effectively communicate the 'why' behind safety protocols,

listen to employee concerns and build consensus around safety initiatives are far more likely to succeed in creating a sustainable culture of care.

Ultimately, the shift towards prioritising human skills in safety leadership is a recognition that safety is not just about compliance, but about organisation-wide attitudes and behaviours. It is about creating an environment where employees feel valued, respected and empowered to prioritise their own safety and the safety of their colleagues. As the HSE Recruitment Network's data demonstrates, this cultural transformation is now a strategic imperative for businesses operating in high-risk sectors.

To quote a recent advert by HSE Recruitment Network for a HSEQ Director, the ideal candidate will have "the ability to influence, engage and drive cultural change at all levels of an organisation".

A focus on mental health and wellbeing

This onus on culture building and human skills relates to another trend in the knowledge and skills employers want from their senior HSE professionals: mental health and wellbeing. As Bertrand mentions in the first half of this IILSC Insights white paper, more and more employers are identifying the importance of psychological wellbeing and its positive impact on productivity.

The HSE Recruitment Network's Beyond Safety: The Mental Health Impact on HSE Professionals report (2024) reinforces this notion, emphasising the importance of reducing stigma around mental health and creating a culture of openness where employees feel comfortable discussing concerns. This echoes that HSE (health, safety and environment) professionals are acknowledging the importance of mental health not just to the individual, but to the wider organisation.

The future HSE/OSH leader is, therefore, one with a deep knowledge and understanding of how to create work environments that care for people's mental and physical wellbeing.

We see the direction of travel in the data we collected on HSE professional awareness of mental health issues in the workplace. Some 84% consider themselves highly educated on mental health awareness, according to our report, with most HSE professionals noting that their roles have expanded to include mental health responsibilities. This is a large part of why being influential and really understanding culture have become imperative.

Above Image Sourced: shutterstock_609663647

Beyond Safety: The Mental Health Impact on HSE Professionals

This HSE Recruitment Network report, published in 2024, presented a survey-based analysis of more than 170 Health and Safety professionals, offering a detailed look at how mental health is perceived, managed and integrated into workplace safety practices across various sectors.

There is a pronounced awareness among safety professionals regarding the impact of mental health on workplace safety, and this is particularly so at senior level. Some **93% of Directors and 98% of Heads of Department acknowledge the direct link between mental health and safety.** This consensus highlights a significant shift in the industry's understanding of workplace risks, recognising mental health as equally critical to physical safety.

A majority (79%) of professionals believe that mental health and wellbeing should be a collective responsibility within organisations. Only a small minority (3%) think that HSE alone should be accountable, despite 61% of HSE professionals noting that their roles have expanded to include mental health responsibilities. This underscores a growing expectation that all organisational levels, not just health and safety departments, must engage in supporting employee wellbeing. Here, we see why EHS / OSH professionals must be influencers.

Mental health concerns are frequent in the workplace: 44% of respondents encounter these issues regularly, and another 42% report them arising sometimes. This high prevalence emphasises the necessity for ongoing attention and responsive measures to address mental health challenges among employees.

Our report documents a clear evolution in job responsibilities, with a significant portion of professionals acknowledging changes in their roles or protocols due to the need to address mental health concerns.

This evolution is seen as essential for fostering a safer, more supportive work environment. The findings from Beyond Safe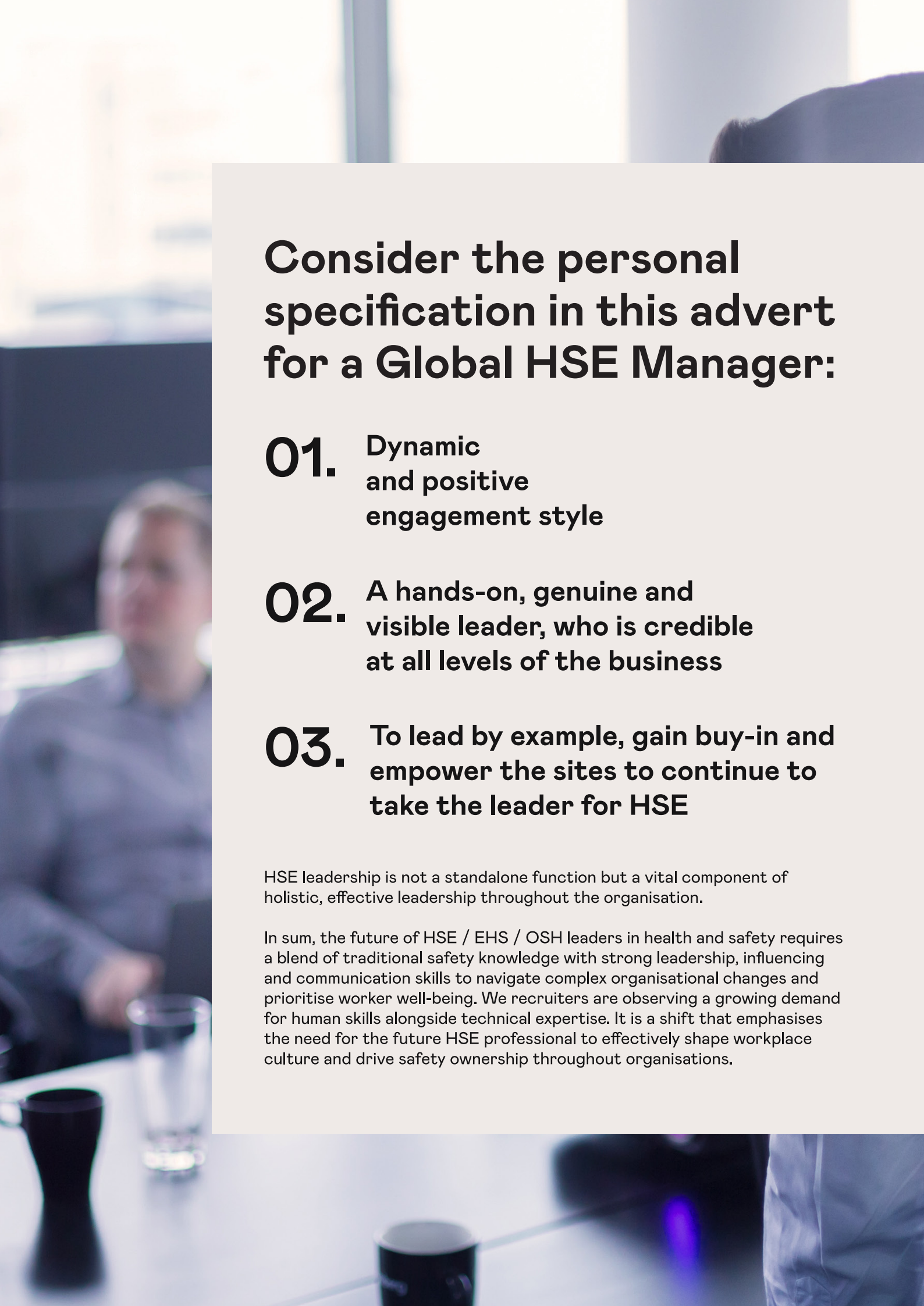ty: The Mental Health Impact on HSE Professionals make it clear that mental health is now recognised as a core component of workplace safety. Safety professionals are expected to lead in mental health initiatives, building on the industry's experience with risk-based safety processes. However, the responsibility for employee wellbeing must be shared collectively across organisations. By fostering openness, providing education, ensuring access to support and encouraging cross-departmental collaboration, organisations can create safer, healthier and more resilient workplaces.

Safety leadership or, simply, leadership

Another key change in the market sure to continue is the notion that 'safety leadership' is a distinct category from leadership. This idea is increasingly being challenged by organisations and boards. True leadership must be exhibited by individuals at every level, not just those with safety in their title. Effective leadership should integrate HSE into the broader business objectives and ensure that safety and well-being are not siloed concerns but central to decision-making and therefore organisational success.

More and more HSE professionals are now realising that influencing the C-suite is not optional but essential. Senior leaders set the tone for organisational priorities, and their buy-in is critical for embedding HSE into strategic planning and performance metrics. Achieving this influence requires HSE professionals to become adept at building alliances, translating HSE goals into business value and communicating in ways that resonate with executive concerns such as reputation, productivity and sustainability. By aligning HSE initiatives with organisational objectives and demonstrating their impact on the bottom line, HSE leaders can secure the resources and commitment needed for sustained cultural change.

Ultimately, leadership is about inspiring collective action, and HSE professionals must leverage their unique cross-functional reach to build coalitions and drive shared ownership of safety outcomes. Their influence is most effective when they act as partners to the C-suite, advocating for HSE as integral to organisational excellence and long-term success. The successful candidate will have 'the ability to influence and engage key internal and external stakeholders from operations on the ground to the Boardroom,' said a recent job advert for a Head of SHEQ.

Consider the personal specification in this advert for a Global HSE Manager:

01. Dynamic
and positive
engagement style

02. A hands-on, genuine and
visible leader, who is credible
at all levels of the business

03. To lead by example, gain buy-in and
empower the sites to continue to
take the leader for HSE

HSE leadership is not a standalone function but a vital component of holistic, effective leadership throughout the organisation.

In sum, the future of HSE / EHS / OSH leaders in health and safety requires a blend of traditional safety knowledge with strong leadership, influencing and communication skills to navigate complex organisational changes and prioritise worker well-being. We recruiters are observing a growing demand for human skills alongside technical expertise. It is a shift that emphasises the need for the future HSE professional to effectively shape workplace culture and drive safety ownership throughout organisations.

Conclusion

The future of workplace health and safety demands more than technical proficiency; it requires astute, adaptable leaders capable of navigating unprecedented complexity and influencing at the highest levels. Organisations that fail to recognise and cultivate these multifaceted senior safety professionals, equipped with both hard and 'soft' or human skills, risk being blindsided by evolving threats and failing to foster truly resilient and healthy work environments.

The time for siloed safety management is over; only a holistic, strategically integrated approach, driven by visionary leaders, will safeguard the future safety and health of people at work.

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Owned by the executive education club CEDEP, the Institute is a global hub for leaders to meet, talk, learn, and create safety excellence.

Through executive education, consulting, prestigious events, and digital learning, IILSC is creating a worldwide network of leaders from the C-suite, the OSH profession, and beyond that will turbo-charge advances in safety and health at work.

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