

## Q&A: Tackling Environmental Health & Safety

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*Just like Human Resources, virtually all facilities will need some sort of an environmental health and safety function — it might be a part-time role, full-time, outsourced, or part of line level employee responsibilities. Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) programs cover a broad range of disciplines including industrial hygiene, environmental compliance and general safety. The goal of a program is to protect the health and safety of employees, the local community and the environment from potential hazards that are presented by the operations conducted at the facility.*

*Unfortunately, despite their critical role in manufacturing, EHS programs are often managed outside a company's information technology network, making the endeavor costly, time-consuming and grossly inefficient. Our sister publication Chem.Info sat down with Bryan Connors and Bob Foster from EH&E, an environmental and engineering consulting services provider, to talk about these challenges and potential solutions.*

### **What are the biggest challenges in implementing an EHS program?**

**Bryan Connors:** One of the biggest challenges is implementing an EHS program that works effectively and efficiently *within* the organization's existing structure. Clearly knowledgeable and experienced EHS staff are needed, but they also need to have the processes and tools in place that will allow them to ensure compliance, promote a culture of safety and ensure that information is readily available.

A second challenge lies in identifying all the regulatory compliance areas that are

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Published on Food Manufacturing (<http://www.foodmanufacturing.com>)

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applicable to the organization. Numerous regulations — federal, state, and local — exist for everything from chemical waste, emissions, machine safety and chemical exposure in the workplace. The regulations change frequently and require a lot of documentation in order to prove compliance.

### **What are the benefits of automating the program?**

**Bob Foster:** One key benefit is time savings — by the program administrators as well as others tasked with performing program functions. EHS programs process a great deal of information from a variety of sources, and automating the workflows associated with this information processing will save a great deal of administrative effort. For example, the relatively simple approval process for incident reporting forms and related corrective actions can involve a surprising amount of email traffic even when everyone responds as requested. Tracing missed deadlines or missing information can add greatly to this. An automated process can result in administrative intervention only when necessary based upon pre-determined rules.

Time savings — and more information in electronic format — will mean more time and data for program analysis and improvement. For example, is there a correlation between the near miss reports at a site and the training program status? Does a shift in training program result in a reduction? This level of introspection is needed to create best-in-class EHS programs.

Another benefit is continuous compliance. Deadlines can't be inadvertently missed or ignored without notification to multiple parties. The program is not at risk of falling behind between audits, or missing key deadlines during personnel changes because key tasks can be assigned an escalation plan for email alerts to multiple personnel.

### **What factors does EH&E have to consider when recommending and implementing a program for a company?**

**Foster:** Success is directly related to taking steps to ensure a smooth, effective implementation and maximizing the benefits. We always spend time with both EHS staff and other stakeholders to understand their immediate needs and their existing internal processes prior to designing the automation applications. Every program has strengths and weaknesses, and we don't want to disrupt a successful area but rather focus first on the areas we can improve the most. We study the existing internal processes as well, not just because we may be able to improve efficiency but also because the less we change them the more successful we can be at gaining acceptance. While regulatory compliance requirements are the same, how they are achieved can vary significantly from organization to organization so a one-size-fits-all approach is not optimal and we have found it can be a barrier to success.

### **What effects do you see after implementing a system?**

**Foster:** Implementation initially involves both training and feedback, which is used to make final adjustments to the applications. A limited release is very useful in

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speeding this process.

The most immediate effect after a full implementation is a high level of program visibility. Tasks are assigned and tracked in a crisp and efficient manner, and data entry is easier and faster for all involved. Program participants as well as executives find the program and metrics much more accessible — and often more relevant. Productivity can be a hard statistic to measure in any organization, but all would agree that with the same amount of labor and effort a much more effective, compliant and visible program resulted from automation.

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*Robert Foster, MS is the Director of Products & Services, EH&E*

*EH&E's EHS Automation Consulting services to help companies and institutions achieve greater compliance, time and cost savings by automating their environmental health and safety programs with Microsoft SharePoint.*

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