

International Transportability of Safety Credentials

by

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Note: The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and may not express the official views of the Board of Certified Safety Professionals.

Introduction

More and more safety professionals work in more than one country. The number of multinational employers continues to increase. The flattening of the world through technology and education¹ is changing the way business processes work, often involving safety professionals in different countries working together on the same safety issues and projects.

Not long ago, a person holding the Certified Safety Professional (CSP) credential called to explain that his company had recently purchase two production facilities in Ireland. He wanted to find out whether his CSP certification had any value in Ireland. In particular, he wanted to extend his responsibility as the corporate safety director to those two plants. In researching Irish law, it was clear that to serve as a safety officer for a facility, one must complete a three to four day training program. The training course mainly covered knowledge he already had.

In another recent phone call, another Certified Safety Professional called to find out how her CSP might gain recognition at the headquarters of her company in London. She worked for an international utility company. Her facility was just one of several in the United States owned by the British company. The safety office in London was not familiar with the CSP. While the CSP has gained significant importance and value in the United States, it has limited value in other countries. Shortly before receiving the phone call, the Board of Certified Safety Professionals had signed a memorandum of understanding with the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) that provided a path for those holding the CSP to gain the professional status in IOSH as a “Chartered Member IOSH.” The woman then contacted IOSH and completed the requirements to become the first CSP to achieve “Chartered Member IOSH” and recognition from her corporate safety office.

Only a couple of weeks ago, a woman called me on her cell phone from Mexico. She was attending a safety meeting and was seeking answers about certification on behalf of other attendees from Central and South America.

¹ Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2005

Definitions

Within each country where certification of safety practice has been established, the certification process has helped those in practice to achieve *lateral mobility*. When there are interruptions in employment, those holding recognized certification have an advantage when competing for work or a new position. They are able to change employers without starting their careers over from the bottom and are able to qualify for a similar level of responsibility because of their certification and the employer's recognition of its value. Lateral mobility is the ability to change employment readily and certification contributes to lateral mobility.

In some countries, the employment culture involves working for one company an entire career and allowing the employer to control advancement. When an employer fails in the world economy, someone must start at the bottom of the chain of responsibility with a new employer. Without certification, the employers have no independent assessment of competency to rely on and there is little or no lateral mobility.

International transportability of credentials takes the value of a certification a step further. International transportability allows professionals who have earned a certification or met a competency standard in one country to practice in another country based on the certification or credential from the original country. International transportability of credentials is effective when a credential from one country is recognized as substantially equivalent and sufficient to qualify for practice in another country and to compete equally with someone holding a credential from the other country.

Today there is little opportunity for international transportability of credentials in the safety profession. While a limited number of safety professionals are in need of international transportability today, the shrinking world economy and the globalization of business will increase the need for international transportability of safety credentials in the future.

Focus of This Paper

The goal of this paper is to outline an approach for improving transportability of professional safety credentials across borders. The issue will not be solved quickly. It may take ten to twenty years with a constant and persistent effort. Progress will occur in small increments. It is an issue that requires broad participation and collaboration among many safety organizations. It requires leadership to ensure quality among safety credentials.

There are five main steps for achieving international transportability of safety credentials. All five steps require the international community of safety professionals and the organization that represent them to work together and solve it within the profession first. Then there must be an effort to influence those outside the profession who rely on the profession. Additional steps may emerge along the way.

The first is finding out where the safety profession is at. We need to collect and catalog information about what processes for assessing safety competency are in place, what organizations offer them, what elements are involved in the competency schemes and what laws and regulations are in place that control or rely on particular competency standards.

The second step involves developing a collaborative environment among professional organizations engaged in competency standards. It requires compiling general information about what constitutes safety practice in different countries and beginning to understand the degree to which practice is the same or different across borders.

The third step requires setting basic international standards for safety practice within the safety profession. It will involve a formal international job analysis study that establishes a clear definition of the functions and tasks of practice and the associated knowledge and skills for each task. As a minimum this study must define the common aspects of practice. Potentially, it involves delineating educational and experience qualification standards. The standards must include use of independent, third-party standards for quality in the competency assessment process.

A fourth step is determining which competency assessment processes meet these standards. Then the organizations managing the certification or competency assessment schemes that meet the standard can establish ways to recognize each other's credentials through agreements. It must also include agreeing to work together to remove barriers outside the profession and gain recognition of credentials that meet international standards.

The fifth step focuses on removing barriers created by employers and government agencies. It requires analyzing company or industry policies as well as the laws and regulations that limit competency to credentials earned within a country. It requires establishing approaches for eliminating those barriers. Undoubtedly, this step is the most difficult.

In summary, the safety profession itself must find a way to work together first. It will then be in a position to exert influence on entities outside the safety profession. Let me explore these steps in more detail.

Step1 - Compile Current Information

This step is an information gathering step that involves collecting several kinds of information.

To start with, we need to compile a list of certifications and competency standards for safety professionals around the world. There is a need for a catalog of recognized certifications and other credentials in various countries. BCSP has identified a few of these, but do not have a comprehensive list. We need to know what programs there are and the requirements for achieving and retaining them. We need to know if there are examinations and how they are operated. We need to know if any of the certifications and credentials meet any independent, third party standards. We need to know who can apply and qualify for them. In short, we need to know what organization in a country

is the “keeper of the list” of safety professionals meeting some competency standard and what it takes to be included in “the list.”

Along with the catalog of credentials is a need for identification of the organizations offering the credentials. We need to know if the organizations are operated by voluntary professional organizations, government agencies or individuals. We need to know how these organizations work.

We know that there are some differences in the content of practice across borders. Most often there are some cultural differences. Often there are differences in legal systems and business practices. It is also possible that there are differences in the core elements of practice. For example, practice in the United States involves compliance with many prescriptive standards. In some other countries, practice may derive from performance standards and risk-based strategies.

Finally, there is a need to compile information about laws and regulations in various countries that regulate or limit who can practice in certain areas of safety. If one is to work toward transportability of credentials across borders, it is essential to know if there are any official barriers preventing professionals in one country from practicing in another country or being recognized as competent.

Step 2. Establish Collaboration and Understanding

In this step, there is a need to bring safety organizations together to focus on the international transportability issue. Some of that is already underway on a limited basis. The goal is to establish commitment to improving international transportability of credentials.

One task in this step is getting organized so that organizations representing safety professional credentialing programs join together and work collectively on shared competency matters. Depending on how responsibility for assessing competency is handled, the organizations may be strictly credentialing organizations or may be membership organizations that assess competency as part of their membership scheme.

One goal in getting organized is to use an existing international body, if possible. Recently, safety organizations from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and other countries formed a new international organization intended to address issues important in safety practice. The organization is called the International Network of Safety and Health Practitioner Organizations (INSHPO²). A similar organization formed among European safety organizations is called the European Network of Safety and Health Practitioner Organizations (ENSHPO³). In the industrial

² The INSHPO web site is: www.inshpo.org.

³ The ENSHPO web site is: www.enshpo.org.

hygiene community, an organization formed in the 1990's is the International Occupational Hygiene Association (IOHA⁴). All of these organizations have similar aims.

Another task in this step is working together to begin understanding what safety professionals do. That involves additional information gathering, an extension from Step 1.

For a certification program to be able to defend its examination, it is essential to ensure content validity. A certification examination must cover knowledge that is relevant to practice. That begins with studies of what safety professionals do and defines the knowledge and skill to be able to perform the functions and tasks. The Board of Canadian Registered Safety Professionals and the Board of Certified Safety Professionals both spend considerable resources to conduct such job analyses periodically with a level of detail that meets accreditation standards for certifications.

A study of practice needs to extend across many countries to establish what is similar or different in practice in different countries. That information provides the foundation for beginning to define whether credentials can be transported across borders and whether there is a potential for mutual recognition. Beside the content of practice, other factors are also a part of international transportability and addressed in the next step.

I recently learned of an international survey⁵ intended to identify the roles and tasks of safety professionals. To date the participating countries have included: Netherlands, Norway, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Finland, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Cyprus, Australia and Singapore. While the survey is not as rigorous in its approach to defining practice as that required in job analysis studies for certification examinations, this survey is a major step forward in defining what safety professionals do in practice in different countries. The results help to define what is similar and different among groups of safety professionals. To date there has been no participation from countries in the Western Hemisphere and limited participation from countries in Asia. I would encourage BCSP and BCRSP to take the lead in establishing participation from North America. It can be accomplished fairly quickly with limited expense. The results will be valuable.

⁴ The IOHA web site is: www.ioha.net.

⁵ Two papers reporting on this survey include the following:

A. R. Hale and F. G. Guldenmund (Safety Science Group, Delft University of Technology, Netherlands), "Role and tasks of safety professionals: some results from an international survey." (Available on the ENSHPO web site.)

D. Borys, D. Else, P. Pryor and N. Sawyer, "Profile of an OHS professional in Australia in 2005," *Journal of Occupational Health and Safety Australia/New Zealand*, 22(2), 175-192, 2006.

Step 3. Define International Standards for Safety Practice

Another important step toward international transportability of credentials is setting standards for safety practice. This can occur at the professional level or at other levels of practice, since people continue to enter safety practice from a lot of different backgrounds. The goal is to craft general guidelines and standards that are universally acceptable in any country.

Based on the current certifications and competency standards and working from the data that defines practice around the world, an important task is to develop general standards and guidelines for key levels of practice that are applicable anywhere. Most standards for practice involve four elements. Individuals must meet basic educational requirements, have an applicable period of experience, demonstrate knowledge by examination and remain current through continuing professional development. The goal in this activity is to craft general guidelines and standards that are universally acceptable in any country. A particular certification or competency program must meet the standards and have the option of exceeding the minimum standards or offering variations from the standards to cover those elements of practice that are unique in a country.

The most important standard is that associated with the content of practice. While the survey approach is valuable in helping to define what safety professionals do, it is not a sufficient job analysis method to meet compliance with international accreditation standards for certifications. As a result, there is a need for a collaborative approach to an international job analysis study that will meet the accreditation standards. No one certification body can afford to conduct such a study on its own. The study must account for those elements of practice that are universal and those that are specific within a country. In order to do such a study effectively, there must be participation by safety professionals in many countries.

Another important standard relates to education. BCSP has applied an educational standard for many years to qualify candidates for the Certified Safety Professional. The BCSP standard is based on the higher educational system for the United States. For Canada and other Commonwealth countries, the educational system works somewhat differently and such differences need to be incorporated into any international educational standards. In addition, the educational standards must guard against claimed education from diploma mills. In some countries, competency standards must comply with government standards or guidelines. These requirements must be factored into an acceptable standard on safety education. In addition, there must be a way to deal with those people who receive education in some other field and later become responsible for safety for their employer and become part of the safety profession through other than degrees in safety.

Another aspect of educational standards involves assessing whether an academic program effectively prepares people for entry into or advancement in professional safety practice. In the United States, there is a voluntary system for *program accreditation* that is separate from accreditation of an educational institution in general. Both forms of accreditation provide an orderly process for assessing quality related to preparation for safety practice. The American Society of Safety Engineers

represents the safety profession in the program accreditation process in the U.S. BCSP writes policy around both institutional and program accreditation standards that it can rely on.

Through a similar process in the United Kingdom and Australia, the professional membership bodies, IOSH and the Safety Institute of Australia (SIA), respectively, define academic guidelines for safety degree programs, evaluate programs against the standards and award recognition to those that meet the standards.

In Step 3, there is a need to establish standards for qualifying safety experience at a professional level. For many years, BCSP has used several criteria to differentiate professional safety practice from para-professional practice and from other domains, such as public safety. There needs to be agreement on the assessment of professional safety experience. There should be some agreement on the amount and level of experience required for credentials to be transportable across borders.

Because many people participate in achieving safety at work, home, play and in travel, and because certification schemes are not limited to professional practice, there may be a need to define different levels of safety practice.

It is one thing to find general agreement within the profession on the elements of practice, education and experience. Ensuring that the processes for assessing and managing competency are of high quality is another. With the emergence of ISO/IEC 17024 on certification of persons, there is now an internationally accepted standard for ensuring the quality of any credentialing scheme. Incorporating such a standard within this step is critical to potentially gaining acceptance for a credential outside of the safety profession.

When IOHA began approaching some of the issues on international practice, it developed standards for recognition of industrial or occupational hygiene credentials⁶. The standards and their implementation provide one example for dealing with standardization of a profession. However, for recognition to extend beyond the industrial hygiene profession to achieve acceptance by employers and governments as users of industrial hygiene professionals, especially those from outside their country, reliance also on ISO/IEC 17024 becomes essential for credibility that IOHA must consider.

Obviously, one of the more difficult elements in Step three is gaining consensus. There will be differing opinions about what is included in standards and how they are written. Working from data gathered in Steps 1 and 2 will help provide justification and direction to the standard setting process. Staying fixed on the goal of gaining outside recognition that extends across borders will also help in reaching consensus. Providing some flexibility in the standards is essential to reach agreement among participants.

⁶ “Recognition of National Occupational Hygiene Accreditation Schemes - Guidelines to Applicants,” IOHA, Amended May 22, 2005. (Available on the IOHA web site.)

Step 4. Establish Recognition Within the Profession

The intent of this step is to find appropriate means for the profession itself to recognize which certification schemes or schemes for assessing competency meet the standards established by the profession and to publish those results for anyone to see.

There are at least two possible approaches. One approach is to establish agreements among certification bodies to recognize each other's credentials. The Canadian Board of Registered Safety Professionals and the Board of Certified Safety Professionals have had such an agreement in place for 14 years, since 1992.

BCSP has used that agreement as a model in establishing an agreement with IOSH in 2005 that recognizes its new "Chartered Member" status. BCSP has used those two agreements as models for drafting a new agreement with the Safety Institute of Australia and its "Professional Member" status. BCSP is trying to apply the same agreement model to update recognition established about a decade ago with the Singapore Institute of Safety Officers (SISO) "Member" status when combined with the government issued Singapore Safety Officer qualification that is based on passing a safety practices examination. BCRSP may be interested in establishing similar agreements with IOSH, SIA and potentially SISO.

A second approach to recognition is establishing procedures by which a certification or competency assessment scheme can apply for recognition and creating a panel who's members rule on applications and manage compliance with the established standards. The process may include periodic renewal procedures and regular reporting on changes in credentialing schemes. In the long term, this may be the better approach. In the short term, the agreements among specific credentialing organizations appears to be the way to begin achieving recognition among specific quality credentials.

Step 5. Achieve External Recognition

The final step in the process is moving recognition from inside the profession to outside the profession. The overall goal for the entire effort is getting employers and government organizations to recognize the credentials that achieve the standards of the profession and independent international accreditation, even if a credential was issued in some other country. The goal is to have employers and government agencies recognize them as *substantially equivalent*. Substantially equivalent means that while there may be some differences in how competency and certification schemes work, they meet standards for professional safety practice and hold accreditation against international standards for certification of persons.

Relying on the compilation of laws and regulations governing practice from Step 1, Step 5 can then establish strategies for removing barriers that limit international transportability of professional safety credentials. One can identify precisely which policy, regulation or law creates a barrier and establish create ideas for potentially removing each barrier. The specific actions needed can be defined along with funds and personnel to execute the projected actions.

A part of this step is gaining support for implementing the actions and achieving the changes that remove the barrier. A part of this step is tracking success or the lack of success in order to know if the overall effort is actually improving international transportability of safety credentials across borders.

Getting Started - Establish the Network

A key question is how best to get this process started. A difficulty in moving forward is finding an organizational structure that will foster and support the activities needed to improve international transportability of safety credentials. One possibility is using the new INSHPO organization. It will require that INSHPO establish a means for credentialing organizations to participate with membership organizations and to establish a committee focused on international transportability of credentials.

At its first formal meeting in 2005, BCSP addressed the founding group and asked the organization to find a way for those organizations which set and implement competency standards to work together through INSHPO on the transportability issue. BCSP is awaiting a response on whether INSHPO will be able to take on this challenge with credentialing organization participation.

Should that approach fail or be delayed, it may be possible for credentialing organizations to form their own committee or organization and get the process started.

An additional organization that can play an important role is ENSHPO because of the work it has already started on understanding the similarities and differences in professional safety practice across borders.

Other Actions Needed

Beside those steps outline above, a number of other actions need to be considered. For example, there needs to be a repository of information, such as that collected in Steps 1 and 2. Information about practice, what organizations operate schemes for assessing competency, and details about the competency assessment schemes need to be shared. Information about policies, laws and regulations that limit who can practice in a country need to be available. There is a need to regularly update this information and maintain public access to it. There is a need to share information about education programs and standards. People need access to lists of individuals holding certification or designations that denote having achieved competency standards and where to locate the lists.

Once the profession establishes guidelines and standards, it is necessary to publish them and make them accessible. There needs to be information about processes for applying for recognition of certifications and credentials in the safety profession.

There needs to be strategies and initiatives for removing barriers limiting practice across borders. There needs to be tabulations of successes in removing those barriers. There needs to be funds to support the international transportability effort.

There needs to be governance procedures for those organizations and individuals participating in the overall process for improving international transportability of safety credentials. There needs to be promotion of the overall activity.

Summary

International transportability of credentials is a growing issue. When organizations like BCRSP and BCSP started, they devoted energy toward making their certification processes work for safety professionals. Slowly, energy expanded to promotion, adding value, assessing performance of the certification scheme and achieving accreditation from independent organizations. As they mature, certification programs face new challenges.

With the global economy and flattening of the world in which we work, an emerging issue is international transportability of credentials. The issue is not unique to the safety profession. The issue is not limited to our two organizations. It requires being aware of what is going on elsewhere in the world in the safety profession. As the author of *The World is Flat* points out, a key to future success in many enterprises is collaboration. Removing barriers to professional safety practice across borders will require a great deal of collaboration.

As early as 1983, BCRSP and BCSP began discussions about recognition for each organization's certification. When BCRSP and BCSP establish the first agreement in 1992 between credentialing bodies in the safety profession, little did anyone realize the impact that such collaboration would have in the future of the safety profession. Now, we not only must deal with the global economy, but the flattening of the world that affects how business processes, including safety practices, are handled. In the interim, barriers for acceptance of credentials earned in one country are present in other countries. To serve their employers effectively in the future, safety professionals must work toward removing these barriers and preventing others from emerging.

Ensuring quality in credentialing is essential. Our two organizations lead the rest of the world in demonstrating credentialing quality through independent, third party accreditation under international standards. We must help the safety profession in other countries meet similar standards. International transportability of credentials across borders provides the justification to lead the profession while meeting the growing needs of those in safety practice.