

► DIRECT FROM AAS



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Strategic Professional Development



Editor’s Note: In an effort to provide environmental health professionals with relevant information and tools to further the profession, their careers, and themselves, the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) has teamed up with the American Academy of Sanitarians (AAS) to publish two columns a year in the *Journal*. AAS is an organization that “elevates the standards, improves the practice, advances the professional proficiency, and promotes the highest levels of ethical conduct among professional sanitarians in every field of environmental health.” Membership with AAS is based on meeting certain high standards and criteria, and AAS members represent a prestigious list of environmental health professionals from across the country.

Through the column, information from different AAS members who are subject-matter experts with knowledge and experience in a multitude of environmental health topics will be presented to the *Journal’s* readership. The conclusions and opinions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NEHA.

Vince Radke is chair of AAS and has been a diplomate since 2007.

Environmental health is a compelling career field. Environmental health practitioners are scientists who protect our communities through the practice of identifying and evaluating possible environmental dangers and hazardous agents, and limiting exposures to hazardous physical, chemical, and biological agents in air, water, soil, and food to reduce or eliminate risk (National Environmental Health Association [NEHA], 2023a). We are valuable assets to keeping communities safe and healthy. We also see and find fulfillment in meeting the depth and breadth of the chal-

lenges in front of us. Sometimes, however, the job and life provide circumstances that cause a professional to pause and wonder about the place they are in their career, the direction they have come from, and where they are heading.

New and evolving situations are challenging environmental health professionals as they work to address routine and emergent community needs. The role of those professionals working in environmental health is continually reemphasized by emergencies requiring rapid and effective responses to address environmental issues and ensure

protection of the public’s health (Gerding et al., 2019). Adaptability is often key to surviving emergencies and workplace challenges, and to finding fulfillment in environmental health endeavors.

To be motivated, satisfied, and successful in your career, it is crucial to chart a course based on your desired workforce goals. To assure adequate competencies for job effectiveness and for current and future leadership roles, environmental health professionals can benefit from developing a personal career plan, also known as career pathing. Career pathing is a process used to chart where you are in your work life, where you want to be, and steps to take to get there. It is a type of SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis that helps one identify areas for personal professional improvement.

In this column we share some strategies an environmental health professional can take to develop their environmental health career goals, skills, needed knowledge, and experience. Thoughtfully considering a series of questions—and laying out an action plan based on them—can help lay a foundation for you to better progress through your career laterally or vertically through promotions and career benchmarks.

This series of questions include:

1. Self-evaluation: Who am I?

- Identify what you like and do not like about working in environmental health.
- What are your priorities?
- Name five things you want in a job.

2. Skills analysis: Where am I going?

- Evaluate your KSAs (knowledge, skills, and abilities).

- What are your qualifications and experience?
 - What are your key strengths and skills?
 - What are your biggest accomplishments to date?
 - What are your areas for development?
3. **Set your direction: How am I going to get there?**
- Think about what industries or roles you belong in.
 - » The broad industries that really appeal to you.
 - » The types of roles that suit you best.
 - » The skills you need to develop.
 - Assess impediments and potential remedies.
 - Stay current with technology.
 - Update your résumé.
4. **Achievement: How will I define success?**
- Prioritize what you want to accomplish.
 - Set goals.
 - Get a mentor.
 - Make milestones for the next 6, 12, and 60 months.
 - Identify how to achieve your training and education plan.
 - Identify how to expand your network.
 - Celebrate successes.
5. **Keep learning and exploring: How can I stay curious?**
- Leverage internet platforms.
 - Find and access resources.
 - Identify productivity tools.
 - Explore communication methods (e.g., abstracts and articles, report writing, public speaking).

Once you have a few years of experience in the field, acquire a credential. A credential shows that you are a subject matter expert and have acquired the knowledge and experience to perform your work (NEHA, 2023b). The Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian (REHS/RS) credential is the standard in environmental health (NEHA, 2023c), but there are other credentials that you can obtain. NEHA has several credentials related to food safety but there are many other credentials available from different organizations.

Volunteer your time with NEHA and/or your state affiliate. This endeavor will help you network with new and seasoned environmental health professionals. Attend conferences to learn from others. Take it a step further and present at conferences to share your knowledge and experience. Learning new skills, such as grant writing, new technology, and computer systems, can increase your value to employers. Expand your network beyond environmental health to include related fields (e.g., epidemiology, laboratory science, medicine, etc.). Understand the legal constructs at the federal, state, and local levels that you work under. Work with leaders in your community to understand its culture.

Know that NEHA—in its mission to build, sustain, and empower an effective environmental health workforce—and the American Academy of Sanitarians—in its complementary focus of improving the practice and advancing the professional proficiency of

environmental health professionals—work to provide thought leadership and opportunities to forward your career. Together, we provide opportunities for strategic professional development; networking with peers, mentors, and leaders; and sharing ideas and experiences to further environmental health and you. 🌸

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