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Cross-Training: It's Not Just for Athletes!



Editor's Note: In an effort to provide environmental health professionals with relevant information and tools to further the profession, their careers, and themselves, 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 upon meeting certain high standards and criteria, and AAS members represent a prestigious list of environmental health professionals from across the country.

Through this 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. This column strengthens the ties between both associations in the shared purposes of furthering and enhancing the environmental health profession.

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Athletes do it! Fitness trainers push it! It's cross-training! Just as athletes are encouraged to pursue cross-training in more than one sport to improve fitness and performance in their main sport, environmental health professionals should be encouraged to cross-train in more than one aspect of our discipline to improve overall competency and performance in environmental health. By the very nature of being the only toxicologist in a health de-

partment, an environmental quality department, a consulting firm, and a corporation, cross-training in the various disciplines of environmental health has been mandatory for me to be effective in my position as a toxicologist. Forty years of professional practice have made me realize how important it is for an environmental health professional to understand all the program areas that intersect within environmental health groups or departments.

Cross-training can be a powerful tool for both the organization and the environmental health professional. Just as the team and athlete benefit from cross-training by having better team members, environmental health organizations are stronger and more effective when their environmental health professionals have more overall knowledge about environmental health and safety program areas. A broader understanding of the programmatic areas encourages employees to use a more holistic approach when implementing new projects, developing new regulatory programs, etc. It builds better teamwork within and among program areas as they begin to understand why each is important to the overall mission of the organization. It also makes an organization less vulnerable to disruptions due to employee departures, emergencies, illnesses, or unexpected workloads.

For organizations that have compliance requirements, cross-training yields professionals that can identify issues beyond their individual subject. For example, the food service inspector can recognize that an emergency generator installation at the food processing facility needs an air permit and may also need a spill prevention control and countermeasures plan, a lead-acid battery management plan, an evaluation of potential employee exposure to the combustion exhausts, and a hazardous waste management plan. This comprehensive view can result in better overall environmental health compliance.

Considering the recent trend of manager placement over areas in which they have little or no competency, cross-training helps to build better managers. One of my sons

worked for 20 years for a company that was divided into three major program areas. An entry-level employee worked a minimum of 9–12 months in each of the program areas. Only then was an employee eligible to be promoted to a management level. Each program area was managed for a year to gain experience managing each of the areas before becoming eligible for promotion to the next management level. By the time someone reached the upper levels of management, they knew how to do every job in the company. Cross-training makes for better managers and better decision making by those managers. The major barrier to this rotational approach is the highly specialized and complex nature of environmental health tasks. It often takes a year or more to bring a new professional up to a minimum level of competency. In these instances, cross-training could be accomplished by job sharing between employees on a temporary basis (e.g., a couple of hours per week), short duration assignments of two to four weeks, or a voluntary two-year rotation plan. For highly specialized positions, cross-training may only cover a portion of the job that can be reasonably shared.

Cross-training can also be helpful between field environmental health professionals and those located in the central agency or corporate office. By nature of the job, field environmental health professionals have more opportunity for on-the-job cross-training because of the diverse programmatic responsibilities of their job. For employees in the central agency or corporate office, field and multiple discipline cross-training helps them understand the time requirements for accomplishing field activities. These cross-training

opportunities lead to better design and implementation of new programs at the field level.

For the individual employee, cross-training makes them a more valuable asset to their organization and adds variety to their work, which typically results in happier and more productive employees. Cross-training gives the employee an opportunity to build new relationships with other environmental health professionals in their organization, which enhances the team concept for the entire organization. Cross-training does have to be implemented carefully to avoid employee concerns about being replaced or their work not being satisfactory.

Cross-training requires careful planning, upper management support, and engaged employees. The concepts of cross-training should be built into an environmental health organization's overall training plan with clear expectations and goals. To start, a series of "awareness" type training opportunities covering all program areas in the environmental health organization could be developed and offered to employees.

This training could be augmented with Internet-based training opportunities that are often free and available for a wide variety of environmental health subject areas. Group participation in a webinar followed by a 30-minute facilitated discussion regarding how the topic impacts or is handled by the organization could enhance the value of the training. The use of problem-solving oriented, multidisciplinary training activities, such as tabletop exercises, can also be useful in cross-training. Most sanitarian and environmental health specialist registration programs require continuing education in

any of the duties or tasks associated with an environmental health professional, including general environmental health, food, water, wastewater, waste management, hazardous materials, air quality, housing, and occupational safety and health. With this diversity of duties and tasks in mind, continuing education can offer great opportunities to incorporate cross-training.

One major challenge to cross-training is the organizational structure of most environmental health organizations, i.e., organizations that are divided by environmental media or major regulatory areas. Personnel and human relations systems are often not well suited to promote cross-training. Therefore, it requires managers to creatively address ways to allow their environmental health professionals to develop expertise in more than one subject area, such as the use of interdisciplinary workgroups for large projects or regulatory program development or the use of formalized mentoring arrangements among program areas.

When planning your next year's training calendar or identifying the continuing education to take in the coming year, consider cross-training. It helps increase the overall sustainability and flexibility of environmental health programs and departments. Although it requires consideration, planning, and effort on the part of environmental health organizations and professionals, it is well worth the effort. 🇺🇸

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