

New to the IH Profession? Consider These Words of Encouragement

By Kara Williams

I remember entering the IH World like it was yesterday.

About two thousand students sat in neat rows eagerly awaiting our two-second moment of fame when we walked across the stage to accept our mock diplomas and begin another chapter of our lives. It was Friday, August 13, 1999, and in three days I would be an industrial hygienist for the State of Tennessee.

As I settled into my training position, I eagerly joined our local AIHA section where I would meet many individuals with various professional experiences and work environments. Although they came from academia, government, and private industry, I felt like a bird who had finally found its nest among those who found toxicology and control banding *interesting*. Finally, people who understood this profession to be applied science and not an industrial cleaning service!

Looking back, I was the baby of the group (it still warms my heart, although I am no longer the youngest). I had years of learning, education, and experience ahead of me. Little did I know what it would take to become a “Credible and Competent” industrial hygienist. So it is with great pleasure that I share with you my “growing pains” of becoming a member of the profession.

1. Always be Willing to Learn

As I began my career with the State, I was somewhat clueless about industrial hygiene. For the first year I attended several compliance-oriented courses out of state, (at the OSHA Training Institute) and accompanied senior industrial hygienists on inspections. I also attended formal industrial hygiene courses and later graduate-level courses just to expand my knowledge base. In fact, learning is so important, the American Board of Industrial Hygiene (ABIH) requires one to continuously collect “Certification Maintenance” or CM points just to keep the Certified Industrial Hygienist designation. Granted, points may be earned by giving presentations and the like, but the goal is to encourage practitioners to stay abreast of current issues, and, alas, to relearn what is so easily forgotten.

2. Jack of All Trades, Master of None

I remember at the tender age of twelve my piano teacher asking me, “Do you want to be great at one thing, or good at a lot of things? I struggled with that question for years while participating in everything from the Science Bowl to Drama. The answer was right under my nose! I was a *Jackie of all Trades*. I was about diversity. The one commonality among industrial hygienists is our ability to take a little information from as many sources as needed (chemistry, psychology, industrial sciences, etc.) and apply it when needed. Understanding that industrial hygiene is a multi-science discipline is key. Likewise, hygienists vary by their strengths. Some studied chemistry in college, while

others may have an industrial hygiene degree. Either way, develop a “weave” of colleagues with varying strengths and learn from one another.

3. Learn to say “I Don’t Know”

Did you know there are people out there who will purposely ask you things to test your knowledge? Yes, I know, it is hard to believe. In fact, I can say that I have employees who know as much or more about Class I asbestos containment than I do. However, it is OK to say “I don’t know.” Admitting to uncertainties accomplishes several things. It says, “I’m only human”; “No, I don’t think I’m better than you”; and “My intent is to tell you the truth”. Truth...let’s talk about that...

4. Credibility

I have matured a great deal since I began working for Alcoa. In fact, I think it’s safe to say that I have crossed the boundary of “IH Program Ownership”. It’s like not only getting your license to drive, but buying the car and heading cross-country in a blizzard! I knew my first and foremost goal at Alcoa would be to establish credibility. From the first day I worked on this in a variety of ways: confidence, floor presence, friendliness, humility, and addressing employees’ concerns. Yes, those behaviors and actions take a lot of time, but it is time well spent. Not only does building credibility make the company stronger, it also establishes who you are as an industrial hygienist whose goal should be to protect the health of the worker regardless of where you work or who you represent.

5. Improvement Takes Time

I have always considered industrial hygiene an “apprenticeship” career. Course work introduces one to instrumentation, sampling methodology, etc., but who teaches an upcoming industrial hygienist how to address departmental health issues without causing mass hysteria? Or judgment between screening versus sampling? This knowledge can only be learned from a “seasoned” industrial hygienist who is willing to take the time to show fresh hygienists the “tricks of the trade”. As one encounters hygiene dilemmas in his or her career, a personal “database” of knowledge will build. Keep in mind that even the ABIH requires one to practice industrial hygiene a minimum of five years before sitting for the CIH exam. Why? Experience builds knowledge.

So the next time you encounter a huge industrial hygiene dilemma, consider it a wonderful learning opportunity!