

NEXT GENERATION RISK LEADERS

As the role of the risk professional broadens, Fiona Ramsay explores how the profession can bridge education, recruitment and retention to develop its future leaders



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The question of where the next generation of risk leaders will come from has become increasingly pressing. Skills shortages are widely discussed, while technology, changing workforce expectations and economic uncertainty are reshaping the environments in which organisations operate.

For the risk and safety profession, the pipeline begins with awareness and education, continues through recruitment and early-career experience and ultimately depends on whether people are given sufficient opportunity and encouragement to build a career and remain within it.

These issues were explored in depth during IIRSM's Presidents' Reception in September, which brought together various perspectives. The discussion, however, reflects a much wider conversation about what the risk professional of the future will look like and how organisations can develop the people they will need.

John Pares, IIRSM Co-President, has seen considerable change in the role over the course of his career. "My experience of traditional safety professionals at the start of my career was of 'technical introverts'," he says.

Many, he recalls, came from engineering degrees or factory operations backgrounds, and the role was largely concerned with fixing problems. Inspections, form-filling, corrective actions, training and compliance checklists occupied much of the professional agenda and John believes that the work could sometimes become so focused on systems and processes that "people were treated as things".

As the remit expanded, so too did the perspective required of the people working within it. Environmental responsibilities have widened from pollution control into sustainability, while occupational health has become more holistic.

One experience in particular helped shape John's thinking about the distinction between health and safety and wider organisational risk. A chief financial officer told him that his role was to manage the risks of the business to people and the environment, while the CFO's was to manage the risks to the business. In the organisation's enterprise risk management discussions, only two health and safety issues appeared among the major business risks: a significant pollution incident, because of the potential consequences for factory operations and reputation, and a major fire, because of the potential loss of production capacity.

John came to see the division as increasingly unhelpful. A serious incident can affect people, operations, reputation and finances simultaneously, while decisions about technology, supply chains, workforce strategy or sustainability can have consequences across several different areas of the business. His experience of leading a major greenfield project reinforced the point. The project

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EMELIA NTIAMOAH



risk assessment covered more than 200 risks, ranging across people, operations, infrastructure and the external environment.

"The new risk leaders are not limited by this approach," John says. "They consider risks of and to the business across a broad range of categories – many outside of our traditional remit. Importantly, they need to see the connections between the risks."

Paul Mansfield, Head of Strategic Operational Risk Consulting Growth UK at Marsh, sees a similar shift in the expectations employers now have of risk professionals. The role, he says, is becoming "much broader and more strategic", although this does not mean specialisation has lost its value. Strong technical knowledge remains important, particularly in regulated or specialist areas, but technical capability is now only one part of what employers are looking for.

"It's no longer about just identifying hazards or ticking the compliance box," Paul says. "It's about helping organisations build resilience, make better decisions, stay ahead of disruption, manage volatility and protect their reputation and balance sheet."

That broader responsibility requires risk professionals to understand the environment in which their organisations operate and to connect risk with business performance. They need to be able to explain why an issue matters to people whose primary concerns may be operational, financial or strategic rather than technical. Paul believes that the professionals who have the greatest influence with senior leaders are those who understand the detail but can translate it into advice that is clear and commercially relevant.



IIRSM'S MENTORING SCHEME

IIRSM's mentoring scheme helps you become a mentor or mentee to develop your skills, grow your network and receive one-to-one support from a dedicated professional to enhance your career progression.

Whether you're meeting face-to-face or online, our scheme has been developed to align with the IIRSM Risk Management and Leadership Competency Framework. The framework helps you identify any knowledge or skills gaps that the mentoring relationship can help you develop and enhance.

www.iirsm.org/learn-and-develop/mentoring-scheme



6 ESSENTIAL EMPLOYMENT SKILLS FOR THE WORKFORCE OF 2035



COMMUNICATION



COLLABORATION



CREATIVE THINKING



INFORMATION LITERACY



PLANNING AND PRIORITISING



PROBLEM SOLVING AND DECISION MAKING

Source: National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)

“They understand the detail but know how to translate it into clear, commercially relevant advice,” he says. “They’re strong communicators. They can challenge constructively, build trust and present risk in a way that helps senior leaders act with confidence.”

Curiosity is another important quality. The future risk professional will not be able to rely on existing knowledge alone, particularly when the environment in which organisations operate is changing so quickly. Paul points to the need to ask the right questions, look beyond the obvious and remain close to what is changing both within the organisation and in the wider world.

GROWING EXPECTATIONS

The growing range of expectations presents an obvious challenge for those thinking about the profession’s future talent pipeline. If tomorrow’s risk leaders need technical expertise, commercial understanding, communication skills, digital awareness, leadership capability and the ability to operate across different disciplines, how should the profession identify and develop them?

John’s own career illustrates the value of experience gained outside a traditional safety progression. He began in engineering, before moving through graduate recruitment, mainstream HR, operations and international supply chain projects. He led a major greenfield project in Hungary before moving into an EHS role based in Switzerland, and took on additional responsibilities in communications, sustainability and IT. By the time he entered health and safety as a full-time profession, he had already encountered environmental,

Liliana Drew/Pexels



financial, geopolitical and infrastructure risks, alongside those associated with HR, operations and supply chains.

That also gave him experience of leadership, coaching, flexibility, intercultural management, influencing and financial management, as well as an understanding of how different parts of an organisation worked.

His advice to people in the first years of their careers is not to become too attached to a carefully mapped-out route. “Have an open mind to learning opportunities that come from left-field and take them.”

A sideways move may not always look like the obvious next step on a conventional career ladder, but experience gained in another function can later prove highly valuable. Someone who has worked in operations may understand the practical pressures behind a decision in a way that is difficult to acquire from outside the function. Experience in HR may provide a deeper understanding of culture and people, while time spent in technology, sustainability or supply chain management can broaden the way an individual thinks about risk.

Paul also believes organisations need to think carefully about the qualities they are looking for when recruiting and developing people. Qualifications matter, particularly where technical competence is essential, but he questions whether the greater challenge is always finding people with the right certificates or finding those with the mindset and adaptability to grow as the role itself changes.

“I was asked about flexibility and adaptability at a health and safety manager interview nearly 30 years ago,” he says, “and those core attributes are now more important than ever.”

Paul points to the adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) as one example of the different





LIFELONG LEARNING

The question of how the next generation develops does not end when someone leaves university or secures their first role. The International Labour Organization's report, *Lifelong Learning and Skills for the Future*, argues for a more continuous approach to learning throughout working life, an issue with clear relevance for risk and safety professionals whose responsibilities are expanding alongside changes in technology, work and society.

Read the report at bit.ly/sentinel-lifelonglearning



attitudes people can bring to technological change. In many cases, he believes, mindset, adaptability and interpersonal skills may be a stronger predictor of long-term success than a narrow set of qualifications.

If employers look only for people whose experience closely resembles that of the person who previously held a role, they may overlook potential in people who have developed relevant skills elsewhere. Risk leadership increasingly draws on a broad range of capabilities, and some of those capabilities can be developed in places that do not have the word “risk” or “safety” in the job title.

John believes the profession has work to do in making itself visible. “Before we can make it attractive, we have to raise awareness,” he says. “I think many young people don’t even know the profession exists.”

Dr Mabel Nnadi, Deputy Programme Lead for the IIRSM-approved MSc Occupational Safety, Health and Environment at Manchester Metropolitan University, sees that lack of awareness at the education end of the pipeline. “I have seen numerous prospective students walk into our campus on open days who know nothing about the role nor career opportunities,” she says.

Universities are an important part, she explains, but awareness cannot be left to education providers alone. She believes stronger collaboration between universities and industry is needed to raise the profile of the profession and make young people aware of the opportunities it can offer.

There are individuals within the profession who regularly share their work and ideas on social media platforms, but John questions how effectively that activity reaches people outside the existing professional community. The difficulty is with communicating the value and variety of the

work in a way that engages someone who has not already chosen the profession.

For people outside the profession, health and safety may suggest a narrow role focused on rules, inspections and compliance. Yet the future described by John and Paul is concerned with organisational resilience, technology, sustainability, culture, reputation and strategic decision-making.

LinkedIn provides a useful window into some of the frustrations experienced by people trying to enter the workforce – a place where jobseekers share increasingly familiar experiences of long and sometimes impersonal recruitment processes: repeated application forms, automated screening systems, personality assessments, multiple interview stages and, in some cases, requests for candidates to complete substantial pieces of work before receiving little feedback or an automated rejection.

From the perspective of an applicant, the process can feel increasingly demanding and disconnected from the people behind the organisation. There is also a more fundamental difficulty for people attempting to enter health, safety and risk. Job advertisements frequently ask for previous experience, even at relatively junior levels, creating the familiar problem of needing experience to secure a job but needing a job to gain experience.

John believes employers can do more to break that cycle through internships, placements and structured training opportunities. These routes are not simply a way of creating more vacancies. They give people an opportunity to understand what the profession involves and to begin developing the practical judgement that cannot be gained solely through formal education.

The relationship between education and employment is therefore an important part of the discussion. Universities can help students understand the range of careers available to them and develop relevant knowledge and skills they will need, but employers also have a role in providing opportunities to put that learning into practice.



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SHARE WITH YOUR NETWORK



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JOHN PARES



THE CHANGING WORLD OF WORK

The *Skills England Annual Skills Report 2026* is not a report specifically about health and safety or risk management, but its wider findings on the changing nature of work are relevant to a profession facing increasing complexity.

Read the report at bit.ly/sentinel-skillsengland



7m

workers could have deficiencies in the essential employment skills by 2035

1-3m

fewer jobs in occupations at high risk of decline if recent labour-market trends continue

53%

of workers think automation or AI is likely to affect their job within the next ten years

45%

of UK adults said they currently feel supported by their employer to develop new skills

For Mabel, connecting academic learning with the realities of professional life is central to preparing the next generation of risk professionals. “It also entails bridging the gap between theory and practice for future risk professionals to possess practical competencies in managing risk,” she says.

John sees a particular opportunity for IIRSM to contribute through its mentoring scheme, which enables members to connect with mentors and mentees through a dedicated digital platform. The scheme is aligned with the IIRSM Risk Management and Leadership Competency Framework, providing a way for members to identify areas of development and seek support from other professionals.

Mentoring is often discussed in the context of early-career development, but John believes its value is much broader. Someone may benefit from a mentor when moving into a new role, sector or area of expertise, or when working in an unfamiliar country or organisational environment.

John’s own career has been shaped by the people who supported and encouraged him. “Make connections with anyone and everyone, listen, learn and ask questions,” he says. Some of the most useful relationships, he suggests, may come from unexpected places.

No individual can know everything, and future risk leaders will have to become increasingly comfortable with that fact. Instead, John believes, professionals need strong networks so they know where to find the expertise they do not have themselves.

There is also scope for greater engagement with higher education. John believes the schools market may be too large for a relatively small professional body to influence directly, but universities could provide an important opportunity to raise awareness of the profession. IIRSM has a substantial body of experienced members and Fellows whose knowledge could potentially be used more systematically to engage with students and contribute to relevant courses.

RETAINING THE RIGHT PEOPLE

The connection between recruitment and retention becomes increasingly important once people have entered the

“IT ALSO ENTAILS BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE FOR FUTURE RISK PROFESSIONALS TO POSSESS PRACTICAL COMPETENCIES IN MANAGING RISK”



DR MABEL NNADI

profession. Attracting someone is one thing; providing sufficient opportunity for them to build a meaningful career is another.

Paul believes retention is strongest when people can see a “meaningful future within an organisation”. That means making career pathways clearer, while also recognising that there may be several different destinations. Some people may wish to become deeper technical specialists, while others may move into operational leadership or broader enterprise risk roles.

Paul points to mentoring, rotational opportunities, exposure to senior stakeholders and a clear connection between day-to-day work and long-term progression. “When people feel they’re growing, recognised and trusted, they stay.”

For younger professionals, the decision to stay may also depend on factors beyond salary and job title. Paul says new entrants to the workforce, particularly members of Generation Z, are likely to place importance on ethics, diversity, work-life balance and social impact alongside financial security.

John argues that genuine growth requires people to be stretched. “To grow, you need to be stretched, which means taking some risk,” he says. The difficulty is that younger professionals cannot be expected to develop if every mistake carries the potential to damage their career permanently. “The risks cannot be career-threatening to a young person.”

Organisations want future leaders who can exercise judgement, make decisions, challenge assumptions and deal with uncertainty, yet those qualities are difficult to develop if people are never given responsibility. A professional who is protected from every difficult decision may struggle to build confidence and judgement,

while someone who believes every mistake will follow them indefinitely may become more concerned with avoiding blame than learning.

Organisations need to consider how they can give young professionals exposure to challenging situations while ensuring there is sufficient support around them. They need to provide opportunities for people to work beyond the narrow boundaries of their existing roles and to encounter the senior leaders and wider business functions that they may one day need to influence.

The environment in which the next generation will build their careers is also likely to be shaped significantly by AI.

Emelia Ntiamoah, Responsible AI and Data Systems Lead at Global Queens Community, believes AI is already changing the way organisations think about risk, particularly through its potential to identify patterns and relationships that may not otherwise be immediately apparent.

“We are moving from spotting what is already gone wrong to asking whether the system was ever set up to go right in the first place,” she says.

AI can potentially help organisations identify emerging issues, analyse near-miss information, support predictive maintenance and make better use of the data already available to them. But Emelia is clear that the future professional needs to be more than someone who accepts an algorithmic output at face value. “Where did this data come from?” she asks. “What isn’t it showing me? Who might be left out?”

Emelia does not believe every risk professional needs to become a data scientist or learn to code, but they do need sufficient understanding to ask good questions and to use technology critically.

A risk professional therefore still has to exercise judgement. As Emelia puts it, “the algorithm can recommend, but it cannot be accountable”.

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PAUL MANSFIELD



The future role may therefore require a combination of capabilities that would once have seemed unusual in a single profession. Emelia suggests that the risk leader of the future may need to be “part engineer, part ethicist and part storyteller”.

Her observation that data and instinct can sometimes point in different directions is particularly relevant to experienced professionals. “If your data and your gut are telling you different things, that is not a sign to ignore one of them. It is a sign to dig deeper.

“I would love to see risk professionals shadowing data scientists the same way they shadow engineers on site. Cross-disciplinary learning is where the real insight happens.”

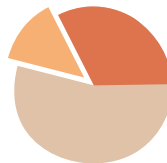
That observation returns the discussion to one of the central themes raised by John and Paul: the next generation of risk leaders will need to build careers through a combination of formal learning, practical experience and relationships with people whose knowledge differs from their own. Mabel reiterates the importance of education in developing the critical thinking skills required for the future of risk management.

Emelia believes professional bodies such as IIRSM have a role in improving AI literacy and providing spaces in which professionals can ask questions that they may otherwise be reluctant to raise. Often, she says, the questions that people worry are too basic or too obvious turn out to be the most useful ones.

The next generation will encounter risks that today’s professionals cannot fully anticipate. Climate change, technological transformation, geopolitical uncertainty and changing workforce expectations will continue to affect organisations and the decisions they make. The skills required to deal with those issues will continue to evolve.

John hopes that the profession itself may become less constrained by traditional labels. Looking ten years ahead, he says he would like to see a point at which people are simply talking about risk management, with health and safety understood as an important part of that broader discipline rather than as something entirely separate.

The development of that profession will depend not only on the people entering it, but on those established within it. Our task is to make sure that the people capable of asking the right questions are not only attracted into risk and safety, given the experience, confidence and opportunity to develop their own answers. ♥



ESSENTIAL SKILLS

The changing skills needs of the workforce are at the heart of NFER’s *The Skills Imperative 2035: Creating a system of lifelong learning to provide the essential skills for tomorrow’s workforce*. The report argues that technological, demographic, environmental and economic change will continue to reshape both the jobs available and the skills people need to succeed in them.

Read the report at bit.ly/sentinel-skillsimperative



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