Do occupational safety and health professionals improve the occupational safety and health performance of an organisation?
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Abstract
A review of the literature was undertaken to assess the evidence that the occupational safety and health professional improves the occupational safety and health performance of an organisation. Also assessed were the knowledge, skills and attributes of the occupational safety and health professional that might be linked with their effectiveness and that may vary depending on industry and organisational size.

Of the 58 articles retrieved during the literature search only two (2) studies were classified at level one on a hierarchy of evidence developed for the research. Both studies were conducted in the construction industry and both studies demonstrated the value of employing a suitably qualified in-house occupational safety and health professional, measured by reductions in fatality and injury rates. Two themes that emerged from the literature and which warrant further research are the importance of the line of report and the personal attributes of the occupational safety and health professional. It is suggested that knowledge without power and the ability to influence senior decision makers may negatively impact the occupational safety and health professional’s ability to add value.

While there is evidence that the occupational safety and health professional has an important role to play in reducing fatality and injury rates, missing from the evidence is the role they play in reducing the rates of disease and ill-health. There is also a lack of evidence for the value proposition for the occupational safety and health professional in high risk industries other than construction.

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Introduction
There has been a long-standing interest in the value of the occupational safety and health professional (OSHP) (see for example Adams, 2000; Greer, 2001 & Lawrence, 2008). Economic factors are placing OSHPs today under increasing pressure to demonstrate their relevance and value. Professional bodies, in particular the American Society of Safety Engineers (ASSE), have responded to this challenge through a structured campaign to demonstrate the value proposition for the OSHP (Lawrence, 2008). Reflecting this trend, a recent article by Seabrook (2014) continues the call for OSHPs to demonstrate safety’s business value in delivering sustainable and profitable organisations. In a similar vein, Curtis (2014) questions if OSHPs are able to explain to top managers how safety practices contribute to the “bottom-line.”

A review the literature was undertaken in an effort to identify the current evidence, and the strength of that evidence, in support of the value proposition for the OSHP. The literature review addressed the following research questions:
1. What is the evidence that the OSHP improves the OSH performance of an organisation?
2. What knowledge, skills and attributes of the OSHP might be linked with the effectiveness of the OSHP?
3. Does the impact of the OSHP vary depending on industry and organisation size?

Methodology
An exhaustive search of the peer-reviewed and grey literature was undertaken using 36 combinations (search strings) of search terms within 12 databases, using EBSCOhost as the major host database.
The databases provided access to a broad range of journals in discipline areas related to safety including organisational studies, management studies, psychology and sociology, as well as all safety science journals including Safety Science, The Journal of Safety Research, Accident Analysis and Prevention and Professional Safety. A search of dedicated safety science databases including NIOSHTIC and HSELINE did not find articles beyond those found using EBSCOhost as the host database.

The database search was complemented with a more general search using Google. A total of 58 articles were retrieved, read, classified for relevance and categorised according to themes. The strength of the articles was classified according to a four-tier hierarchy of evidence designed specifically for this research and informed by other hierarchies of evidence (Institute for Work and Health, 2006):

1. Studies with strong evidence of direct value (n=2).
2. Studies with moderate evidence of direct value but where the evidence is moderated by other variables (n=16)
3. Studies with moderate evidence of inferred value but where the evidence is moderated by other variables (n=6)
4. Studies with weak evidence of direct value and expert opinion (n=34).

Results
Studies with strong evidence of direct value
Only two studies (Cameron, Hare & Duff, 2007 & Rebbitt, 2012) have investigated if there is a direct relationship between OSHPs and value, where value is measured by lower injury rates (Cameron et al. 2007) and lower fatality rates (Rebbitt, 2012). Both studies were conducted in the construction industry.

Cameron et al. (2007) combined quantity measures (how many OSHPs) with quality measures (OSHP experience and qualifications) to develop a questionnaire sent to 101 construction companies employing 660 OHSPs. Safety performance was measured using the reportable accident frequency rate (AFR) and accident costs (Cameron et al., 2007).

This study found statistically significant lower AFRs were associated with organisations that employed an in-house OSHP, having an AFR 60% lower than those using only external consultants. Furthermore, construction companies that gave their OSHP management authority had an AFR that was 60% lower than those where the OSHP gave advice only. Authority is associated with line of report to senior management (Cameron et al. 2007). The OSH practitioner(s) with full authority held a senior management position in the organisation which the authors suggest increases the influence and places the OHSP in a stronger position to voice concerns and have their recommendations implemented. The study also found a relationship between the functions (role and tasks) of the OSHP and OSH performance. For example, AFRs were 60% lower in construction companies where the OSHP vetted sub-contractors, compared to those construction companies where the OSHP did not vet subcontractors.

Based on their findings, Cameron et al. recommend that construction companies with at least a £4 million turnover should invest in an experienced and qualified OSHP. For companies with a turnover of £35 million or more, the investment in OSHPs should represent at least 0.1 to 0.2 percent of turnover. They caution, however, that continuing to increase the number of OSHPs indefinitely will not lead to lower accident rates, with the savings better spent on other strategies to improve OSH.

Rebbitt (2012) investigated the value proposition for the OSHP by comparing the number of OSHPs with fatality rates in the US, UK and Canadian construction industry. He confined the measure of OSH performance to fatality rates due to the lack of reliability inherent in measures of injury frequency rates.

Using linear regression analysis Rebbitt found a strong correlation between the density of safety professionals and a lower the fatality rate. Conversely, Rebbitt found no such correlation with the number of safety practitioners. Rebbitt concludes that these findings “demonstrate emphatically that safety professionals do have a solid value proposition and that they have been, and are, effective in preventing fatalities”. (p. 61)

Studies with moderate evidence of direct value in which evidence of value is moderated by other variables
Within studies that investigate a range of factors associated with lower accident rates (see for example Jaselskis, Anderson and Russell, 1996) it is more difficult to understand the relationship between the OSHP and direct value. The exception is an intervention study conducted across industry sectors in the Netherlands (Hale, Guldenmund, van Loenhout, & Oh, 2010). Leaving aside the issues associated with varying methodological quality, this group of studies provides moderate evidence of direct value.
Studies of matched pairs of companies with higher and lower accident rates

The seminal work in this area was undertaken by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) in the United States, comprising a series of three studies that commenced in 1974 (Cohen, 1977). The aim of the studies was to determine the factors in successful safety programs. They drew on six studies dating back to 1964 that identified nine general factors associated with safety performance, one of which was “management commitment” that included the sub-category “safety officer holds high staff rank.” Of the six earlier studies, four identified safety staff as one factor associated with good safety performance.

Of the six earlier studies, work by Shafai-Sahrai (as cited in Cohen, 1977) was used as the basis for the NIOSH study. Using a matched pair’s study design, the questionnaire-based study identified eight factors associated with low accident rates, with safety training for workers, including lectures by the safety specialist, identified as one of the eight factors (Cleveland, Cohen, Smith & Cohen, 1979). The second phase of the NIOSH study, a site visit to seven of the 42 matched pairs of companies, aimed to verify the results of the first study (Cleveland, Cohen, Smith & Cohen, 1979).

In the third phase of the study the matched pairs design was abandoned and five plants with the lowest lost time injury rates in the United States were sent a questionnaire and were followed up with a plant visit (Cleveland, Cohen, Smith & Cohen, 1979). The studies provide mixed evidence for a direct relationship between the OSHP and value. From the first phase of this study there is moderate evidence for a relationship between the role and tasks performed by an OSHP. Less convincing, due to the weaker methodological quality of the third phase of the study, is the claim that the rank and stature of the OSHP is associated with lower accident rates. Intuitively, the higher up the organisation the OSHP reports, the more ability they have to influence the decision making of senior managers, which ostensibly translates into lower accident rates. However, it is a difficult argument to sustain based on the evidence available in this study.

Studies of a sample of companies within an industry sector or across industry sectors and accident rates

The construction industry, particularly in the United States, has shown greatest interest in identifying the safety strategies and factors associated with excellent safety performance. Of the 11 studies included in a literature review by Jaselskis, Anderson and Russell (1996), three identified that improvements in safety performance could in part be attributed to the employment of a full-time safety director, safety officer or safety professional. Of the three studies, one emphasised that it was important for the safety professional to report to the president or vice-president of the company (Hinze and Harrison as cited in Jaselskis et al., 1996). This early finding from the construction industry is consistent with the findings of the NIOSH study.

Jaselskis et al. (1996) sent a questionnaire to 48 construction companies in the US and compared results with Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) incident rates and the experience modification rating (EMR) for the companies involved, the latter a measure based on workers’ compensation claims experience. They found a statistically significant lower EMR was associated with greater involvement by the safety coordinator including safety inspections. This study also found that companies with more detailed safety programs had lower EMR. It is unclear as to why OSHP in companies with a higher EMR conducted fewer inspections and had less detailed safety programs. This finding, therefore, is open to interpretation, with either the qualifications of the OSHP or other organisational factors including cost or possibly management commitment to safety being factors.

A similar questionnaire based study by Findley et al. (2004) of 305 construction companies in the US also found that companies with a lower EMR employed a full time safety manager. As a result, these companies were more likely to implement the elements associated with an effective safety management program. On the basis of this finding, the author recommends that companies wishing to improve safety and their “bottom line” should employ a full time safety manager who reports to a senior manager.

Hinze & Wilson (2000) also used the EMR, together with recordable injury rates, to survey the safety practices of 40 well-performing companies in the US to determine the improvements these companies had made as a result of the “zero accidents” and “zero injuries” initiative. They identified five high impact techniques for improving performance and if these are considered to be the good safety practices that lead to lower injury rates, then it is likely that it is the OSHP who initiates and implements these practices. Without the OSHP performing these tasks it could be argued that lower injury rates would not have been achieved.

Abudayyeh, Fredericks, Butt and Shaar (2006) studied the correlation between management commitment to safety and the frequency of injuries and illnesses among a random sample of the top five hundred construction companies in the US. They found that companies that employed a safety manager on site, an indicator of management commitment, had a statistically significant lower injury and incident rates. In addition, they found
that companies that authorise the safety manager to spend over $1,000 on safety improvements had fewer injuries and illnesses.

In contrast Hallowell (2010) found that employing a safety manager is less cost-effective than investments in management commitment to safety and sub-contractor selection. This finding departs from the previous studies in that management commitment is separated from employing a safety manager. In a subsequent study, however, Hallowell & Calhoun (2011) found that the employment of a site safety manager, together with use of worker engagement, existence of site-specific safety plans and management commitment, to be the most effective element of a safety program.

Esmaeili & Hallowell (2012) explored the diffusion of injury prevention strategies in the construction industry, finding that employing a site safety manager was one of three innovations less frequently implemented. They found that the three most frequently adopted safety innovations were project-specific training and safety meetings, frequent worksite inspections, and health and safety orientation training. The three least frequently adopted safety innovations were the employment of a site safety manager, contractor selection and management, and substance abuse programs. They conclude that “the construction industry has now reached saturation with respect to traditional injury prevention strategies and new safety innovations are needed” (p. 955). These findings and conclusions could be interpreted in two ways. First, that the appointment of OSHPs made long ago is of value now and is reflected in the three most frequently adopted safety innovations. Second, that OSHPs have not shown their value in the past and there was no need to appoint one now.

In a study of a single university construction site in the US, McDonald, Lipscomb, Bondy and Glazner (2009) were able to identify a range of factors associated with an injury rate which was half that for the rest of the construction industry. One factor was the employment and visibility of a full-time OSHP.

Pre-dating the previously discussed Cameron, Hare & Duff (2007) study was a Canadian study conducted by Hinze & Raboud (1988) that examined the relationship between company policies and practices designed to influence safety in the workplace and safety performance measured in terms of injury frequency rates. This study found that injury rates were lower in companies that employed a full-time safety officer.

A study of the management practices that contribute to a safe work environment in 62 hospitals found that the OSHP had no impact on injury rates (Vredenburgh, 2002). This study also found that “what differentiated the hospitals with low injury rates was that they also employed proactive measures to prevent accidents” (p. 259). Based on this finding, and despite finding that the OSHP had no impact on injury rates, Vredenburgh proposes that one implication of this study is that the OSHP should hold a “management-level classification” (p. 259). Although the reasoning behind this proposition is not clarified in the study, it is presumably because the OSHP is the best person to implement proactive measures to prevent accidents.

An intervention evaluation in the Netherlands investigated 17 projects across 29 companies drawn from different sectors (Hale, Guldenmund, van Loenhout, & Oh, 2010, see also Guldenmund & Hale, 2012, Guldenmund, Hale, van Loenhout, & Oh, 2008, Hale, Jacobs & Oor, 2010). This study found that the OSHP was central to the successful implementation of a range of safety initiatives. Hale et al. (2010) found that a distinguishing factor in successful interventions was “the amount of energy and creativity injected by top managers and, above all, by the coordinator (safety professional)” (p. 1026). They found that the OSHP or the top manager was the “active motor to make the change” (p. 1033). When interventions were not being driven by these motors, particularly the OSHP, companies were five times more likely to be unsuccessful in implementing OSH initiatives.

Studies with moderate evidence of inferred value in which evidence of value is moderated by other variables

The impact of the OSHP on safety climate

Zohar (1980) conducted what is generally accepted as the first study of an organisational climate for safety. Drawing on earlier studies, including the study conducted for NIOSH by Cleveland, Cohen, Smith, and Cohen (1978), Zohar developed a 40 item questionnaire comprising seven dimensions, one of which was the perceived organisational status of the safety officer, sent to 20 organisations in Israel. Zohar found that safety climate was correlated with the effectiveness of the safety program in the organisations that he studied. Of the two climate dimensions that influence safety climate, one was managers’ perceived attitude towards safety “exhibited in workers’ eyes by the organisational status of both the safety officer and safety committee” (p. 101). Zohar goes on to conclude that the “status of the safety officer can be assessed by executive authority relegated to him [sic] (e.g., authority to remove workers from production hall or to stop production processes when safety regulations are not followed)” (p. 101). This characterisation of the status of the safety officer is one that places an emphasis on their role as an enforcer of regulation.
Wu, Liu, and Lu (2007) conducted a questionnaire-based safety climate study across 100 university and college laboratories in Taiwan. They explored five organisational factors that affect safety climate, including the presence of a safety manager. A statistically significant finding was that universities that employed a safety manager had better safety climate scores. In a later study, Wu, Lin and Shiau (2010) conducted a questionnaire-based study of the predictive factors of safety culture in 22 departments of five telecoms firms in Taiwan and found that those who employed a safety manager had a better safety climate.

In an earlier study of role behaviour Cameron and Duff (2007) developed seven measures of management safety performance, including the actions of the safety managers. This intervention study, using a before and after design on one large construction project in Scotland measured changes in safety behaviour. They found that safety manager actions improved during the six month intervention period. This study also found that the role of the safety manager shifted from one of providing advice to being more “hands-on” becoming “more involved in employee consultation, employee training and risk assessment” (p. 879). Management viewed this shift in role as more motivating, although the study does not clarify if it was motivating for managers, workers or both.

Cameron and Duff’s (2007) finding runs counter to the argument that OSHPs are better placed to add value when they are given more authority and have a line of report to senior management (Cameron et al., 2007). This apparent contradiction raises a question about the style of OSHP practice (e.g. hands-on, providing advice only, strategic advisor with authority, motor for change) that produces more value.

A UK study of safety culture conducted by Smith and Wadsworth (2009a) on behalf of IOSH explored the relationship between safety culture, competent safety and health advice and safety performance using a safety climate survey sent to 40 organisations representing different industry sectors. The study found a significant relationship between “favourable” safety cultures and better safety performance. Smith and Wadsworth (2009b) also found a significant, yet independent, relationship between OSHP advice and safety performance, although the “relationship between advice and performance is more complicated and there’s no clear pattern” (p. 8). They found that “less positive corporate safety performance was associated with more competent safety and health advice” (Smith & Wadsworth, 2009a, p. 64), which at face value is a negative finding about the value of well-trained OSHPs, in contrast with findings reported earlier. However, in considering this finding, the researchers suggest that high risk industries are more likely to employ more highly qualified OSHPs, but they were unable to test this assumption because the study did not include sufficient numbers of high and low risk industries, nor did it include sufficient numbers of OSHPs with different qualification levels. The findings of this study and how to interpret them remain unclear.

The safety climate and safety culture studies suggest that companies employing an OSHP have better safety climate scores. These studies fall short, however, of making a direct link between the OSHP, safety climate and lower accident rates. Nevertheless, when the lens is widened to consider the broader literature on safety climate, evidence emerges that safety climate is a significant predictor of injury rates. For example, Zohar and Polachek (2013) state, in relation to safety climate, that “recent meta-analytic studies indicated that its effect size on safety performance and objective injury data equals or surpasses all other known safety risk indicators, including unguarded physical hazards at the workplace” (p. 1). Therefore it is possible to infer a relationship between the OSHP and value, albeit through safety climate where climate is a predictor of safe behaviour, and by extension, lower accident rates.

**Studies with weak evidence of direct value and expert opinion**

There have been a number of studies that have returned surprising and often difficult to interpret findings on the relationship between the OSHP and value. Indeed some of these studies, at first glance, have found a negative relationship between the OSHP and value. Some have considered the status of the OSHP (who they report to), their competence and qualifications (what they know), their role and tasks (what they do) and the industry sector (where they work). The evidence emerging from this grouping of studies is weak due to the quality of the study design or is suggestive only based on expert opinion. However, it does contribute to the understanding of what qualities and competences are expected or required of good OSHPs.

**Studies with ambiguous evidence of direct value**

Shannon, Mayr and Haines (1997) undertook a systematic review of the literature published between 1970 and 1994 to examine the relationship between injury rates and organisational and workplace factors. Of the 61 studies retrieved, only 10 met their inclusion criteria. Of the 10 studies they reviewed, one found an association between the OSHP being represented on joint safety and health committees and reduced injury rates. When considering all 10 studies, however, and after applying their consistency criteria, Shannon et al. conclude that the amount
of training received by committee members was the only factor consistently associated with lower injury rates. Therefore there is no evidence of a relationship between the OSHP and lower injury rates even though they were represented on such committees.

Mearns, Whitaker and Flin (2003), in a study conducted in the off-shore oil and gas industry, interpret the results of the Shannon et al. study differently. They suggest that representation of OSHPs on joint safety and health committees was “consistently associated with lower injury rates” (p. 7). Mearns et al. developed a Safety Management Questionnaire (SMQ) as an audit tool comprising six elements; element one, safety and health policy, sought to explore the “number and status of dedicated safety and health staff” (p. 648). In year one of the study, they found that the presence of an off-shore OSHP was significantly correlated with “unfavourable” (p. 665) performance. A similar result was found in year two of the study. Mearns et al. comment that unfavourable scores predicted an increased propensity to report accidents. However, it could be argued that the presence of the OSHP had a positive impact on reporting rates, which is a good thing for learning and improvement (Hale et al., 2010).

A further study by Mearns, Whitaker and Flin (2001) draws on a 1997 internal company report for British Petroleum, Conoco and the Royal/Dutch Shell Group conducted by Sykes, Paxman and Thom (as cited in Mearns, Flin & Whitaker, 2001). This study identified that one aspect of best practice was that the corporate safety and health advisor made policy recommendations and chaired a committee “comprising senior business managers” (p. 773). This finding suggests an indirect relationship between the OSHP and value as a result of their role (high status) and their function (chairing a high level committee). This study is limited, however, because the extent to which best practices equate with lower accident rates remains unclear.

**The status of the OSHP and speculated value (who they report to)**

The status of the OSHP has emerged repeatedly (see for example Zohar, 1980) as a factor that may be associated with their ability to add value. For example, Hopkins (2007) argues that “the best companies have safety staff at several different points of the hierarchy, with safety officers reporting directly to the most senior manager at that level, not via a human resources manager or some other intermediary” (p. 217). A recent salary and attitude survey of 3,939 OSHPs conducted by IOSH (2012) found that 55% of OSHPs do report directly to the board. Disturbingly, however, the IOSH survey found also that respondents were unable to articulate the value of their proposed safety interventions, a finding that has the potential to undermine their perceived value by managers.

Although Hopkins argues for a high status for the OSHP and a line of reporting to managers at different points in the organisational hierarchy, Minnick (2013) proposes a different view of the line of report for the OSHP. Drawing on a survey of 442 ASSE members in the US, Minnick argues there are two viewpoints on reporting structures for OSHPs; first, through a “line of power,” for example to a Chief Executive Officer; and second, through a “functional unit,” for example an environmental, health and safety department. It was found that role stress was less when the OSHP reported to a functional unit. Minnick also found that OSHPs were experiencing role overload “due to the expansion of the safety role into other roles, such as environmental safety and security, while expecting the same level of safety performance” (p. 152). This latter finding suggests that expanding the OSHP role, without an equivalent increase in the numbers of OSHPs, may inadvertently undermine the ability of the OSHP to add value. This raises an interesting paradox. Expanding the role of the OSHP to include, for example environmental management, is generally viewed as a necessary step towards demonstrating the value of the OSHP to business. Doing so, however, may have the reverse effect given Minnick’s findings. Minnick’s former finding, that role stress was less when OSHPs reported to a functional unit, could, in part, be explained by the inability of the OSHP to articulate the business case for safety when reporting directly to the Board or senior management. It also has to be recognised that stress, up to a point, may be good as it can reflect being in a position of influence close to the reins of power, rather than having a comfortable, but less influential position in a separate safety, health and environment unit.

**OSHP competencies and speculated value (what they know)**

Notwithstanding who OSHPs report to, a survey (Peter Wager & Associates, 2010) of Australian Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) found that CEOs perceived that OSHPs lacked the ability to understand business strategy, were unable to constructively influence business objectives and were “too negative or bureaucratic in managing the balance between business and OHS imperatives” (p. 110). Without these skills, it is easy to imagine that OSHPs would feel stressed, and feel safer reporting to a functional unit as Minnick (2013) found. Role stress may be compounded by the OSHPs’ inability to measure safety in a manner that is meaningful to senior managers, the end result being that OSHPs could find themselves caught in a vicious rather than virtuous cycle. The inability of the OSHP to engage senior managers is also highlighted in a US report that explored the return on investment.
of the environmental health and safety function (BLR, 2006). This study found that the function is under-valued by senior executives due to “communication barriers between EHS professionals and executive management, and a lack of standard metrics for evaluating all aspects of EHS performance.” The report goes on to suggest that OSHPs must “measure the performance of their programs using the tools of business managers and the format and language of the organisation’s financial analysts” (p. 28).

In a bid to close the gap between OSHPs (and what they know) and managers (what they expect OSHPs to know), Leemann (2005) proposed a framework that would allow OSHPs to demonstrate their value-added contribution to an organisation. Leemann breaks the OSHPs role into five categories: i) ensure compliance; ii) no incidents; iii) communications; iv) influence; and v) cost-effective. Each role is broken down into functions. Roles and functions are cross-referenced to their underpinning competencies. Leemann offers three competency clusters for the OSHP: i) cognitive competence, ii) interpersonal competence and iii) intrapersonal competence.

An interesting inclusion in this framework is the interpersonal skills of the OSHP. Pryor (2014) conducted a grounded theory study exploring the strategic influence of the OSHP in which seven (7) dyads of senior OSHPs and their managers across a range of industry sectors in Australia were interviewed. She found that trust was central to the OSHPs being able to influence the strategic decision making of their senior manager. Although Leemann’s framework and Pryor’s findings fall short of demonstrating the value of the OSHP in direct terms, a picture starts to emerge that an OSHP who enjoys high status (power) would benefit from complementing their role and functions with a set of personal attributes (influence).

**OSHP role and tasks and speculated value (what they do)**

The OSH community has taken it upon itself to promote the need for OSHPs to be able to argue the business case for safety and health (see for example Byrne, 2013; Hill, 2006; Veltri, 1992; Veltri et al., 2007; Veltri et al., 2013 & Williamson et al. nd) through the use of cost-benefit analysis (see for example Behm, Veltri & Kleinsorge, 2004 & Deshkar, 2010). Indeed, the need to evaluate the business value of the safety function was recognised over 20 years ago by Veltri (1992), who proposed a conceptual model to do this. Veltri argued that OSHPs must demonstrate the strategic value of what they do and instead of focusing solely on regulatory compliance, OSHPs must also contribute to productivity and business performance.

In an early effort to describe the safety functions of OSHP, DeJoy (1993) surveyed 1,190 safety professionals in the US spanning 10 industry sectors. DeJoy identified five primary functions: 1) serving as safety consultant/advisor; 2) coordinating compliance/control activities; 3) assessing the effectiveness of controls; 4) analysing hazards and losses, and 5) conducting specialised studies and reviews. He went on to identify that OSHPs require good communications skills to carry out their functions.

Studying 400 Certified Safety Professionals and 100 safety educators’ perceptions of the most important competencies for OSHPs in the US, Blair (2004) found both groups rated “communicating effectively” as the most important competence, followed by “accepting responsibility” and “translating solutions into practical terms.” Blair concludes that safety educators should teach business and communication skills as part of their safety programs.

In a similar study conducted in Taiwan, Chang, Chen and Wu (2012) set out to develop a competency model for OSHPs. Unlike Blair (2004), they found different perceptions of what constitute important OSHP competencies among safety professionals and safety educators; although both groups did agree that applying business management principles was important, it was the least valued competency by both groups.

The role and tasks of the OSHP have attracted significant attention for some time (see for example Borys, Else, Pryor & Sawyer, 2006; Brun & Loiselle, 2002; Hale & Ytrehus, 2004) with the role variously described as one of a “politically reflective navigator” (Broberg & Hermund, 2004; Olsen, 2012), “change agent” (see for example Brown & Larson, 1998; Brun & Loiselle, 2002; Hasle & Jensen, 2006; Hill, 2006; Limborg, 1995 & Swuste & Arnoldy, 2003) or “compliance agent” (Hopkins, 2007). The notion that the OSHP should act as a “change agent” is often cited in the literature based on expert opinion. There is no evidence that acting as a change agent does or does not add value.

In a UK study, Conchie & Burns (2009) studied how employee trust in an information source shaped workers’ safe behaviour. They collected data from 131 workers on a single construction site and found that the safety manager, together with the Health and Safety Executive, were the most trusted sources of information influencing worker behaviour.

Nytrø, Saksvik, and Torvatn, (1998) explored the implementation of internal control regulations in Norway in an effort to determine the organisational factors that predict the successful implementation of systematic management of health, safety and environment programs. They found that the availability of a suitably qualified
OSHP working within the organisations they studied was the strongest predictor of success in managing a systematic approach. They caution, however, that improvements in activity, that is, increased implementation of the internal control regulations, does not guarantee effectiveness as measured by reductions in the rate of fatalities, injuries and disease. Nevertheless, this finding does suggest that it is the OSHP, rather than any other job function, which will have the knowledge and skills to implement systematic approaches. A similar study conducted by Chaves et al. (2009) interviewed “key contacts” in 78 companies in Bahia to evaluate the implementation of OSH programs. They found that company-related, employee-related and occupational safety and health specialist-related factors were associated with the successful implementation of these programs.

A recent study by Veltri et al. (2013), argues that the key is to ensure that safety is fully integrated into business operations. According to Veltri et al. (2013) this shifts the responsibility for safety and operations to operations managers. This study is unique in that it broke down the barriers between safety researchers and operations management researchers. Equal numbers of researchers from both disciplines used 10 case studies from nine organisations across different industry sectors in Ontario, Canada. The researchers explored the relationship between safety and operational practices and outcomes, comparing the results with data on injury rates. They found that the “top performing facilities on operational outcomes were also the top performers on safety outcomes and these facilities all had supportive cultures and used joint management systems” (p. 127). On the basis of these findings, it is reasonable to argue that the value of the individual OSHP and the safety function may be measured by the degree to which OSHPs are successful in integrating safety and health into the day-to-day operations of the business.

**Industry sector (where they work)**

Contrary to the view that a determining factor related to the impact of the OSHP may be the type of industry and its associated level of risk (IOSH Culture study), DeJoy (1993) previously found that safety functions did not differ across industries (including mining, construction and electronics), operations or size. Furthermore, in their single industry sector study of safety climate in university and college laboratories in Taiwan, Wu, Liu and Lu (2007), found no difference in safety climate scores based on organisational size and location, and employing an OSHP resulted in all locations achieving better safety climate scores. If safety climate is taken as a proxy measure for safety performance, then the presence and functions of the OSHP seems to make a difference irrespective of organisational size and location.

**Discussion**

This literature review has four key findings. First, there is a distinction between the value of the individual OSHP, and the value (positive or negative) of safety. It is possible to argue that these are complementary rather than competing perspectives; OSHPs value may be measured by the extent to which they are able to convince organisations in the first instance of the business value of safety.

Second, only two studies provide strong evidence in support of the value proposition of the OSHP. These studies are important because within them the value of the OSHP is not moderated by other variables or factors investigated. Both were conducted in the construction industry, a sector that dominates the literature. It is unclear why there has been interest in the construction industry but not in other high-risk industries, for example mining, or the (chemical) process industry.

Third, all the studies reviewed measure the value of the OSHP in terms of either a reduction in fatality or injury rates. There are no similar studies that explore the rates of disease and ill-health.

Fourth, the methodological quality of all the studies undermines the strength of the evidence. Cohen’s (1997) research using matched pairs of companies represents the highest methodological quality. Unfortunately the value of the OSHP was investigated among many other variables. Furthermore, this study is over 40 years old. The second highest methodological quality is found in the intervention evaluation conducted by Hale et al. (2010) who employed a before and after design, but like the Cohen study, investigated the value of the OSHP among other variables – resulting in this study being classified as providing only moderate evidence.

The findings of the literature review regarding the relationship between OSHPs and business value is presented as a value pyramid in Figure 1. At the base of the pyramid is the safety and health Body of Knowledge (BOK) that is the bedrock knowledge upon which OSHPs build their professional practice and formulate their advice to organisations on how to achieve safe operations. The middle section of the pyramid represents the OSHP who is the linchpin between the safety and health BOK and business value. This section of the value pyramid is broken into five (5) interrelated sub-sections. Taken together, these characteristics or qualities of OSHPs allow them to fulfil their full potential and add value to the organisations within which they work. The top section of
the pyramid represents the business value of the OSHP in terms of safe operations and reductions in fatalities, injuries, disease and ill-health and is built on the sections beneath.

[Diagram: Pyramid with sections labeled from bottom to top: OSH Body of Knowledge, OSH Professional, Experience, Qualifications, Professional certification, Role and tasks (functions), Line of report, Personal attributes, Business Value, Lower injury, disease and fatality rates, Potential to deliver business value from the bottom up, Actual support for OSH and the OSH professional from the top down - A is dependent on B.]

**Figure 1**
Re-Conceptualising the relationship between the occupational safety and health professional and business value

Notwithstanding the findings, it is apparent that there are significant gaps in the evidence base. For example, no strong evidence was found in support of personal attributes or line of report or experience.

**Conclusion**
OSHPs are facing increasing pressure to justify their value to their organisations, driven in part by a struggling global economy which is placing pressure on organisations to cut costs wherever they can. The purpose of this literature review was to determine the strength of the evidence in support of the value proposition for the OSHP. While many studies have investigated a range of safety management factors associated with better safety performance, including the role of OSHP, only two studies bring into sharp relief the value of the OSHP in reducing workplace fatalities and injuries. This finding is at once disappointing and encouraging – disappointing due to the dearth of studies on such an important topic, encouraging because there is evidence for the value proposition of the OSHP. The profession and researchers should work together to strengthen the evidence base and enable the OSHP to more easily demonstrate their value in both good and tough economic conditions.

Further research using robust methodologies and focussing on the value of the OSHP is required. It is important to investigate how the elements in the value pyramid are related to one another.

Research is also needed to investigate the extent to which formal university programs are delivering the requisite knowledge, skills and attitudes of the OSHP that will allow them to successfully add value. At the very least, research should include disease and ill-health as well as fatalities and injuries as measures of value.

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