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Appraising "Lessons Learned" Practices

by Ludwig Benner

One of the essential functions of a bona fide technical professional is regular self-appraisal of the essential elements of one's professional practice. This is a challenge to system safety professionals to appraise the "lessons learned" element of their practice. The appraisal should assess the quality and value of the lessons safety professionals learn or acquire, and pass along to others.

System safety professionals have many sources from which safety-oriented lessons can be learned. In addition to knowledge acquired during their professional education, they can develop "lessons learned" while performing their system safety tasks. They can learn from experiences such as the discovery of new hazard combinations, new sources of data about systems they are analyzing, new hazard identification or analysis methods, incident reports and analytical efficiencies they develop, just to name a few. Sources from which to acquire lessons to learn include, for example, professional journals, new books, clients, discussions with colleagues or peers, training sessions, tutorials, seminars, research reports, new checklists, software and Internet searches. All such sources potentially have some lesson for us to learn. And there's the rub: How do system safety professionals keep up with what new lessons there are to learn among all these many sources, and then determine whether the lesson is worth keeping and implementing? Beyond that, what lessons do they share internally or pass on to the "customers" they serve, and how do their coworkers and customers respond to the lessons they offer? How long do they retain (or what is the life of) the lessons they learn, and how do they ensure that they do not have to learn them over again at some future date?

A system safety plan is one element of a system safety program that practitioners expect their customers to have in place. What "lessons learning system" plan do you, as a system safety professional, have in place to seek, identify, capture, disseminate and evaluate the lessons you can learn as you practice your profession? Do you have a plan in place to try to stay ahead of — or at least keep up with — new lessons learned in your field? What are the current elements of your lessons learning system plan? Are you satisfied that you are able to recognize "lessons learned" and remain reasonably alert to opportunities to develop lessons to share while you practice system safety? Do you reach out regularly to find lessons others have learned, to determine whether you might use them? Do you have a system in place in your practice to capture, document, access and disseminate lessons you and your colleagues learn? If so, how effective is your system, in terms of the lessons that you have led others to implement, and were the results you expected actually achieved?

The questions posed above offer a starter list for self-examination and self-appraisal of your personal or your organization's lessons learned practices. JSS can provide a forum for the discussion of these issues, and for the exchange of "lessons learning system" self-appraisals and findings. 



The Next Generation of System Safety Professionals

August 25-29 2008

ideas
knowledge
experiences

The conference theme, "The Next Generation of System Safety Professionals", is an invitation for professionals at relatively early stages of their careers to benefit from the wealth of system safety knowledge and experience acquired by the membership of the System Safety Society.

