The Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) profession in Singapore is likely to be undergoing some fundamental changes in the next several years as work is in progress to develop national competency standards and a qualification framework for workplace safety and health professionals by the Workforce Development Agency (WDA) within the Ministry of Manpower. A draft framework and several competency standards for the OSH profession have been developed and comments from the various stakeholders – employers/companies, academic institutions, professional bodies and practitioners – are being sought. Members will recall that our Secretariat circulated several drafts for their comments. If you have not reviewed them yet, I would recommend that you do so. Your comments are valuable.

The competency of OSH professionals has been discussed for some time already. There are many articles on this subject in professional journals published by bodies such as the American Association of Safety Engineers. Academic institutions in Europe and USA have also published on this subject. Many large US based multi-national corporations, as elsewhere, have gone through a phase of assessing their OSH (or "EHS" as the environment is also part of the OSH professional's responsibilities) management systems. They have examined issues like professional, technical and leadership competencies for an OSH/EHS professional to discharge his/her responsibilities and to stay current in the profession.

Why the fuss over OSH professional competencies these days? While the professionals are becoming more qualified through specialized academic education and training, the old paradigm is still well and kicking. OSH professionals have to constantly fight the battle of demonstrating that they are adding value to the bottom line. Do companies, especially the small and medium sized ones, with tight operating budgets and thin margins, truly believe in OSH as an integral part of their businesses? And that the money spent, with no tangible returns, makes good business sense? In organizations without a strong OSH culture, professionals, even the senior OSH staff like vice presidents, directors and managers, are finding it tough to prove to the board of directors or senior managers that OSH work add value to their businesses. Justifying capital expenditure to fund the implementation of engineering controls to mitigate workplace hazards and risks, often face the challenge of meeting very basic financial metrics such as return on investment (ROI).

The road to a robust safety culture in a company will be long and twisting. New regulatory requirements such as those in WSHA will be a stimulus. Safety is now truly a line management responsibility and not just that of the Safety Department or Safety Officer. A mindset change is slowly taking place.

The new OSH professional would, in addition to his/her technical competencies, need the following:

"Cognitive Competencies" focus on helping the OSH professional figure out what's causing a problem and what to do about it. They include technical expertise, analytical thinking, conceptual thinking and information seeking.

"Interpersonal Competencies" provide an OSH professional with the skills to reach out to the appropriate individuals in the organization to obtain agreement on what the problem is and subsequently commit to identifying, developing and implementing solutions to the problem. Senior management these days expect everyone in the organization, who hold critical positions, to be part of the solution as opposed to being part of the problem. We often hear "complaints" from senior management that certain professionals (including OSH professionals) do not offer solutions to problems.

"Intrapersonal Competencies" are about personal effectiveness and maturity that are internal traits that permit an individual to be successful. These traits are self-control, perceptual objectivity, perseverance and achievement orientation.

In a nutshell, our OSH profession needs to move with the fast changing times in order to maintain and improve its position as an integral and indispensable part of any business.