LEAD OR LAG?

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Joanne Schroeder, P.E.
Vice President
Information-Driven Performance

In my 20 years of working with Environment, health and safety (EHS) management information systems (EMIS), every company I've encountered said they wanted to be an EHS leader. But in my experience, it often feels like EHS is lagging.

Other business functions in an organization often adopt new technology years before it reaches EHS. Other business functions do not fall prey to "vaporware" as EHS functions sometimes do. Finally, other functions are considered integral pieces of overall operations, whereas EHS is often seen as a compliance requirement.

Ask yourself this: By your company's actions, not words, is your EHS program leading or lagging? I posed the same question to attendees when I kicked off our ALIGN 2020 conference in New Orleans, and the conversations held at the event helped me outline the hallmarks of true EHS leaders.

Lead or lag:
Mindset and culture

Companies with leading EHS programs think about EHS differently than those trailing them. They elevate EHS from a compliance requirement to an overall business function critical to operations success.

It starts with mindset and culture. In a strong EHS program, everyone – from the c-suite to the frontlines – collaborates to maximize EMIS' potential. Risk owners consider data an asset, and they embrace trying new ways to mine it for insights.

Laggers focus too much on assigning blame for incidents, which can discourage staff from making reports that eventually drive operations. Leaders are constantly looking to learn from incidents,

encouraging thorough reporting and exploration of root causes of incidents based in data.

With a mindset that treats EHS as an overall business function, shares risk responsibility at all levels, and looks to maximize EMIS insights, programs can accelerate toward a leading role in global EHS.

Additionally, leaders take the time to find their "goldilocks zone." In developing a vision or plan for an EMIS it is critical to remain firmly grounded in present challenges while leaving room to reach toward the future.

There will be a "just right" spot that makes sense for your organization today and long-term. One Fortune 50 company I work with, for instance, is revamping all systems across the organization to lead it into a second century of business. With such a future-forward mindset, its "goldilocks zone" might be a little more ambitious than others'.

Take the time to gather input, reflect, and then articulate your "goldilocks zone." Make sure it resonates across your governance structure and the core teams that span business functions.

Lagging EHS programs	Leading EHS programs
Treat EHS as a compliance requirement	Consider EHS critical to overall business operations
Fail to recognize or fully utilize data as an asset	Use data from across the organization to find process- and safety-improving insights
Focus on assigning blame for incidents	Focus on learning from each incident
Are eager to "stand up" systems	Take the time to find their "goldilocks zone"
Lack a clear governance structure for EMIS selection	Build a core team from across business functions to determine EMIS selection

Lead or lag:
EHS MIS implementation practices

Strategic EMIS selection, implementation and adoption can push EHS programs to the forefront of their industry sectors.

Implementation practices are where we see programs face tough decisions critical to long-term success, like whether to customize the EMIS.

A customized solution sounds like something a leader might want.

However, time and time again we find customization ends up dragging programs down. Costs mount with each additional feature, and support becomes more specialized and costly.

Another customization downfall is bending software to old ways of working, which blocks out opportunities to use EMIS to make process improvements by embracing embedded best practices.

Organizational change management (OCM) is as important as software selection, but lagging companies

tend to overlook its value and push product with little consideration given to end users.

Global EHS leaders use communication, training sessions, and ongoing support to increase long-term buy-in.

Ignoring OCM could lead to a costly, frustrating replacement and prolonged lack of insights into potential EHS improvements.

Lagging EHS programs	Leading EHS programs
Use a de-centralized approach	Perform extensive end-user engagement, testing and training
Customize to bend a software solution to old ways of working	Adopt embedded best practices
Consider a software launch the end of the journey, with little consideration given to end users	Prioritize organizational change management (OCM) for long-term adoption

Lead or lag:
Data optimization

Continuous learning and constant improvement keep leading EHS programs at the front of the pack. Some are beginning to layer interpretive tools and utilize data sharing amongst peers to promote learning.

Continuous learning is a tenet of leading EHS programs. Real leaders strive to improve standards for consistent reporting and good data. For example, immature EHS programs might be satisfied adding more incidents to their reports. Leaders dig deeper into incidents to understand why they occur. They look at specific injuries, tools used, the number of hours the employee had worked and more details to make informed decisions.

The best decisions are being made through the application of predictive and prescriptive analytics. Top tier programs are evolving to take proactive stances on risk while looking for trends or indicators to drive performance. Not only can this information be used to prevent serious safety or environmental hazards, it can optimize functions including repair and replacement schedules.

Lagging EHS programs	Leading EHS programs
Take a secretive approach to data and resist sharing it for the greater good	See value in sharing data within or across industries
Keep data in silos or lack standards that enable collaboration	Use EMIS to explore new ways of accessing and collaborating over EHS data
Are limited to standard compliance reports and in arrears dashboards	Implement or plan to implement predictive and prescriptive analytics

Want to be a leader? Consider the power of sharing.

In closing, I want to encourage leaders to make a choice that might make them feel vulnerable: sharing data. Sharing has the ability the transform the safety of all global workforces and environmental outcomes we are responsible for. Whatever level of insights your EMIS gathers, it is important to share them across the organization and, further yet, within and across industries. Collaboration and access amplify data's power as an asset.

Sharing could become even more powerful if global EHS follows the footsteps of forward-looking companies. Coalitions of innovators are forming to expedite EHS progress with information sharing.

- The International Aerospace Environmental Group brings together nearly 50 aerospace companies to collaborate on and share innovative environmental solutions. They pool their knowledge and resources to provide members with guidance and support regarding shared challenges such as greenhouse gas reporting, materials and substance declaration, sustainability and more.

- Similarly, the Pharmaceutical Supply Chain Initiative members share a vision of better social, health, safety and environmental outcomes. By working together to develop training materials and share audit findings, members are progressing their industry more effectively than any one organization could alone.

Even if your EHS program is leading amongst peers and competitors today, adhering to a secretive approach will hamper growth. Concerns around privacy and the complexities of managing large data sets must be addressed, but the free flow of valuable EHS insights will be worth it.

If your EHS program is behind the curve, there's ample opportunity to push it to the front of the line. Remember, it will be actions – not words – that reflect a commitment to EHS excellence. Seizing the pole position will take a lot of work, but you can use the signs of EHS leadership to help guide the way.

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Contact:

Joanne Schroeder, P.E.
Vice President
Information-Driven Performance
joanne.schroeder@arcadis.com

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