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Safety: a matter for “professionals”?

At the request of industrial partners, the FonCSI's Strategic Analyses Scientific Group (GSAS) has conducted some research on the professionalisation of industrial safety. In this opinion piece, Claude Gilbert, Emeritus Director of Research at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and President of the GSAS, shares with us the group's initial findings on this topic which, until now, has been the subject of very little research. This piece was also put forward to be used as the introduction to a research seminar which gathered international experts on 12th and 13th November 2015.

The industrial companies report one clear finding: training programmes in the field of industrial safety no longer seem to be yielding the expected results. This is in spite of the interest shown in them and the funding allocated to them.

The question is simple: in light of this finding, what new avenues are likely to be explored in order to increase industrial safety in companies so that it is more “professional”?

The conclusion drawn by the industrial partners deserves to be discussed in more depth, as we are still lacking elements to assess the impact of safety training programmes or, conversely, to determine what effects a reduction in training programmes might produce in this area.

Nonetheless, in response to the question raised by our industrial partners, our considerations focused mainly on the following three points:

- Where do professionalism and safety training meet?
- Should safety training be incorporated into everyday practices and activities or should it be the subject of specific actions within companies?
- Does safety training primarily meet internal requirements dictated by the specific problems companies encounter? Or external requirements dictated by external entities such as regulating authorities, the public, the media, etc.?

Professionalism and safety

The link between professionalism and safety can be understood in two different ways:

- the attention given to safety, a term that is yet to be suitably defined, seems to be closely linked to the skills and know-how that those engaged in industrial activities learn through the occupations or duties for which they were initially trained;
- the attention given to safety results primarily from specific actions and training courses which are distinct from the initial training received.

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“Increased safety results primarily from the capacity of these agents to be ‘good professionals’”

In the first scenario, no particular actions are required in order for safety to be taken into account, as it forms part of the skill set of the various categories of agents working in industrial companies. In this context, increased safety results primarily from the capacity of these agents to be “good professionals” when carrying out the duties assigned to them (bearing in mind that this applies to operators, middle managers and senior managers alike).

In the second scenario, taking into account safety relies, as a priority, on specific actions undertaken by individuals and departments specialised in the field of so-called “safety”. In this context, increased safety is primarily expected to be achieved by increasing the professionalism of these specialists who influence industrial activities by distinguishing themselves from the agents directly involved in the flow of operations.

The link between “professionalism and safety” can thus be understood in very different or even opposing ways. This can largely explain the ambiguity that often exists in the way these issues are approached; even more so because, within companies, greater safety is usually sought on both these levels, albeit with varying degrees of visibility.

Ordinary safety or extraordinary safety

While reflecting on the two approaches possible to the link between “professionalisation and safety”, we considered how to include the issue of safety in company activities. There again, two main conceptions emerged:

- one which considers that safety is an “everyday concern” and thus cannot be dissociated from all of the practices, processes and organisational systems on which a company’s activity relies. Moreover, maintaining a long-lasting safe state in a high-risk activity seems difficult to achieve without the existence of “routines” or, in other words, without the integration and implementation, within everyday operations, of a set of rules, procedures, but also experiences and non-formalised know-how (constantly and dynamically correcting mistakes and problem areas) that limit the human cost of actions for agents and organisations. In short, routine, despite being a potential source of deviations and problems, seems to be a necessary evil within organisations.
- and another, which considers on the contrary that safety (just like risks and crises) is a matter of exception and that it can only be achieved through deliberate and repeated actions, located outside of everyday operations, so as to keep attention on it at all levels. In this context, the “routinisation” of practices and procedures is perceived as a danger.

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The first approach seems to be the one that most corresponds to the reality of the situation within companies. But, quite paradoxically, it is the least known and the one that is not always the focus of investigations in the academic field. Consequently, despite research in the field of ergonomics, in the sociology of work and the sociology of organisations, only a partial analysis has yet been done of the way safety is ordinarily guaranteed in high-risk companies.



Similarly, the issue of safety is broached more from the perspective of its “extraordinary failures” than its “ordinary successes”, and this contributes to diminishing interest in the complex processes through which socio-technical systems are usually maintained in a satisfactory, or at least an “adequate”, state.

The second approach is more in line with common sense and with the way safety actions are spontaneously considered in companies. Indeed, it seems obvious that safety cannot be achieved without specialised agents and departments constantly calling for vigilance or – and this is the reason for quality assurance measures - without the actual processes being accompanied and backed by administrative procedures. But there again, despite the visibility or even the publicity given to these actions, it isn’t always easy to determine what impact they really have on everyday operations.

Although they are very different, these two approaches both ask what the effective drivers of ordinary safety are in high-risk activities (knowing that they vary depending on the sector of activity and the company). More particularly, they lead us to question what really underpins safety (practices or processes that are part of routines and refer explicitly or implicitly to various safety models? Orders supported by communication campaigns, training courses, certifications aimed at prompting vigilance, at introducing and maintaining a safety culture that is widely shared?). They also lead to questioning ourselves about what could enable us to get to grips with the reality of high-risk activities (problematic in the first approach, given the numerous factors to take into account; seemingly easier in the second approach, but there is no guarantee then that they will enable in-depth action on what constitutes the hidden face of these activities).

Safety for whose benefit? The inside or the outside?

The difficulties encountered in defining safety actions and implementing them in high-risk activities appeared for the most part to be linked to the existence of a double bind which carries a strong contradiction. On the one hand, these actions must solve specific realities and problems that are characteristic of a company or a sector of activity. On the other hand, they must meet a set of external expectations which are increasingly numerous and codified in societies that are conscious of collective risks.

When it comes to safety in companies, the primary aim is effectiveness, irrespective of the means used (comprehensive actions through professionalisation; ad hoc actions through training). The goal is always to try to ensure that these actions are as compatible as possible with actual situations (with a wide range of methods available to achieve this, which explains the variety of training options available).

But, at the same time, companies must provide evidence (to regulating authorities, various associations, the media and, more broadly speaking, the public) that they are making safety their number one priority. Moreover, this evidence must meet the criteria that prevail in public debates about collective risks (and more particularly industrial risks). Which means that such evidence can essentially be provided to the public by highlighting efforts made to finance safety measures,

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ensure standards, rules and procedures are adhered to, develop a safety culture, etc. Thus, even though quality approaches can be considered an “internal” justification method, they are actually largely in place to meet “external” justification requirements (particularly those stemming from supervisory authorities or the evolution of jurisprudence).

Safety actions thus find themselves caught in a contradictory injunction, because they must meet both internal requirements (in terms of effectiveness) and external requirements (in terms of justification). Rather paradoxically, the consequence is that the most in-depth actions – those that have the greatest influence on practices and processes and those that take into account the diversity of the factors that effectively guarantee safety – are those that are least likely to be of use as evidence for “the outside”. Conversely, those that are the most aligned with public views regarding risk management (by highlighting formal aspects, respect for values, a sense of responsibility, ethics, etc.) are the most useful for company communication (in the very broad sense of the term). This explains the difficulties people within the company can encounter when they must elaborate a safety training policy, as is the case for HR managers. The training offered is indeed based in large part on what “the outside” expects from companies when it comes to safety.

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The analysis therefore meets the demands of industrial companies by considerably shifting the questioning about “professionalism and safety”. Indeed, it asks all involved to note the fact that specific safety training courses are at odds in many ways.

“Specific safety training courses are at odds in many ways”

Firstly, without it being said clearly, they find themselves in competition with the pursuit of safety as it is effectively carried out by the different occupations, the practices, and process activation (in other words, anything that can be qualified as “professional”). Insistence on the professionalisation of safety, or indeed the professionalisation of safety-related occupations, only contributes to masking the discreet, yet broad, implementation of the ordinary safety processes that are part of high-risk activities (but do not necessarily dictate how they are carried out). Thus it is difficult to tackle head-on the link that must be established between initial training, the skills upgrades required by the different occupations, and the training focused on safety. Similarly, the limitations of many professional development courses that aim to train employees in designated “theoretical” situations without sufficiently preparing them for the range of situations they are likely to encounter in real life or teaching them the knowledge they need to develop a pertinent response are overlooked.

Secondly, and this is linked to the first point, training activities most often lead to thinking about safety from the perspective of the exceptional, the extraordinary, as if they were barely conceivable outside of specific activities, separate from everyday operations and, above all, carried out most deliberately by specialists (whether those recognised as such within the company or external trainers). Once again, the consequence of this is to render the return to reality difficult and make the views introduced from “the outside” seem out of touch or indeed ineffective

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(irrespective of how close the trainers are to the agents involved in the activities, and despite the middle road taken by proponents of the quality approach).

· Thirdly, when training initiatives are also used to demonstrate the willingness of high-risk companies to make safety an absolute priority, this can in fact shift their core purpose away from the reality of the company’s activities. The goal then becomes less about effective management of these activities and more about justifying the efforts made by a company or a sector of activity.

Given these findings, what should be done?

First, make every effort to “return to reality” by aligning safety training courses with safety as it is actually practised in high-risk companies. Indeed, if high-risk situations are to be handled with professionalism, it is important to encourage debate (or even controversy) between different professionals with regards to the situations they encounter, the way they interpret them, the risks they see in them, the solutions that seem pertinent to them, and the feedback received on the implementation of these solutions. Taking stock and discussing the handling (technical, organisational, pedagogical) of categories of high-risk situations must be a permanent part of each occupation’s duties. Similarly, the very wide range of practices, of situations and of networks and groups of individuals actually involved in carrying out and managing tasks, often external to the companies themselves, must be taken into account. This seems obvious, but as previously indicated, there are many obstacles to aligning the goals of safety training programmes with safety as it is handled in the field (ensuring effective practices are “hidden” if they appear to be scarcely or not at all compatible with the image of safety held in the public sphere).

“If high-risk situations are to be handled with professionalism, it is important to encourage debate (or even controversy) between different professionals”

Next, favour a pragmatic approach by acknowledging the fact that although the current situation in terms of safety training is far from ideal, it corresponds to a “state of the world” and a “state of relations” in our society which it is difficult to change. Hence, however effective safety training programmes are, and however well aligned they are with industrial realities, they participate in the justification work that companies and high-risk activities must engage in. It’s through them in particular that a debate on safety, dangers and risks can develop by involving other types of players than those managing the high-risk activities.

Lastly, consider that it is possible, dialectically, to work on these different elements to improve industrial safety. Going “back to reality” and getting as close as possible to ordinary activities makes it possible to question the pertinence of safety training programmes.

Conversely, the elaboration of safety training programmes can be an ideal opportunity to encourage those in charge of ordinary activities to report on their effective practices and the compromises they make between various demands; on how they relate to standards, rules and procedures; on the way they shoulder their responsibilities and conceive their code of ethics. Similarly, taking into account the public’s views on risks, no matter how out of touch they are, is likely to prove a useful lever for making the issue of industrial safety “visible”, to make the situation as it really is a subject of discussion in society.



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Especially because these views impact the individuals within the companies who, in a variety of ways, must interpret them and position themselves in relation to them.



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