

INTERVIEW WITH IHSA CEO

Michael Delisle shares his thoughts about future service to IHSA's customers



Michael Delisle was recently hired as the inaugural CEO of the Infrastructure Health and Safety Association (IHSA). IHSA is the organization resulting from the amalgamation of the Construction Safety Association of Ontario (CSAO), the Electrical & Utilities Safety Association (E&USA), and the Transportation Health and Safety Association of Ontario (THSAO).

Michael has a Master of Business Administration degree from Wilfrid Laurier University, and has a distinguished background with client-based service organizations. He was the founding CEO of International Certification Services; Vice-President of Business Development at KPMG Registrar; and CEO of the consulting firm McCormick Delisle & Thompson. He also held executive positions at General Electric and ABB.

Construction Safety: What skills and experience do you have that will make you an effective CEO?

Michael Delisle: For the last 25 years I've managed organizations, or parts of organizations, that provide professional services to clients. Over that time I've learned a few things. One is that everything should be dictated by the customer. If you're not a customer-focused organization then you need to change. I've managed professional and consulting organizations so I know how to deliver services to clients in an effective and efficient manner. I also know how to get information from clients so we can understand their expectations.

CS: What would you say to a company owner who asked, about the amalgamation, "What's in this for me?"

MD: First I would ask, "What are your expectations?" That's because I believe that the customer should drive how an organization provides services. We need a process for listening to customer feedback. Our clients need a way to articulate what is important to them.

So, "What's in it for them?" They are going to be able to provide input. We are going to have to have a pretty effective process so that they can say "I'm a little company from Tweed Ontario and

I have some concerns . . ." And we will respond quickly.

We will also develop innovative ways to provide services. We will constantly examine our internal processes to ensure that the majority of our budget is focused on prevention. Is there a better way to invoice clients, or collect revenue, or do our books, or bill our customers, or set up training?

We should have a standard for all those functions and we should benchmark the best companies so that we become better. We want to be a leader in providing world-class prevention services.

CS: How will this amalgamation affect the products and services that customers receive now?

MD: There won't be a lot of difference right away because change doesn't happen overnight. If you have a course scheduled for February, I don't think that's going to change. At the beginning, the level of service will be consistent. No one is prepared to accept any decline in the level of service.

In the long term, I see change happening because of two things. One is our investigation of how we can deliver more effective prevention services. The other is our customers' ability to influence how we deliver our services.

Continued on page 5 (after the pullout toolkit)

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Continued from page 4

CS: What are your thoughts about a goal of zero injuries?

MD: I don't believe that there's any other objective we could embrace or endorse. When I started in the quality-control business in the late '70s and early '80s, manufacturers measured their defects out of ten. That was the scale, such as three defects out of ten total products. Since that time, manufacturers have grasped the idea of prevention and implemented it, so that today, good manufacturers measure defects out of a million. A good company producing automotive parts might have two defects per million. We've come a long way.

For some industries—such as air travel—zero crashes is the only standard we're willing to live with. So I don't see how any of us can stand up and say we will accept one person dying in Ontario or one person getting hurt. I can't imagine saying that. So do I believe in zero? Absolutely. Is it going to be difficult to get there? Absolutely. When will we get there? I'm not sure. But that's what we are trying to do. And it's important that people embrace this idea.

The WSIB and other organizations talk about a “national habit of safety”. When I first heard it I thought it was a bit flowery, but the more I think about it, the more it makes sense. Imagine construction workers with a

habit—a culture—of safety. If the boss says “just climb up that ladder” and it's not safe, they aren't going to do it. We need that habit.

CS: What about a company that believes that it can't financially afford to do injury and illness prevention?

MD: There are two situations here. One is where employees are more permanent. In this case, health and safety is an investment. It's no different than buying an employee a computer every two years. If the worker gets hurt and is off work, there's a substantial cost. It's all about risk, so the company needs to examine the risk, understand it, and then provide for it. When the employees are permanent, it's just a no-brainer. You do it because the consequences of not doing it are too great.

As for less-permanent employees, the health and safety system has been successful working with construction unions where the employees tend to move between employers.

The way it is today, no one has extra money. I've run businesses, and I know what it's like to lay awake at night worrying about cash flow and wondering how I'm going to pay the bills tomorrow. And then imagine someone saying that we have to provide for safety training! It's tough. We have to empathize with this kind of company. We can't have a cavalier attitude and simply assert that “You just have to do it!” We have to find innovative solutions.

“ I believe that the customer should drive how an organization provides services ”

—Michael Delisle

CS: Injury reduction has slowed or hit a plateau in recent years. Why do you think that is, and what can we do about it?

MD: It's a lot more difficult to take one defect out of a system that has three defects in every million than it is when there are three defects in every ten. So as our industries get better at injury prevention, it's more difficult to prevent injuries because there are fewer incidents to focus on.

We also need to examine the root causes behind the performance of poor-performing firms and, then, how we provide services to them. For example, say we discovered that poor-performing firms are small companies with three employees, and it turns out they have no money for prevention programs. We'd have to find a way for them to implement those prevention programs and still survive financially. IHSA will be the kind of organization that comes up with such creative solutions. ■