

Faces of the Profession



Greg W. Richey

Faces of the Profession is intended to introduce you to some of the many industrial hygienists making a difference to workers and the community around the world. This month we hear from Greg W. Richey, principal of Colden Corp., an occupational health, safety and environmental consulting firm located in Philadelphia. In his work for Colden Corp., Richey provides project management and a full range of technical consulting services to industrial, commercial and institutional clients.

Previously, Richey has served as a staff EHS representative at the Amoco Research Center in Naperville, Ill., and as a compliance safety and health officer and later as the Philadelphia Area Office supervisor for OSHA. He holds a master's in industrial hygiene from Temple University and is both a CIH and a CSP. He is a past president of the AIHA Philadelphia Section and has served on AIHA's Communication and Training Methods and Indoor Environmental Quality Committees.

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The Synergist: You were one of the original compliance officers to work for OSHA. What was it like to be at the forefront of the early development of the agency?

Greg W. Richey: I loved the job; when I joined the agency in 1977 there was relatively little case law. It was a great challenge to interpret the regulations. We had a tremendous amount of freedom. Of course, that had a downside as well, because the employers were also challenged to interpret those same regs. There were many contested cases, as you might expect.

The people I worked with were great. There was a lot of camaraderie and mutual support. I have been fortunate that many of those same people are still working for OSHA in various capacities and, for a consultant like me, they have served as a tremendous information resource over the years. I call them often.

Those were years of great change in American industry. Old, heavy industries such as steel mills, coke ovens, foundries and smelters were declining but still common. Some newspapers still set type using Linotype machines with molten lead, and there was still the occasional machine shop run by a single motor and a line shaft off of which each machine was powered by flat belt. There was great satisfaction in helping to improve conditions in many places.

On the other side of the coin, I personally found the job stressful. The relationship between compliance officer and employers, though usually polite, also had an adversarial element. I am not usually comfortable in this type of situation. I much prefer my current situation in which I am invited into the workplace to do my work. It is also comforting to be working with clients that really care about worker safety and health. With OSHA, not all of the employers at the other end of the table admired our work. However, we were the advocates their workers often needed.

Another troubling aspect of the job was the fact that early on, OSHA regulations were put together quickly from a bunch of consensus standards not originally written as regulations. Many were weak, confusing and did not contribute to the safety of the worker. Some were downright embarrassing—for example, the split toilet seat rule. Dr. Eula Bingham as Assistant Secretary of Labor got rid of many of these useless rules in the late '70s. Over time, the administrative law judges decided that many more were unenforceable.

OSHA will need new and talented health and safety professionals to continue their good work as the old guard retires en masse in a very few years.

TS: Currently, you are one of the owners and corporate officers of a thriving consulting firm. What are the unique challenges and benefits of the consulting field? Would you encourage other industrial hygienists to consider a move into consulting?

GWR: The benefits are those that you might expect: satisfaction born of challenge, self-actualization and the freedom of being your own boss. In addition, consultants are in a position to see a nearly unlimited variety of health and safety situations.

The income can be satisfactory, but, unless one has unique skills, earnings probably will be comparable to those in a more traditional health and safety field. What caught me by surprise after we started our firm 10 years ago were the staggering costs of running a business.

Consulting is not for everyone. One must have a passion for all aspects of the work. One must be organized and able to maintain a sense of balance to avoid burnout and family stress. One must be extremely flexible and able to turn on a dime when priorities demand it or opportunities arise. In addition, one must develop a good sense of the value of one's work. 

If you know of a colleague who you think would be a good candidate for a future Faces of the Profession article, or you have other suggestions regarding this series of articles, please contact Senior Editor Lisa Junker at ljunker@aiha.org or (703) 846-0734.