Close the Technology Gap to Create More Sustainable EH&S Programs

Environment, health, and safety (EH&S) is a dynamic, complex world. The pace of regulatory change, the introduction of new risks, and new reporting requirements that call for data from multiple feeds expose the technology gap—the gap between where we are and where we should be to effectively manage EH&S risk and compliance.

A group of 550 EH&S, sustainability, risk, and IT professionals gathered in Chicago in late September for Sustainable Performance Forum (SPF) Americas 2014, an information-packed two-day meeting. What started five years ago as an Enablon software user meeting is today a leading EH&S and sustainability forum. As one speaker after another shared their thoughts, it became clear that IT is critical to sustain EH&S programs.

Yet, in most cases, organizations underutilize their EH&S technology. For over half, the primary technologies are spreadsheets, documents, and e-mail. Even those with advanced IT platforms manage information in EH&S “issue-based” systems separate from other business systems.

IT Supports Sustainable EH&S Programs

Companies need agile, flexible IT architecture to support this dynamic, complex world. They need integrated content feeds, advanced analytics, collaboration, mobile device support, and capable reporting tools. This technology must support the organization’s strategy, performance measurement, objectives, and integrity.

In my last column, I described the capabilities of a software platform to support EH&S programs or management systems (see “21st Century Energy Boom and Greater Risk Awareness Drive EH&S Software Initiatives,” EM October 2014, p. 32). But what makes the program sustainable?

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Back to SPF Americas... I feared a fist-fight might break out as the panel moderator—Anna Clark from EarthPeople Media—and I held a dry run a few days before the event. The group had a lively discussion when one panelist remarked on the difference between sustainability (what I call the “Big S”) and the sustainable company (the “little s”).

If you ask EH&S professionals to define a sustainable EH&S program, you will get different answers. In my view, a sustainable EH&S program is a technology-enabled management system with seven elements (see Figure 1):

1. **Strategic alignment** to set the direction of the program and ensure a fit with the organization’s strategy and objectives.
2. **Defined objectives** that clearly state what the organization wants the system to do.
3. **Expected benefits** that look beyond “cost” to clearly document the value that IT will provide.
4. **Executive buy-in** to support and promote technology and help overcome obstacles along the way.
5. **Stakeholder engagement** to ensure IT meets the business needs and users adopt the system; “If you build it, they will come” is a myth.
6. **Program and risk management** that embrace consistent policies and processes for handling data, managing IT platform changes, quantifying and managing the risks associated with operating the technology.
7. **Organizational change management** that parallels the IT initiative, starting with strategy, not software selection; involves ongoing alignment, engagement, communication and training.

**The Technology Gap**

The proper selection and use of technology is key to measuring governance, risk, and compliance (GRC) maturity. An organization’s GRC maturity depends on how well processes, information, and technology enable the organization to be efficient, effective, and agile to:

- reliably achieve objectives (governance)
- while addressing uncertainty (risk management) and
- acting with integrity (compliance)

A 2014 OCEG1 survey said that half of all organizations feel that they can better use their current GRC technology. First, the technology deployed does not meet the current needs of 70% of organizations (see Figure 2). Second, the majority of

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Figure 1. Elements of a sustainable EH&S program.

Figure 2. The technology gap.

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Source: OCEG, 2014 GRC Technology Strategy Survey
solutions used are department- or issue-focused (81%) and are stand-alone solutions not integrated with other solutions (80%). In my experience, these same issues apply to EH&S.

In a recent Epicor survey, 80% of respondents said that enterprise resource planning (ERP) tools are critical to business. Yet, approximately 50% are underwhelmed by ERP system performance, calling it “adequate” or “basic,” taking too long for users to access the information they need. Mobility is an unmet need, with only a small percentage able to connect to their ERP resources via smartphone or tablet. I have heard EH&S professionals, operations managers, end-users, and executives say the same about EH&S systems.

**Closing the Technology Gap**

Let’s close the technology gap to correct the underutilization and shortcomings of existing IT used to support EH&S. To enable sustainable EH&S programs requires tackling a number of issues, including functionality, user interface, ease of access, responsiveness, ease of deployment, and security.

- **Functionality** to help EH&S professionals and operations do their jobs, replacing older and outdated technologies.
- **User interface** where the technology is attractive, intuitive, and easy to use to promote user adoption.
- **Ease of access** to information is important for users to perform daily functions and make decisions. This relates closely to ease of use, with information displayed on dashboards, in tables and reports in formats easily digested by the users.
- **Responsiveness** to keep stakeholders engaged and to improve performance; includes speed of data display and interaction with data.
- **Mobile** applications to allow field and virtual workers access to information and social tools to allow internal and external collaboration and communication.
- **Cloud** solutions, strongly favored by 32% of companies, versus on-premises solutions, strongly favored by 41%. Each option is acceptable to about two-thirds when “no preference” responses (27%) are added.
- **Consolidation** of information; options range from a single platform to integration of strategic data sources with a centralized platform to periodic data feeds to a system of record.
- **Ease of deployment** and the ability to add new functionality and facilities to support future growth.
- **Security** to protect sensitive information such as trade secrets and employee-related injury and illness data.

Technology, along with EH&S, is a moving target. What sufficed a few years ago no longer meets our needs, and we acknowledge that there is a gap between where we are and where we want to be. To achieve sustainable EH&S programs, we must focus on seven programmatic issues and work with technology providers on functional and technical issues to close the gap. **em**

**References**

1. A nonprofit founded in 2002 as the Open Compliance and Ethics Group, now goes by OCEG.