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Licensing and royalty fees can blunt safety advances

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Practices to improve safety performance and culture have and will continue to evolve, due to advances in thinking born from a continuous pursuit to challenge the status quo. But who should own these advancements and what rights will exist to modify and improve upon them?

When an organization is hindered in the ability to internally train and modify, or evolve methodology and programs, it creates an unhealthy dependency on external organizations, slows the rate of continuous improvement and ultimately creates a barrier to safety excellence.

The safety industry, along with the rest of the world, is quickly approaching a new industrial revolution. Observe the increase in do-it-yourself and internally-led projects, a significant rise in independent consultants and the rapid spread of new ideas.

It's all available with a simple search within your favorite web browser. Operational and safety improvement concepts previously were owned by those with the time to file a patent and the capital and resources to mass-produce. That is no longer the world we live in.

The new revolution

During the past few decades, the control of who owns ideas has moved from large to small employer, and even the self-employed. Today in the U.S., small businesses have become, by far, the largest employer.

In his new book, "Makers: The New Industrial Revolution," bestselling author, Chris Anderson, calls our times "the industrialization of the Maker Movement" (p. 46). The book is primarily a sequel to his first book, "The Long Tail." Anderson predicts a greater, amateur, do-it-yourself (DIY) movement. It will be facilitated by creative digital and personal manufacturing. He points out how much easier it has become to imagine and then produce something innovative. The book is slanted more toward technological innovation; still, it is important to recognize the same themes are becoming obvious in the safety industry.

Today, you can explore any major source of social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn) with the search term "safety" and innovative ideas, products, methodologies and tactics are quickly discovered. This idea-

manufacturing capability now permits organizations to be on the continuous journey to safety excellence. They are evolving past the “find and adopt a best-practice” thinking. Plus, these companies seek outside ideas to prevent the not-invented-here occupational hazard Lisa Gansky calls “breathing your own exhaust” (Pink 2012).

When ideas to improve safety are regulated by a pay-me-first requirement, profit is put in front of safety. This slows advancement of safety excellence cultures.

“I can appreciate trademarking terms, software or specific detailed methodologies for the protection and continuance of the business and individuals who create them. I, too, participate in such things. After all, without the revenues derived from such developments, businesses would not be able to afford the capital needed to test and discover such advancements. However, protecting new ideas behind offerings where learning can only occur after payment is received, is placing profit in front of safety” (Galloway, 2011).

Striking a balance

The safety profession should encourage advancements of ideas and idea ownership -- but there needs to be a healthy balance on availability and flexibility of usage. It is not as simple as moving from one polar end (“It is mine!”) to another (open source). Consider how iTunes has changed the way music is consumed. Not too long ago, an entire album was purchased for the benefit of a single song. Now, the customer can select this single song based on preference and value, which enables the artist to focus on individual value-add with each offering, rather than lumping non-value-add to fill an album revolving around a hit single.

Ideas to advance safety must progress similarly, based on value, and should not create a dependency between vendor and client. Methodologies must be internalized to facilitate sustainability. Many organizations, the safety industry included, have grown in size due to this dependency and funded by the umbilical cord of royalty or program-for-rent payments. From a business perspective this makes sense, especially if shareholder value and profit growth are the underlying reasons. But there must be a better way.

This is a complicated issue. It won't be solved through a single article. That's not the intent of this piece. But there are questions worth asking to help you determine value, flexibility and longevity of idea acceptance. Whether you are the innovator or a potential consumer, consider utilizing these questions as decision filters:

1. In practice, how will this further the journey to an incident-free workplace and safety culture excellence?
2. Will this further the ability to internally improve and sustain results, or create dependency?
3. How flexible is this for internal usage regardless of culture and operational reality?
4. How effectively, yet quickly, can internalization occur?
5. How does this further the ability to execute the safety excellence strategy?
6. Does the acceptance of the idea provide more long-term value to creator or consumer?

Inability to pay

With the global recession of the past several years, several organization of all sizes regressed in their safety performance due to the inability to pay licensing or royalty fees. While creators and owners of ideas should be compensated based on value, we must further examine and agree on the reason for advancements in sciences, technology, programs and tools in safety. If the creators are mostly driven by profit, barriers to safety excellence will be experienced by their consumers. If, however, the creator and client collaborate to experience and focus on value and equitable compensation, justified by the furthering of safety performance and culture, everyone wins and the question of who owns the ability to advance safety becomes clear. Safety excellence isn't just about achieving results; it is also about sustaining them.

References

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