In these tough economic times when career opportunities for most people are few and far between, the drive toward corporate stewardship and sustainability is creating a multitude of new career paths for industrial hygienists.

Increasingly, IH professionals are shifting their focus from inside the fence line of the plant facility to take on new roles in corporate stewardship and sustainability that touch consumers, the community and the environment. Some work in product stewardship throughout the corporate value chain, conducting risk assessments for R&D departments to ensure that new products being developed are safe and sustainable, supporting sales and marketing efforts to ensure safe and sustainable end uses, and training and educating customers to use and dispose of products safely.

Others are involved in roles as diverse as corporate communications and investor relations, helping to integrate the message of corporate sustainability throughout company operations, prepare sustainability reports and respond to requests from investor analysts. A few have risen to the highest level as chief sustainability officers (CSO), reporting directly to the CEO of the company.

In these and other roles, IH professionals are finding that their basic skill set provides a solid foundation for their work in corporate sustainability.

“Industrial hygienists are very good at understanding, quantifying, evaluating and communicating risks,” said Jeff Hogue, CIH, vice president of corporate sustainability for Danisco, where he is responsible for overall strategic direction, reporting, transparency and investor initiatives. “IH skills transfer effectively to the more strategic roles involved with corporate sustainability.”

Product Stewardship: A Burgeoning Field

At ExxonMobil, many industrial hygienists have gotten involved in the product stewardship aspect of sustainability. As ExxonMobil Chemical Company’s product stewardship and regulatory affairs manager, Allan Fleeger, CIH, CSP, has the responsibility to help identify and manage risks associated with products sold in commerce across the value chain. His staff evaluates the raw materials and additives used in the company’s products and conducts risk assessments to help ensure the safe handling, transport and disposal of these products for their intended use.

“Our work is somewhat unique because of the wide slate of products we manufacture, ranging from high volume commodity products to specialty chemicals and polymers,” explained Fleeger. “When we conduct our risk assessments, we evaluate if we can support the sale of that product into that intended use. If we identified an application that we do not support, we communicate that in our product information. If we learn that a customer is inappropriately using our product, we would contact the customer to discuss the issue and take appropriate...
action as necessary, which could include stopping that sale.”

Fleeger’s group also supports new product development. As the R&D staff gets closer to a viable product concept, the product stewardship group conducts a risk assessment for the proposed applications.

In addition, Fleeger and his staff work with the International Council of Chemical Associations (ICCA) to educate smaller and medium-sized chemical companies in developing countries about the ICCA Global Product Strategy, which seeks to improve the industry’s management of chemicals and communication of chemical risks throughout the supply chain. ICCA designed training materials for mid-level career EHS professionals who have responsibility for initiating a sustainability program at their company. Last year, ICCA conducted 12 workshops, from Russia and Eastern Europe to Malaysia and Indonesia, working through the United Nations Environment Program as well as individual country chemical associations.

The workshops are greeted with great enthusiasm. “The participants know that this information will help their companies do the right thing from a stewardship and regulatory perspective,” said Fleeger.

The demand for industrial hygienists to do this kind of international work is growing, according to Fleeger. By applying basic risk assessment, management and communication principles, industrial hygienists have the perfect skill set to fill this niche. Ten years ago, only five or six countries had chemical inventories, requiring companies to provide appropriate toxicology information for chemicals to be sold there. Now, with the Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labeling of Chemicals (GHS), many countries worldwide are developing their own classification and labeling system along with much more specific product regulations.

Product stewardship is an aspect of sustainability that is still evolving with great growth opportunities for IH professionals, noted Kathy Thompson, CIH, technical service specialist with 3M’s Building and Commercial Services Division, and chair of AIHA’s Stewardship and Sustainability Committee. At 3M, she provides chemical safety training services for customers in the commercial cleaning markets, educates customers about infection control in the health care market, and speaks on surface disinfection and chemical regulatory topics. She also serves on business teams and product development teams.

Thompson’s work is integral to the Life Cycle Management (LCM) component of 3M’s environmental stewardship and sustainability policy, focusing on the entire product life cycle from manufacturing through customer use and disposal. All business units are required to conduct LCM reviews for new and existing products.

Understanding the Business

Thompson sees many opportunities for industrial hygienists to get involved on the business side of the company in areas related to sustainability, such as new product development, technical service and customer training and outreach.

“Sustainability also provides us with a lot of opportunities to communicate more effectively to the general public about the work we do in terms that they better understand and can relate to,” she said.

IH professionals who work on the business side are usually better positioned to advance to senior posts in corporate sustainability, according to Hogue, who co-founded the AIHA Stewardship and Sustainability Committee. “People who sit in business understand the business context, and understand how to apply sustainability to the business’ strategic intent. With this level of understanding, they are better equipped to lead sustainability efforts and embed these principles into the business.”

“Sustainability involves meeting the needs of today without compromising future generations,” observed Marilyn Johnson, director of corporate sustainability for IHS, a critical information and insight source serving Fortune 500 firms in energy and power and EHS, among other fields. “This opens up many career possibilities for industrial hygienists because identifying long-term impacts and opportunities for sustainability requires the same thought process used in IH: anticipate, recognize, evaluate and control.”

Johnson speaks from experience. She came to her current position after serving in EHS positions in the oil and gas industry and the wood and building products...
business. Now as a member of her company’s corporate communications, investor relations and corporate sustainability group, Johnson’s primary responsibility is to integrate corporate sustainability and strategically bring sustainable thinking into company operations.

IH professionals can also contribute to innovation and business value creation. “In the sustainability world, we strive to motivate our organizations to see the big picture, to be inspired to develop innovative solutions to long-term global challenges,” said Hogue. “Industrial hygienists bring a unique skill set that enables them to take those challenges and translate them into something that’s actionable by the organization, which is quite powerful. The fact that IH professionals are good communicators gives them a significant advantage in motivating people to deliver the most impactful decisions in a variety of business functions including innovation, sales, sourcing and manufacturing.”

Breaking into Sustainability
IH professionals who aspire to careers in corporate sustainability need to understand the opportunities and take the initiative. A new and important resource is the recently launched Center for Safety and Health Sustainability (CSHS), a collaborative effort between AIHA, the American Society of Safety Engineers (ASSE) and the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH). The Center is focused on defining how safety and health professionals contribute to the long-term sustainability of organizations and will serve as a comprehensive resource in addressing global sustainability policies. (See the sidebar on page 31 for more information about CSHS.)

“The greatest way for IH professionals to gain traction is to look at their company’s product lifecycles, identify opportunities and show that there’s a market for innovating in this area,” said Johnson. “Industrial hygienists have the background and skills to show the business value of sustainability and demonstrate the connection between sustainability efforts and the company brand and reputation.”

At Arizona State University (ASU), the role of the EHS group in sustainability is growing because the group recognized opportunities and actively pursued them, according to Michael Ochs, CH, assistant director of EHS at ASU. As a result, the group has been working with ASU’s Office of University Sustainability Practices unit to promote sustainability throughout the university. When the Office of University Sustainability Practices was setting sustainability goals, the EHS group served as a resource by providing valuable IH insights and perspective.

“Recently, ASU developed an online course, Sustainability 101, which is available on the ASU website for all employees,” noted Ochs. At ASU, EHS is also responsible for the university’s Green Labs Program, which assists in reducing energy use and implementing other sustainable practices through education and alternative solutions. For more information, visit the ASU Green Labs Program website at http://sustainability.asu.edu/about/resources/green-labs/index.php.

Expanding Knowledge
Expanding knowledge in all areas related to sustainability is also key to career growth. IH professionals will benefit by learning more about regulatory issues related to bringing products to market and stewardship, including chemical control regulations and other regulations affecting chemical and non-chemical products.

AIHA offers courses on these issues through the Stewardship and Sustainability Committee. Topics include REACH (Registration, Evaluation, Authorization and Restriction of Chemicals), GHS and product stewardship. Trade associations such as the Consumer Specialty Products Association and American Coatings Association are also good sources for training.

Knowledge of environmental regulations and country inventory regulations is also important. “Industrial hygienists have the opportunity to become more involved in the advocacy and regulatory arena to promote regulations with good science behind them,” noted Fleeger. “This will help ensure safe products for consumer use by applying the same principles and regulations that everyone can work with.”

Understanding major sustainability initiatives such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and the International Standards Organization Guidance for Social Responsibility (ISO 26000) is also key. Hogue recommends expanding professional development activities to include conferences and engagements with other professional organizations such as Business for Social Sustainability (BSR) and the Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship (BCCCC). “These organizations have very engaging conferences and learning opportunities, which will help IH professionals to better understand the landscape of initiatives, norms, standards and best practices,” he said.

“Reading sustainability reports will help them gain awareness of the key issues companies face as well as the frameworks and approaches they use to deal with them,” Hogue added. “They may find approaches that could be useful in their own organization.”

A growing number of graduate programs on sustainability are also an important resource. ASU, for example, established the nation’s first School of Sustainability with graduate and undergraduate degree programs.

“IH professionals can most successfully transition into the corporate sustainability arena and advance when they thoroughly understand sustainability in the business context,” said Hogue. “They must take the initiative to change the discussion from compliance and risk reduction to opportunity harvesting and market growth.”