

Lowering the Ladder to Learn and Grow

Welcome to the Lowering the Ladder Series - a selection of interviews designed to inspire, empower, and encourage each other in the health and safety profession. Those times when we lower to ladder to help someone up or are encouraged to climb the ladder ourselves, can be turning points in our lives, supporting us as individuals, and the profession as a whole.



Name: Susi Ratnakar

Position: Health & Safety Advisor -
Boffa Miskell, Christchurch

Tell us a bit about your current role.

I was thrilled to join Boffa Miskell in Jan 2021 as a Health and Safety Advisor. I was brought on board to review and enhance their safety systems with a focus on critical risks including lone and remote work, safety in design, contractor management and biosecurity work. As a professional consultancy they are involved in a diverse range of work activities from office-based planning and design work to urban and residential construction site visits, to measuring flora and fauna, assessing the health and habitat of frogs and bats, and overseeing contractors delivering important biosecurity projects. They have a range of highly skilled and passionate people and, as is the case with many businesses, it's important to make sure that the systems are solid but flexible to allow for the diverse and sometimes unexpected nature of their work.

Prior to this role I was a Health, Safety and Environment Business Partner at AgResearch (a Crown Research Institute focused on growing productivity in our agricultural and pastoral industries) where I've been for the last 7 years.

What got you started in Health and Safety?

From being shown around a 200T excavator in Stockton open cast mine, to facilitating a strategic advisory group of Galvanizing business leaders, as a Training Advisor working in an industry training organization (EXITO) from 2009-2012, I engaged with many different industries to promote national qualification achievement. Every qualification had unit standard 497 'demonstrate knowledge of workplace health and safety' and yet it was clear that when the production pressure was on, the focus on health and safety fell away. It was also clear that demonstrating 'knowledge of' and 'practice of' were quite different things.

At AgResearch in 2015, I had the opportunity (when returning to work part time) to be heavily involved in a project reviewing our health and safety systems; and this launched my health and safety career. The Board approved the appointment of a National Manager in Health and Safety to sit on the Executive team. We implemented the Risk Manager Health and Safety Database and began making changes to better align with the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, including the updated Accredited Employer Programme (ACC AEP).

Holding a BA (Psychology) from the University of Canterbury, I feel that the people and behaviour focus of health and safety aligns neatly with my degree, and it feels like I'm coming full circle to utilize my passion for people and processes. I recently completed the NZ Diploma in Workplace Safety and Health and achieved my professional accreditation with NZISM earlier in 2021.

Who has helped you get where you are and how?

At AgResearch:

- Nick Daniels (now GM Field Operations at ECAN) who gave me the opportunity to work on the health and safety project – launching me into health and safety
- Andy Anderson (now Senior Auditor, Telarc), who encouraged me to ‘take the leap’ into health and safety by commencing the NZ Diploma through SIT and showed me the benefits of reading and interpreting legislation to get the answers
- Natasha Barnett (now Director of Health and Safety, UCAN) who expressed the skill of not needing to have all the answers to each health and safety query but knowing where to look; and the importance of being an influencer to bring people along on ‘the journey’

Also:

- Sharon Butt (now Group Health & Safety manager at Trojan Holdings Ltd) who generously met with me and helped with my CV, showing me the virtues of networking, and as it happens, of lowering the ladder to help another female practitioner!

Were there any pivotal moments in your career, that were difficult at the time, but you look back on and understand the value of the experience? What did you learn and how has that helped you?

Around ten years ago, the government encouraged industry training organisations to merge and all staff were made redundant at EXITO in 2012 (a few months before my wedding). I was so grateful that Metalcorp NZ, one of my scrap metal recycling clients - offered me a casual position working on a quality certification project. As well as learning what a grab was (!), I learned about the importance of getting buy-in from the workers and managers doing the work. It wasn't effective to craft things from an office without their consultation and buy in, which applies to the health and safety world also. I then took a permanent position with AgResearch.

2020 was a slippery year for all, but some additional life events helped me to realise that I was going to grow faster and more strongly as a practitioner if I expanded into new health and safety roles. At the time it was scary to step out of my comfort zone and market myself – but I realized how much I had to offer, was awed by the kindness of those who helped along the way, and was reminded of the philosophy: ‘when you ask for what you want, the universe provides’.

How do you encourage others to learn and grow?

I enjoy listening to the ‘Pre-accident investigation’ podcast by Todd Conklin – and one guest he had on, Sahika Korkmaz of Tesla, talked of how you can listen to something that may seem unrelated to you, but you can usually find some way that it will apply to what you're doing. I do recommend his podcast, but also encourage people to look more broadly at how things may apply to your health and safety career by listening to a variety of things (whether it be sports psychology or personal development talks!). Ultimately, I encourage others by simply giving positive encouragement with anything they want to try.

Share one thing with us that you have learned in your career.

You have to involve workers and managers in crafting new processes and systems, particularly the people who are at the ‘pointy end of the stick’ i.e. the workers closest to the hazards. They are the only ones who can tell you how things actually are and enable you to create processes that will be practical and used properly.

Also, it is more important to get something good in place, and then check and review it in six months, rather than trying to achieve the ‘best’ system upfront.

When did you last lower the ladder?

If you have an inspirational story to share, the WISE NZ Group would love to hear from you. Please get in touch via LinkedIn.