

# The time-travelling ERGONOMIST

The CIEHF celebrates its 75th anniversary this year but what will human factors look like in another 75 years? **Paul Davison** imagines what the Institute's future President might say in a speech to members to mark our 150th birthday and the changes that we could have helped bring about by 2099...

“As I look back on the past 75 years, there have been many developments in ergonomics and human factors, not least a deeper and more meaningful comprehension of compassion and safety as functions of leadership.

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stressors, leaders were required to provide PPE that went beyond the physical, to manage and mitigate the psychological, emotional and spiritual challenges of the workplace. A shift in leaders' vulnerability about themselves and others, with a conception that questions were of greater importance than answers. To boldly go beyond and create learning cultures rooted in

long-term relationship building, centred on values-based decision making and grounded in strategies to achieve far reaching purposes.

I'll start with accidents and their investigations. Seventy-five years ago, there was a significant lack of understanding over the speed of adverse events. In 2024, investigations, as they were so quaintly termed, focused mainly on people and then only on those involved within the minutes and hours prior to the event. Few considered the system factors, especially those not proximal to the event.

It's truly wonderful that the Institute took a lead in the establishment of learning and pre-adverse event reviews. The accurate categorising of the factors that trigger adverse events resulted in safety leaders taking a proactive and deliberate practice to identify and own contributory factors and put in place action plans to remove or mitigate them.

Such a shift saw people as problem solvers, as opposed to being problems to be solved. It levelled organisational hierarchies and resulted in a movement from leader-follower and empowerment relationships through to leader-leader, the sharing of control and emancipated relationships. Everyone had an equal

voice regardless of role, position or experience. Instead of 'why', we heard 'tell me more about'.

The outcome was a near cessation of the post-large-scale accident inquiries more often focused on blame and retribution. These were replaced by a whole industry proactively searching for human factors issues and their removal and mitigation. An industry founded on the understanding that there are no new accidents, only new people.

Back in the 2020s, an even lower priority and one which I'm thrilled the Institute has been instrumental in changing, was the generation of an understanding that many adverse events take place in slow motion, over months and weeks, sometimes years. These are the psychological, emotional and spiritual adverse events.

My own area of research, that of Compassionate Safety, has developed into one of the most impactful industry standards and has for many decades formed part of the Health, Safety and Wellbeing at Work Act within the UK and other nations.

Many of us will cringe when I offer some statistics from 2024 at the time of the Institute's 75th anniversary. Fatal injuries at work in the UK had plateaued with 114 deaths, mostly within construction, agriculture and forestry, but slow-motion injuries due to stress had ballooned.

Let's consider some facts from the 2020s: the EU's annual work-related costs were \$1 trillion, globally \$6 trillion. Those figures are quoted from before the tumultuous 2075 global financial market realignment. One in four experienced poor mental health due to work-related stress on an annual basis. More than a quarter of annual deaths were from cardio-vascular disease. In fact many organisations still held high as a badge of honour that to work here you had to, forgive my language, 'man up', and 'sink or swim'.

If you wanted to get on then dealing with pressure, toxic dysfunctional leaders and competitive working environments was part and parcel of work.

In essence, humans were managed as biological robots.

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The dehumanising of the workplace had, at its root, key performance indicators of a wide and diverse variety. All, with few exceptions, led to competitive working environments of finite games with winners and, sadly, too many losers.

Replacing these with value-based decision making and infinite performance indicators revolutionised workplaces. They became places of collaboration, with long-term relationships and learning at their heart and, of course, cake.

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Performance had become an input, an investment in people for the long term. We've evolved sufficiently to have safety critical sectors which accommodate humans for being human, which catch them kindly when they fall. A world where only the correct thing, the safest thing makes sense. This was enshrined in UK law when the 2068 amendment of the Health, Safety and Wellbeing at Work Act established that employers were responsible for not only a physical duty of care, but also a psychological duty of care.

Perhaps, like me, you recall from our childhood, the TV series *Zara*, about a time-travelling ergonomist who visited the scenes of historic disasters and was able to intervene, altering facets of the narrative to avert disaster. My favourite episode was of *Zara* visiting the bridge of the Titanic and nudging the Captain's arm to point out the iceberg in the distance. I've heard it said that *Zara* did more for creating well beings at work and designing accommodating working environments than any intervention in the last 100 years. The increased number of university places and courses

resulted in a huge number of ergonomists and human factors experts entering industry. You only need to look around this room at the holders of Nobel, Wolf, Templeton and Shaw prizes winners, along with those with national honours. Perhaps then the single greatest achievement in the last 100 years by the Institute is the inclusion of human performance and ergonomics onto the national curriculum. Now allow me to expound other achievements of the Institute's past 150 years...

## Back in 2024...

After exploring what the future could hold, why do we have to wait 75 years to create working environments free from harm? Shouldn't we take the lead and redefine safety to take a holistic approach towards humans, designing working environments which accommodate humans for being human and are committed to the establishment of long-term relationships and the prevention of recurrence?

Perhaps the start is a fresh definition of safety, one that holds employers to a duty of care which includes physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual safety and generates environments where we can all thrive and flourish. Maybe it's a dream and I should keep my visions to myself or perhaps it's an opportunity to be courageous, to go back to that future and collect learning that would be useful here and now. Why wait 75 years? If all that sounds great, why not just do it now? ■

## About the author

**Paul Davison** is co-founder of human-centred performance group PPWD

