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Marisa Firkins - Career Spotlight



Career Spotlight: Marisa Firkins



ENG had the pleasure of hosting a Q&A spotlight with Health and Safety Expert, and Winner of the 2021 Institute of Directors Agility & Resilience Award - Marisa Firkins.

With a health and safety career spanning the past 11 years, and 7 of those running her own consultancy, Marisa gives us an insight into her career, running a business, achievements and challenges she has faced as well as some top tips for emerging health and safety professionals.

Talk me through your journey of how you got into health and safety?

I worked for the national crime agency for 22 years and I was previously a Union Health and Safety Representative. I was an investigator and worked away from home quite a lot, then my husband fell ill and spent 2 and a half years in and out of hospital, so I felt I needed a career change because my daughter was quite young.

I'd already got a keen interest in health and safety, I was always interested in protecting people, it was a natural progression for me, so I did my NEBOSH general certificate at night school over 9 months, then once I'd finished and was waiting for my results, a job came up for a Health and Safety Advisor within the organisation I worked for and out of 4500 people I was the only one with operational experience and a NEBOSH certificate, which was the 2 criteria. I was very lucky, in the right place at the right time.

I stayed with them for about 5 years in that role but because of public sector cuts the role changed and I was a lot more desk-bound and I've never seen it as a role that should be desk bound. Then voluntary redundancy came up and after having 22 years in the business it was a no brainer. I toyed with the idea of taking it at first and I was in the pub one night with a friend and he said "set up your own business, you'd be really good at it" and it was just a conversation in the pub, so I set up my business 7 years ago and the rest is history.





What does a typical week look like for you?

It's very much a mixture of client work and running the business side of things, I organise work when we take on new clients, so I'll do a 'needs analysis' on them to see what they want, how we're going to achieve it, and who the best consultant is to be placed with them. But I do think it's really important still to get out and about and meet clients on site, so I'll be out on construction sites, so last week I was out meeting with a new site manager on a construction site to mentor him through the health and safety aspects of his job and then I was with a company that stores and distributes chemicals so we were having a look at reconfiguring the building and what the new layout needed to be.

I did an accident investigation last week where someone had been injured at work so it's really varied, and I also do quality assurance. Once a consultant has been out to one of the clients I'll go through what support has been given, whether was it at the right level, the quality of the documents supplied and more, so it's lots of different things.

With the physical elements of the job like going out onto sites and meeting people, how did Covid impact that and how did you overcome that challenge?

There's a number of ways, when lockdown came last year there was a massive impact on the business, but we had to overcome it because there was still a requirement. There's this whole new aspect that's come out, it's health and safety related and we had to really bring ourselves up to speed with it really quickly, but everyday it was changing. We overcame the challenges of Covid by instead of face to face visits and site walk-rounds we'd get clients to use WhatsApp video to walk us round and talk us through different questions that we had. We also nominated a technical lead in the business to make sure that we were giving out the right information in respect of Covid.

The pandemic really has focused business owners and leaders how important people are within the business, all of a sudden there were people self-isolating and getting ill with Covid. I had clients that literally had to shut up shop and close because they didn't have the staff. The benefit for the health and safety industry is that it's almost become easier and simpler now because everyone understands the importance of keeping their staff safe and healthy.

What would you say has been your proudest achievement?

I think when there's been contracts that we've won with really large business and I've felt really accomplished that they've chosen to do business with us.

I recently won an award in the Institute of Directors for Agility and Resilience last week which I'm really proud of. I'm also really proud looking around and seeing what I've built, and being proud of how my consultants interact with people and seeing them being proud of where they work and taking pride in what they do.

Who in the industry inspires you and why?

In Health and Safety there's a gentleman called Clive F. Lloyd. He is an author of a book called 'Next Generation Safety Leadership'. He really talks about the trust that is needed in order to have a safe workforce, to get everyone pulling in the right direction there's got to be trust and explores how getting the workforce to trust in you is the most important thing. It's a really inspiring book.

I'm also a massive fan of podcasts, not necessarily health and safety related. I really enjoyed Steven Bartlett's Diary of a CEO, particularly when he talks to Rio Ferdinand. I like the 'High Performance Podcast' and 'How to Fail with Elizabeth Day'. They're not safety related but it gives you a chance to reflect on yourself as a person and understand the importance of failing, brushing yourself off and picking yourself up again.



What are your top tips for someone starting out in the industry?

To volunteer your time. I am a big advocate of bringing people into this business who have passion. It's passion over technical knowledge for me. I have a member of staff here who sent me a random email about 18 months ago, saying that she had completed an events management degree but got a real keen interest in health and safety and asked if she could spend the week with us. So that's what she did and we kept in touch. Just by the fact that she's passionate, she's got an interest and took the time to drop me the odd message on LinkedIn to ask how I was doing showed me that she was committed and now she's on the team.

That's probably the first one. Be focused on where you want to be and how you're going to get there.

One of the biggest criticisms people come out with when job searching is having no experience and feeling like nobody will give them a chance, but I think there are people out there that will accept that you've got no experience but you've got to be realistic. You can't go in at entry level and command £37k a year when you've got no experience. You've always got to take that lower job and build yourself up and get that experience behind you.

Networking is really important and I know that's been really difficult since Covid, but going to the IOSH meetings is a great way of networking. There are people who regularly keep in touch with me that I've never met. Make sure you get connected to the right people but it is a 2 way street. LinkedIn is such a useful tool but you can't just post and expect people to comment and engage with you if you don't engage with them too. It's about building relationships and that does take time.



What would you like to achieve with your career in the next 5 years

When I set up this business I thought it was going to just be me working from my garage 2 days a week, and quickly without even really trying it's just snowballed. In the next 5 years I'd like to grow a really good Health and Safety Consultancy, that gives people opportunities and people who join us can grow with the business. On a more personal note, I've put a lot of time and effort into my business to get it where it is now, so I'd like it to give me a bit of my time back so I can have more of a work-life balance.

I do really want to grow the business further and I know that personal branding is really important – Laura Aucott is really good on that topic. It's not only important when you're setting out on a career journey, but the actual branding of the business and I don't just mean the logo, you're creating an inspiring workplace and solving problems for people.

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