

Q&A



Martin Anderson, FIEHF

Why did you get into ergonomics?

During my psychology degree at the University of Birmingham, my final year project was in relation to instrument displays in helicopters, under the supervision of Sandy MacRae. This was my introduction to human-machine interfaces and to the wider subject of ergonomics and human factors. The project directly led to my decision to apply for the MSc in Work Design & Ergonomics and I'm indebted to Sandy for launching my career in such a fascinating subject.

Who has been the greatest influence on you professionally?

The late Dr Nick Hurst for his mentoring and guidance whilst at the research division of HSE (now HSL). Nick created the opportunity for me to study part-time for an MSc in Process Safety & Loss Prevention, and this firmly cemented my career in the oil, gas and chemicals industries. He taught me a great deal about safety management systems, safety culture, human performance and, through example, how to be a first-class manager.

What other field of research or practice most inspires your work?

My role involves assessing how organisations work (and unfortunately, how they can fail), and so there are many parallels with management consultancy. I interact with managing directors and other senior managers of international oil companies and so it helps to have an understanding of business in order to build rapport and gain credibility.

What ergonomics-related book have you read recently?

Nudge by Thaler & Sunstein. This engaging book describes how environments can be designed to 'nudge' people in beneficial directions. It's primarily aimed at behavioural economics and social policies such as encouraging people to save, take out a pension, reduce greenhouse emissions, etc. What interested me were the parallels with human performance and the factors that 'influence' (or nudge) workplace behaviours. Using a hotel key card in a slot by the door to turn lights on and off is one example you may have come across.

What advice do you have for aspiring ergonomists?

Ask the stupid questions early on, before it's too late and you then look stupid for asking them. Before you visit a company, research them online to learn about their latest product, project, or something in the news that affects them; bringing this up in conversation will build your credibility. Don't specialise too early; wide experience of different industries and topics makes a great foundation for a career. Most of all, listen more than you talk.

What is the biggest future challenge for the discipline or profession?

To show that we offer something different from other professionals.

How healthy is the market for services in ergonomics and HF?

I see an increasing recognition of our topic and many companies are buying-in our expertise. In safety-critical industries, incident investigations continue to highlight the role that people at all levels play in major incidents, and this is helping to keep human factors and ergonomics high on the agenda.

What changes in industry or society will need our input in the near future?

Many organisations are relying on fewer staff, with wider responsibilities, working with ageing plant and equipment, and that combination of factors is worrying.

How can ergonomics have more impact?

Some of the most successful interventions I have seen are those that were undertaken with significant input from industry experts. There's a saying that we should provide our 'clients' with a Mini, rather than trying to sell them a Rolls Royce. I think that's the wrong analogy – instead we need to teach more people to drive, not sell them cars.

How can the application of research findings be improved?

Communicating the findings to a wider audience is key. Different forms of media can be employed to make findings more accessible, such as social media and video-sharing websites. An excellent example is the winner of the best paper award at the EHF2012 conference. This paper discusses a film that was produced in order to disseminate results from the seafarers' fatigue project, reaching an audience that would not normally have access to this work.

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This article originated from a review of several high-profile events across a range of sectors, whilst researching safety leadership and information in preparation for interviewing Managing Directors of oil companies. I have an interest in organisational failures, and how the causes of major events often echo the past.