

RESEARCH REPORT

Beyond the Safety Function

Why HSE professionals rarely reach the CEO role - and what organisations can do about it

THE CENTRAL FINDING

The barrier is not a simple absence of leadership potential. It is the interaction of uneven development, technically bounded innovation, career preferences and systems that keep ambition inside the function.

Griff Bromfield-Jenkins

Public report based on master's research conducted in 2023 and submitted in 2024

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Executive summary

Health, safety and environmental (HSE) professionals often sit close to an organisation's most consequential decisions. They understand operations, risk, regulation, people and increasingly the environmental and social dimensions of performance. Yet they rarely progress from functional leadership to the chief executive role.

This research tested three possible explanations: whether HSE professionals lack the traits associated with effective leadership; whether they lack adaptability and innovation; and whether career aspirations and professional systems are misaligned with the route to enterprise leadership.

BOTTOM LINE

The evidence does not justify the claim that HSE professionals are broadly incapable of leadership. The more persuasive explanation is a career ecosystem that develops technical authority more reliably than enterprise ambition, commercial fluency or cross-functional exposure.

What the evidence says

- Leadership capability is present but uneven. Across 11 self-assessed dimensions, Level 3 was the most common overall response, while Level 4 was the mode for most individual questions. Very few respondents rated themselves at the highest level across every dimension.
- The profession reported clear strengths. 92% rated themselves at Level 3 or above for conscientiousness; 96% did so for emotional intelligence; 73% selected Levels 4 or 5 for social awareness; and 63% selected Levels 4 or 5 for cognitive ability.
- Adaptability and innovation appear strongest inside the technical domain. The survey suggests openness and problem-solving capacity, but it cannot establish whether these capabilities translate into business-model innovation, revenue growth or enterprise strategy.
- Ambition is concentrated within the profession. Among 95 usable career-aspiration responses, 44% were coded as staying in the current role or focusing on retirement, 51% as progressing to roles with limited accountability, and 5% as seeking roles with greater accountability. CEO or managing director language appeared only four times; leading the HSE function appeared 29 times.
- Professional and organisational systems may reinforce the ceiling. Technical credentials, function-specific networks and mentoring can strengthen expertise while offering limited access to commercial roles, CEO mentors and enterprise-wide assignments.

What this means for business leaders

For organisations, this is not only a diversity or succession issue. It is a potential misallocation of talent. People trained to understand systems, anticipate failure, influence without direct control and balance competing stakeholder interests may bring useful capabilities to broader leadership - particularly in high-reliability, regulated or ESG-sensitive settings. Those capabilities will remain underused unless employers create credible routes beyond the function.

The question behind the research

The HSE profession has grown in scale, visibility and influence. Large organisations commonly place senior safety leaders on executive teams or boards, and the profession has become increasingly relevant to ESG, workforce wellbeing, operational resilience and corporate reputation. Even so, the conventional career path tends to stop at Head of HSE, Director of HSE or an equivalent functional role.

The original research question was deliberately provocative: Why do Health and Safety professionals not become CEOs? It was designed to move the conversation away from how leaders can improve safety and towards the leadership prospects of the professionals themselves.

Three explanations were tested

Hypothesis	The proposition	What the study found
1. Leadership ability	HSE professionals do not possess or display the traits and behaviours needed for CEO roles.	Not supported as a simple explanation. Respondents showed a range of leadership strengths, but maturity was uneven and largely self-reported in the middle-to-upper range.
2. Adaptability and innovation	HSE professionals lack the flexibility and innovative capacity required in executive leadership.	Partly challenged. Respondents reported openness and problem solving, but the evidence does not show whether these strengths transfer beyond technical risk management.
3. Aspiration and technical pathways	Career preferences and a system that prizes technical expertise over business leadership restrict progression.	Most consistent with the findings. Only 5% of coded aspirations involved greater accountability, while career structures and networks appeared to keep development within the profession.

Interpretation based on the dissertation's three hypotheses, survey findings and discussion.

Why this matters now

Organisations increasingly face problems that do not fit neatly inside one function: climate transition, public trust, workforce health, supply-chain resilience, technological risk and social licence to operate. These are often 'wicked problems' - contested, interconnected challenges with no single correct solution. They reward leaders who can combine expertise with adaptability, collaboration and judgement.

HSE professionals may be well placed to contribute because their work already crosses operations, people, assurance and risk. But technical credibility alone does not create a CEO candidate. Enterprise leadership also requires commercial judgement, responsibility for trade-offs, visible ownership of outcomes and experience beyond the home function.

What the research did

The study combined a literature review with a quantitative self-assessment survey of HSE professionals. The survey was conducted in October 2023 and distributed to an estimated 500 people through LinkedIn communities, professional channels and group mailing lists within major UK transport-infrastructure organisations.

Study at a glance

106	22%	54%	95
qualified respondents	estimated response rate	with line-management responsibility	usable career-aspiration responses

How leadership maturity was assessed

The questionnaire drew on the leadership attributes described by Zaccaro, Kemp and Bader (2004). Respondents selected one of five behaviour-based descriptions for each dimension, from lower to higher maturity. The 11 dimensions were extraversion, cognitive ability, conscientiousness, emotional stability, openness, agreeableness, motivation, social awareness, self-monitoring, emotional intelligence and problem solving.

Two further questions captured line-management responsibility and career aspirations. Multiple-choice answers were analysed descriptively; managers and non-managers were compared; and free-text aspirations were coded into broad themes.

IMPORTANT READING RULE

These are self-assessments, not observed performance ratings. The results describe how respondents perceived their leadership maturity; they do not prove CEO readiness or establish causal barriers to promotion.

Statistical caution

Because the survey responses were ordinal, non-parametric tests were used. No manager/non-manager differences reached statistical significance thresholds that the dissertation considered conclusive enough to report in detail. Apparent group differences should therefore be treated as descriptive signals, not established effects.

The full survey evidence

The empirical core of the research was not a handful of interviews or isolated observations. It comprised 106 qualified HSE professionals answering 11 behaviour-based leadership questions: 1,166 scored responses in total. Fifty-seven respondents (54%) had line-management responsibility and 49 (46%) did not. A further 95 respondents supplied usable free-text career-aspiration answers.

SCALE OF THE EVIDENCE

106 professionals x 11 leadership dimensions = 1,166 scored responses, plus 95 career narratives.

The following section restores the breadth of that evidence. Percentages are reproduced from the dissertation's analysis. Manager/non-manager differences are included where the original discussion highlighted them, but they remain descriptive because no tested difference met the study's threshold for statistical significance.

Results across all 11 leadership dimensions

Dimension	Overall response pattern	Manager comparison	Public-facing interpretation
Extraversion	69% selected Level 3: a balance between independent and collaborative work.	Minimal difference between managers and non-managers.	Respondents described situational flexibility rather than a strong preference for constant social leadership.
Cognitive ability	39% selected Level 4; 63% selected Levels 4 or 5.	No significant descriptive difference was identified.	Most respondents expressed confidence in handling cognitively demanding work and varied problems.
Conscientiousness	92% selected Level 3 or above.	Managers leaned more towards Levels 4-5; non-managers more often selected Level 3.	Reliability, organisation and attention to commitments were clear strengths, consistent with HSE work.
Emotional stability	79% selected Levels 2-4; 8% selected Level 1, the largest low-score share of any dimension.	Both groups had four Level 1 responses; managers were about 10 points higher at Level 5.	Emotional regulation under pressure emerged as a material development need.
Openness	41% selected Level 3 and 50% Levels 4-5; nobody selected the keep-everything-the-same option.	No meaningful descriptive difference was identified.	The profession did not present as uniformly resistant to change, although many preferred balance over constant novelty.

Dimension	Overall response pattern	Manager comparison	Public-facing interpretation
Agreeableness / collaboration	45% selected Level 3 overall.	53% of non-managers selected Level 3. Managers appeared at both extremes: 7% at Level 1 and 32% at Level 5.	Collaboration may be experienced as a role requirement rather than a stable preference; answer design may also have affected the distribution.
Motivation	95% selected Levels 3-5.	32% of managers selected Level 5 versus 20% of non-managers.	Self-motivation was widely reported, although voluntary participation may have underrepresented less-engaged professionals.
Social awareness	73% selected Levels 4-5, distributed fairly evenly between them.	20% of managers selected Levels 1-2 versus 10% of non-managers.	Relationship-building and influence appear increasingly central to the profession, with a possible generational or career-stage pattern.
Self-monitoring	71% selected Levels 3-4; 43% selected Level 3.	More non-managers selected Level 5.	Respondents generally reported adapting behaviour to context; junior professionals may rely more heavily on influence than positional power.
Emotional intelligence	96% selected Level 3 or above; 71% selected Levels 4-5.	80% of non-managers selected Levels 4-5 versus 63% of managers; 33% of managers selected Level 3.	Respondents understood emotional awareness strongly, but the contrast with emotional stability suggests knowledge may not always translate into composure.
Problem solving	49% selected Level 4 and 18% Level 5; only 5% reported low confidence.	No significant descriptive difference was identified.	Problem solving is a prominent self-reported strength across seniority levels.

Table 1. Full survey profile reconstructed from the dissertation's question-by-question analysis. Percentages describe self-assessment responses, not observed competence.

The complete response distribution

The dissertation also aggregated the number of responses at each maturity level for every question. This preserves more information than reporting only a mean or a single modal score.

Dimension	L1	L2	L3	L4	L5	Mode
Extraversion	2	9	73	5	17	L3
Cognitive ability	4	17	18	41	26	L4
Conscientiousness	1	7	31	35	32	L4
Emotional stability	8	20	36	28	14	L3
Openness	0	10	43	28	25	L3
Agreeableness	5	11	48	15	27	L3
Motivation	3	2	35	38	28	L4
Social awareness	3	12	14	41	36	L4
Self-monitoring	1	7	46	29	23	L3
Emotional intelligence	0	4	27	38	37	L4
Problem solving	0	5	30	52	19	L4
All responses	27	104	401	350	284	L3

Table 2. Counts from the dissertation's Figure 17. Each dimension has 106 responses; the total row contains 1,166 responses. L1-L5 are ascending maturity descriptions.

What the paired analyses revealed

The study did more than review each question independently. It paired conceptually related dimensions to test whether respondents' answers formed a coherent leadership profile.

- Cognitive ability and problem solving: respondents were slightly more likely to select the highest level for cognitive ability, but more selected Levels 4-5 for problem solving overall. The dissertation interpreted this as evidence that problem solving has become part of the modern HSE role.
- Emotional intelligence and emotional stability: respondents rated emotional intelligence substantially more highly. This was the most important internal tension in the survey and supports a development focus on translating emotional awareness into calm, consistent behaviour under pressure.
- Openness and self-monitoring: the distributions were almost identical. This suggests that receptiveness to change and reflection on one's own impact may develop together, although a large Level 3 group shows room for continued growth.

- Whole-response patterns: one respondent selected Level 5 for all but one item, and two respondents selected only Levels 4-5. Nobody selected Levels 1-2 throughout, and nobody selected Level 3 for every question. The answers therefore showed individual variation rather than indiscriminate use of one response category.

Career aspirations: 95 qualitative responses

The optional free-text question generated 95 usable responses and 1,077 words for content analysis. The dissertation used word frequency analysis and thematic grouping to make these narratives comparable while retaining their directional meaning.

Coded aspiration	Share	What appeared in the text
Stay in current role or focus on retirement	44%	Job satisfaction, helping others, balance, family and personal priorities.
Progress to roles with limited accountability	51%	Leading the HSE function, senior management, teaching, training, lecturing and consultancy.
Progress to roles with greater accountability	5%	CEO or managing director language appeared four times; leading HSE appeared 29 times.

Table 3. Career-aspiration coding based on 95 responses. Broad categories simplify varied individual motivations and should not be interpreted as fixed psychological types.

Finding 1: Leadership potential exists; but it is uneven

The survey does not reveal a profession devoid of leadership capability. It shows a broad middle-to-upper maturity profile with clear strengths and specific development gaps. Across all 11 leadership questions, Level 3 was the most frequent response overall. For most individual questions, however, Level 4 was the modal answer.

Self-assessed leadership maturity clustered in the middle-to-upper range



Figure 1. Aggregate of 1,166 responses across 11 survey dimensions (106 respondents x 11 items), reconstructed from the dissertation's Figure 17. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

Only one respondent selected Level 5 on all but one question, and two respondents selected only Levels 4 or 5. At the other end, nobody selected Levels 1 or 2 throughout. This pattern is consistent with a profession that has meaningful capability but few respondents who see themselves as fully developed across the complete leadership profile.

The survey found substantial strengths, alongside uneven maturity

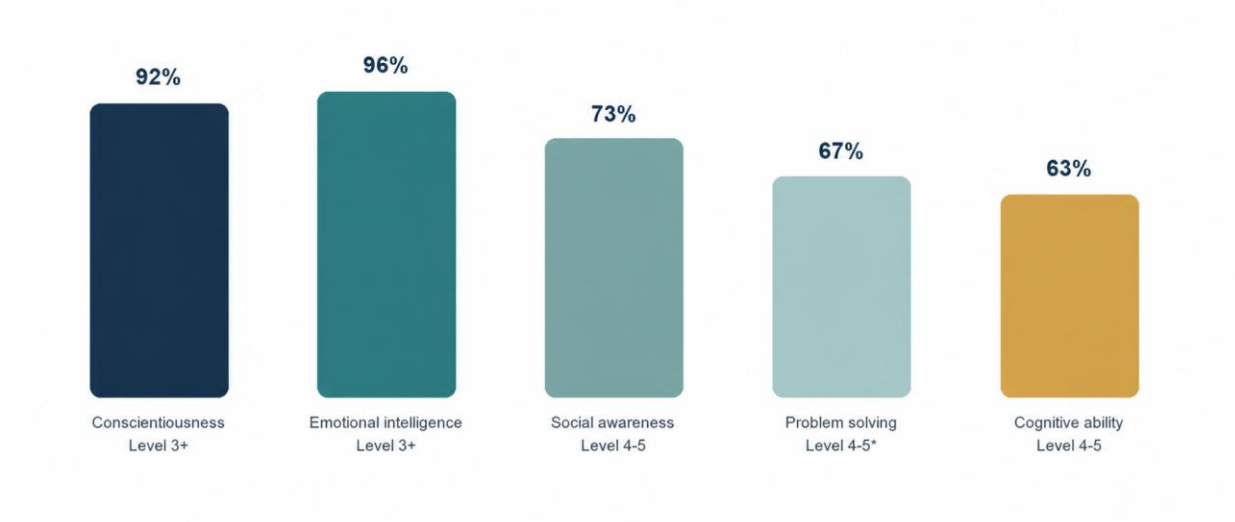


Figure 2. Selected self-reported strengths. *Problem-solving Level 4-5 is calculated from the reported 49% at Level 4 and 18% at Level 5.

Strengths with enterprise value

- Conscientiousness: 92% selected Level 3 or above, consistent with a profession built around reliability, attention to detail and commitments.
- Emotional intelligence: 96% selected Level 3 or above and 71% selected Levels 4 or 5, suggesting confidence in understanding and managing emotions at work.
- Social awareness: 73% selected Levels 4 or 5, reflecting the profession's shift from policing compliance towards relationship-building and influence.
- Problem solving: 67% selected Levels 4 or 5, while only 5% reported low confidence in their problem-solving ability.
- Cognitive ability: 63% selected Levels 4 or 5, reflecting confidence in handling demanding professional tasks.

The leadership gap is more nuanced

The profile also contains tensions. Respondents rated emotional intelligence more strongly than emotional stability. 79% selected Levels 2 to 4 for emotional stability, and this dimension had the largest share at Level 1 (8%). The dissertation interprets this as a development opportunity: understanding emotions is not the same as staying composed and effective under sustained pressure.

Extraversion clustered at Level 3, with 69% preferring a balance between independent and collaborative work. This may reflect useful situational flexibility. It may also reduce visibility in promotion systems that reward confident self-presentation and broad internal networks.

Finding 2: Innovation may be trapped inside the technical domain

The evidence challenges the idea that HSE professionals are inherently resistant to change. Half of respondents selected Levels 4 or 5 for openness, and no respondent chose the answer that indicated wanting to keep everything the same. Problem solving was also one of the strongest self-reported dimensions.

THE TRANSLATION GAP

The unresolved question is not whether HSE professionals can innovate. It is whether safety-led innovation is recognised - and practised - as enterprise innovation.

Two meanings of innovation

Innovation inside HSE	Innovation at enterprise level
Reduces exposure to a specific hazard or failure mode	Changes the business model, strategic position or customer proposition
Improves a process, control or assurance system	Creates growth, productivity or new sources of value
Prioritises risk elimination and mitigation	Balances risk, return, timing and strategic option value
Often judged through compliance and incident outcomes	Judged through enterprise performance and stakeholder outcomes

Conceptual comparison adapted from the dissertation's discussion of HSE innovation and Teece (2010).

This distinction matters because the hierarchy of controls encourages risk elimination at the earliest opportunity, whereas executives routinely choose among imperfect options and accept some risks to pursue opportunity. A strong HSE leader may therefore need to demonstrate not less concern for risk, but a wider vocabulary for value, trade-offs and strategic choice.

A natural fit in high-reliability settings

The literature on high-reliability organisations (HROs) offers a counterpoint. These organisations operate in complex environments where failure can be catastrophic, yet they sustain reliable performance through expertise, learning, resilience and devolved decision-making. HSE professionals' technical knowledge and systems perspective could be especially valuable in such contexts.

The opportunity is strongest when expertise is paired with adaptability. Leadership of a wicked problem cannot rely on one technical answer or a rigid hierarchy. It requires the ability to frame competing interpretations, convene diverse expertise and adjust as conditions change.

Finding 3: Aspiration is focused on the function, not the enterprise

The career aspiration analysis produced the clearest explanation for the absence of HSE professionals from CEO roles. Of the 106 survey respondents, 95 provided usable free-text answers. The dissertation coded these responses into three broad levels of ambition and accountability.

Most respondents did not aspire to enterprise-wide accountability

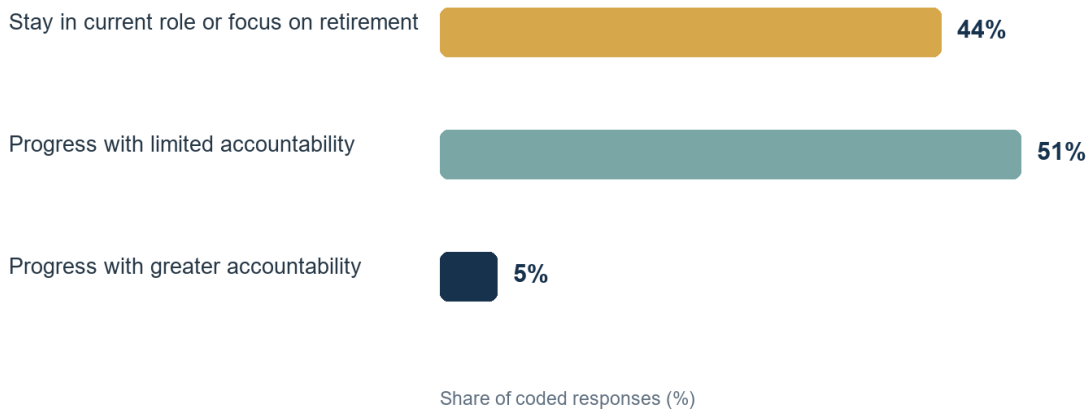


Figure 3. Career-aspiration categories among 95 usable free-text responses. Categories were created through word-frequency and thematic analysis in the dissertation.

Only four references were made to becoming a chief executive or managing director. By comparison, leading the HSE function was mentioned 29 times. Senior management appeared nine times, and teaching, training or lecturing also appeared nine times.

THE KEY DISTINCTION

A lack of CEO aspiration is not the same as a lack of ambition. Many respondents wanted to progress, contribute, teach or lead - but inside a professional identity they valued.

Why people may choose to stay

- Purpose and satisfaction. More than 30% of respondents referred to job satisfaction or helping others as a career motivator.
- Work-life priorities. Some responses suggested that family, personal interests and balance mattered more than promotion.
- Professional identity. Technical mastery, chartership and contribution to the profession can offer a credible and rewarding definition of success.

- Accountability and security. Enterprise leadership brings broader responsibility, exposure and potentially less perceived job security.
- A visible ceiling. If the only credible senior role models are functional directors, aspirations may adjust to what the system appears to make possible.

The data cannot distinguish precisely between free preference and constrained preference. A respondent may genuinely prefer a specialist career; another may have internalised a ceiling after limited exposure to broader pathways. Both can produce the same survey answer.

Finding 4: Career systems reinforce technical depth

The dissertation argues that the profession's development infrastructure is highly effective at building technical credibility. Qualifications, chartership, continuing professional development, peer networks and mentoring all help practitioners become stronger HSE specialists. The unintended consequence is that the same system may narrow access to enterprise leadership.

How the ceiling can reproduce itself

System signal	What it encourages	Possible consequence
Credentials reward technical progression	Deeper subject-matter expertise	Leadership and commercial capability receive less structured attention
Mentoring occurs mainly inside HSE	Advice from people who followed the same path	Limited insight into CEO pathways or enterprise roles
Networks are profession-specific	Strong peer identity and knowledge exchange	Fewer sponsors across operations, finance, strategy and customers
Organisations promote from familiar talent pools	Predictable succession and lower perceived appointment risk	Operational and commercial backgrounds dominate enterprise leadership
HSE innovation is described as risk reduction	Recognition for controls and compliance outcomes	Value creation and strategic contribution remain less visible

Mechanism map synthesised from the dissertation's discussion of organisational structure, professional bodies and networks.

This argument is plausible but not proven by the survey. The research did not directly measure appointment decisions, promotion criteria, sponsorship networks or the views of executives outside HSE. It identifies mechanisms that merit testing in future research.

A comparison with technical experts elsewhere

Research on expert leadership suggests that organisations can benefit when leaders deeply understand the work they oversee. Evidence discussed in the dissertation includes medicine, universities and professional sport. Yet technical professions also create strong internal status ladders, and senior specialists may prefer mastery and professional contribution to general management.

The HSE profession shares the pull of technical identity but differs in status, formal governance and established routes to executive authority. That makes deliberate cross-functional development especially important.

Full discussion of the findings

This section retains the complete line of argument developed in the dissertation. It moves from the raw patterns to what they may mean for leadership capability, adaptability, technical identity and career progression. Where the survey cannot establish causality, the text presents an interpretation rather than a proven fact.

1. Leadership ability

From fixed traits to developable leadership

Leadership research has moved from the idea that effective leaders possess a fixed set of innate characteristics towards a stronger focus on behaviours that can be learned, practised and adapted. Later work also treats leadership as collective and distributed rather than the sole property of a heroic individual. This matters because it reframes the question: HSE professionals do not need to be born with a CEO personality; they need opportunities to develop and demonstrate effective leadership in context.

The survey used the Zaccaro, Kemp and Bader framework to examine whether more than 100 HSE professionals recognised relevant traits, characteristics and behaviours in themselves. The modal response across all answers was Level 3, while Level 4 was the mode for most individual dimensions. Very few respondents claimed the highest maturity throughout. This could indicate genuine development gaps, but it may also reflect the humility and reflective practice associated with a profession that sees itself as an organisation's moral conscience.

Cognitive ability and professional development

Cognitive ability appeared as a strength: 63% selected Levels 4 or 5. The dissertation connects this with increasing educational expectations in the profession, the availability of undergraduate and postgraduate HSE programmes, and the substantial share of members of professional bodies holding graduate, chartered or fellowship status. The role has also evolved from repetitive audit and policing tasks towards influencing, interpretation and problem solving.

This evidence supports the proposition that many HSE professionals possess the cognitive capacity needed for leadership. It does not establish their financial or commercial competence, which would need to be measured separately.

Emotional intelligence and emotional stability

Emotional intelligence has become a prominent part of modern leadership thinking. HSE professionals often need to influence people without direct control and make moral, legal and financial arguments for change. That requires awareness of stakeholders and the ability to shape a message for different audiences.

Respondents rated their emotional intelligence highly but were much less confident about emotional stability. This gap suggests that professionals may understand the language and principles of emotional intelligence without always translating them into calm, consistent behaviour under pressure. Reliance on standard compliance arguments can also substitute for a deeper understanding of the conditions that create genuine commitment. Emotional stability therefore remains one of the clearest development priorities.

Extraversion, influence and visibility

Extraversion in leadership research is not simply sociability. It can involve energy, confidence, communication, adaptability and willingness to take interpersonal risks. Most respondents chose a balanced Level 3 work style, suggesting that they can collaborate or work independently depending on the task.

Situational flexibility can be valuable to an organisation, but it may not maximise the individual's visibility. Senior appointments can favour people who confidently present themselves, build influential relationships and volunteer for visible opportunities. Being effective is not always enough if decision-makers do not see the individual leading beyond the boundaries of the function.

Leadership-ability conclusion

The evidence does not support a blanket conclusion that HSE professionals lack the traits or behaviours required for leadership. It shows a profession with meaningful strengths, a broad middle band of maturity and a small number of respondents who saw themselves as highly mature across the framework. The development case is strongest around emotional stability, visible enterprise leadership and translating technical influence into broader organisational responsibility.

2. Adaptability and innovation

Leading wicked problems

Wicked problems are complex, contested and resistant to a single definitive solution. They demand flexibility, collaboration and the ability to reframe a problem as conditions change. HSE professionals encountered exactly this kind of challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic, when organisations depended on health, safety and wellbeing expertise to make decisions under uncertainty.

The pandemic and the rise of ESG increased the status and reach of the profession. That experience suggests HSE professionals can adapt when a challenge aligns with their expertise. The unanswered

question is whether the same adaptability transfers to problems where safety is only one consideration among commercial, operational, technological and social demands.

Risk aversion and adaptability

The HSE profession is strongly associated with risk reduction. The hierarchy of controls teaches practitioners to eliminate risk where possible and then reduce what remains. This mindset is indispensable for preventing harm, but enterprise leaders must also decide which risks to accept in pursuit of opportunity.

A practitioner can therefore be highly adaptive inside a risk-management frame while appearing inflexible to colleagues making broader strategic trade-offs. Progression requires the ability to preserve professional integrity while explaining risk in the language of options, value, timing, resilience and organisational purpose.

High-reliability organisations

High-reliability organisations avoid catastrophe in environments where serious failure is a normal possibility. They depend on technical expertise, resilience, learning and decision-making close to the point of knowledge. These conditions appear well suited to HSE professionals, whose work involves anticipating failure, understanding systems and supporting a proactive safety culture.

Leadership in these organisations is not always concentrated at the top. Expertise moves to where it has the most influence, and decision authority can be devolved. This strengthens the case for technical leadership, but it also complicates a simple comparison with the conventional CEO role.

What counts as innovation

HSE innovation is often technological or process-based: it improves a control, reduces exposure or manages a hazard more effectively. It may improve productivity, but that is not always its primary purpose and it may require substantial investment. Business innovation has a wider scope, including business models, customer propositions and strategy.

Survey respondents reported strong problem solving and considerable openness. The research therefore supports the view that HSE professionals can innovate. It does not demonstrate whether they routinely connect innovation with revenue, productivity, competitive advantage or new business opportunities. That translation is a critical test for enterprise leadership.

Adaptability-and-innovation conclusion

The second hypothesis is only partly supported. HSE professionals can display adaptability and innovation, particularly within their technical field. Evidence remains limited on whether those capabilities extend across the enterprise or whether the profession's risk-mitigation frame constrains how innovation is recognised and communicated.

3. Career aspiration and technical leadership

Many respondents did not want the CEO role

The career data provides the most direct explanation for the research question. 44% of coded responses indicated a desire to remain in the current role or focus on retirement; 51% sought progression with limited accountability; and 5% described progression with greater accountability. Leading the HSE function was much more common than becoming a managing director or CEO.

This should not be described as a lack of ambition. Respondents valued purpose, job satisfaction, helping others, continued learning, balance, teaching and technical contribution. A CEO role is only one definition of career success, and the survey shows that many professionals prefer other forms of impact.

The promise and limitation of expert leadership

Amanda Goodall's research argues that expert leaders can produce stronger organisational performance in medicine, universities and professional sport. If organisations genuinely want healthier workforces, stronger safety performance and ESG-led business models, a senior HSE professional could plausibly provide relevant expert leadership.

The limitation is breadth. Organisations may value the HSE leader as a technical adviser without believing that the individual has sufficient financial, commercial or general-management experience to lead the whole enterprise. Expertise creates credibility, but it does not remove the need for cross-functional competence.

Lessons from other technical professions

Work on clinicians moving into senior leadership offers an instructive comparison. Technical experts may prioritise advancement within their profession and may not see a chief executive role as desirable. In some fields, moving into management has historically been treated as a departure from professional excellence rather than its culmination.

HSE does not carry exactly the same educational barriers, social status or formal professional governance requirements as medicine, law or engineering. Even so, the underlying dynamic is familiar: professional identity, technical mastery and the satisfaction of helping others can make remaining inside the discipline a rational and rewarding choice.

Organisational structure and accountability

Executive roles can be perceived as less secure and more exposed than technical positions. Specialists may believe that professional communities offer stronger identity and protection, while accountability for organisational outcomes rests with executives. Leaving a secure expert pathway for a broader role can therefore appear unattractive.

The survey did not directly test appointment structures or job security, so this remains a proposed mechanism. It nevertheless helps explain why capability alone does not create a supply of CEO candidates.

Professional bodies, networks and mentoring

Professional membership bodies help practitioners deepen technical competence, maintain continuing development and progress towards chartership or fellowship. Mentoring within those systems is often provided by other HSE professionals and naturally focuses on the career route they know.

This can produce a closed development loop. Practitioners become more technically capable, network mainly with peers, and receive guidance towards the highest available role inside the function. Without mentors and sponsors who have led operations, finance, strategy or whole organisations, potential enterprise pathways remain difficult to see and navigate.

Career-pathway conclusion

The strongest overall interpretation is that HSE professionals rarely become CEOs because many do not seek the role and because professional and organisational systems channel those who do progress towards technical leadership. Leadership potential exists, but aspiration, commercial exposure, sponsorship and visible cross-functional experience shape whether that potential becomes enterprise candidacy.

An action agenda for organisations

The practical goal should not be to push every HSE professional towards the CEO role. It should be to ensure that those with the interest and potential can build credible enterprise leadership careers - and that organisations make fuller use of the capability already present in the function.

1

Open the pathway. Make enterprise leadership an explicit option in career conversations. Publish examples of cross-functional routes, not only the ladder to functional director.

2

Build commercial fluency. Give aspiring leaders responsibility for budgets, investment cases, productivity, customers and value creation - not only assurance and risk reduction.

3

Create cross-functional assignments. Use secondments and rotations in operations, strategy, finance, transformation, people leadership and customer-facing work. Assign outcomes, not observational placements.

4

Diversify mentoring and sponsorship. Pair HSE talent with leaders outside the profession, including current or former CEOs. Mentors advise; sponsors create exposure and advocate for opportunity.

5

Test leadership through stretch accountability. Offer ownership of ambiguous, enterprise-wide problems where success requires trade-offs, coalition-building and delivery across boundaries.

6

Recognise value creation. Assess HSE leaders on business outcomes alongside compliance: operational resilience, workforce capacity, reputation, innovation, productivity and strategic risk.

What professional bodies can do

- Rebalance development after chartership. Offer structured pathways in strategy, finance, organisational design, innovation and general management.
- Form partnerships across professions. Joint programmes with bodies representing HR, finance, operations, risk and governance can widen networks and capability.
- Make cross-profession mentoring routine. Give members access to mentors whose careers moved beyond a single technical discipline.
- Show multiple definitions of success. Celebrate expert practitioners, functional leaders and enterprise leaders without implying that one path invalidates another.
- Build an evidence base. Track career mobility, cross-functional moves, senior appointments and the barriers encountered at each transition.

What HSE professionals can do

- Decide what you want before accepting the default ladder. Specialist, functional leadership or enterprise route can all be legitimate choices.
- Translate safety outcomes into enterprise language. Connect interventions to resilience, capacity, customer trust, productivity, investment and strategic risk.
- Seek accountability beyond advice. Own budgets, delivery milestones, people outcomes and business trade-offs where possible.
- Develop emotional stability alongside emotional intelligence. Practise composure, conflict navigation and decision-making under pressure.
- Build a deliberately mixed network. Include operators, strategists, finance leaders, people leaders, customers and CEOs - not only HSE peers.
- Treat visibility as part of leadership. Communicate results, volunteer for enterprise problems and make aspirations known without abandoning professional integrity.

A USEFUL TEST

Can you explain your contribution as a business outcome without losing it's health, safety or environmental value? If not, the capability may be real but invisible to enterprise decision-makers.

How confidently should we interpret the findings?

This report preserves the dissertation's evidence and conclusions, while separating findings from plausible interpretation. The research is valuable as an exploratory study of an underexamined professional group. It should not be read as a definitive causal account of CEO appointments.

Strengths

- A focused research question in an area with little profession-specific evidence.
- A sample of 106 qualified HSE respondents across multiple organisations and public channels.
- Behaviour-based response descriptions rather than a simple numerical confidence scale.
- A leadership framework grounded in prior literature and applied consistently across 11 dimensions.
- Explicit testing of alternative explanations: capability, adaptability and aspiration/pathways.

Limitations

- Self-selection: more engaged and motivated professionals may have been more likely to respond.
- Self-report: the survey measured perceived maturity, not observed behaviour, performance or CEO potential.
- Sampling and generalisability: the distribution channels and strong transport-sector presence limit claims about the whole HSE profession.
- No external comparison group: the study did not survey professionals in finance, HR, operations or other common CEO pathways using the same instrument.
- No outside-in view: executives, recruiters and colleagues outside HSE were not asked how they perceive HSE leadership capability or promotion barriers.
- Career coding: broad categories derived from free text simplify complex motivations and may combine preference with perceived constraint.
- No conclusive inferential results: reported differences between managers and non-managers were descriptive and did not meet significance thresholds.
- Causality: the research cannot show that any measured characteristic or career preference causes the absence of HSE CEOs.

The next research questions

- How do boards, CEOs and executive recruiters evaluate HSE candidates for enterprise roles?
- Which cross-functional experiences most strongly predict progression beyond HSE leadership?
- How do HSE leadership profiles compare with finance, HR, operations and strategy professionals?
- When HSE professionals describe innovation, how often does it create measurable enterprise value as well as risk reduction?
- How do professional networks and mentoring affect aspiration, sponsorship and access to senior roles over time?

Conclusion

The absence of HSE professionals from CEO roles cannot be explained convincingly by a single deficit in leadership traits. The survey found substantial self-reported strengths in conscientiousness, emotional intelligence, social awareness, cognitive ability and problem solving. It also found uneven maturity, particularly around emotional stability, visibility and the translation of technical strengths into broader leadership.

The clearest evidence concerns career direction. Most respondents did not describe a desire for enterprise-wide accountability. Many valued their current role, professional purpose, balance or progression within HSE. At the same time, the systems surrounding the profession - technical credentials, function-specific mentoring, narrow networks and limited cross-functional exposure - may shape what feels possible and worthwhile.

For employers, the opportunity is to stop treating HSE solely as a source of assurance and start testing where its talent can lead. For professional bodies, it is to complement technical excellence with broader business development. For practitioners, it is to make a conscious choice: deepen expert contribution, lead the function, or build the experience and relationships required to lead the enterprise.

FINAL THOUGHT

The question is not whether every HSE professional should become a CEO. It is whether organisations can recognise and develop leadership potential wherever it sits, before a functional boundary turns into a permanent ceiling.



Griff Bromfield Jenkins MBA, Warwick Business School

Griff Bromfield Jenkins is a Chartered safety professional and strategic leader exploring leadership, organisational performance and how safety professionals can create greater value beyond the traditional boundaries of their profession.

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Report note

This public-facing report is an editorial adaptation of the author's 2024 master's dissertation, based on research conducted in 2023. It preserves the original study's evidence, conclusions and limitations while reorganising and rewriting the material for business leaders, industry professionals and non-academic readers. It does not present the findings as current market data or as a representative census of the HSE profession.

Anonymised supporting data, the full survey instrument and detailed response analysis are available from the author on request.