

BACK TO BASICS

Fifteen years ago, Alison Martins was nervous about hanging out her shingle. She tells **Jaci Moore** what she has learned as a consultant and how some are only now embracing what consultants were saying more than a decade ago.

Her view of the Swan River, her birds, the eclectic décor in her home and her home office are an expression of the life she and her family have chosen.

Hints of adventures in Africa, Asia and South America fill the rooms upstairs while downstairs the staff and colleagues of her business, OH&S Pty Ltd, work in peaceful, suburban surroundings.

This home office is the result of a decision Alison made after the birth of her first son; a decision to bring her fledgling consultancy to her home so she could reap the benefits of being close to her young child, low overheads and working for herself.

Prior to starting her own consultancy in 1995, Alison had held OSH positions in the construction sector, brewing and the petroleum industry. From an early career as a nurse, the transition from OSH advisor to consultant was a big change. Initially she was intrepid and questioned her audacity to "hang out her shingle" advertising herself as an "OSH Consultant", but quickly adapted to the new role.

Alison did have the advantage of a notable career at Shell which she described as a best-practice company that had afforded her leading-edge OSH practice and applied experience. She also had the qualifications (including a Bachelor of Applied Science, Post Graduate Diploma in Applied Science and Master of Public Health).

Twelve years later, she owns a thriving boutique consultancy, offering to the WA market specialist recruitment services, safety management system development, training, auditing, risk assessments, compliance inspections ... and the list goes on.

She is a past president of the Occupational Health Society of Australia (WA Branch), a member of the SIA, IFAP and the National Safety Council of Australia.

When Alison works with a client, her advice is to become informed about OSH obligations, identify the risks to their business and required controls, resource the controls including appointing key personnel, effective planning, monitoring and reviewing where they have been to allow re-positioning. "People have got to know what the regulations are, what the standards are, what are the implications for their business and who is responsible for what," she said.

In her experience, industry needs to get back to basics and perform the basics well. "We show our clients, for example, how basic a risk assessment can be. We have found that the simplest of controls are often missing because of a lack of understanding of the basics of safety management. This deficit has a domino effect and creates other barriers."

Alison observes that OSH professionals are working in leaner and meaner organisations and have many different demands placed on them.

"You simply cannot learn it all and do it all yourself. In-house OSH personnel need to know how to project plan and determine appropriate resourcing strategies that can include the use of consultants," she said.

Alison's first qualification is in health. With such a clear interest in health issues are health matters included in her advice to clients?

"Health management tends to come online with more mature organisations," she said.

Locally Alison cites health-related issues such as fly-in fly-out combined with drug and alcohol issues as problematic areas, and said the biggest health management challenge for businesses today is ensuring that employees are fit for work.

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Alison Martins, campaigner for greater OSH awareness.

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Plastic and steel toe to toe

GONE are the days when steel was the only safety toe cap you could get for boots.

AS/NZS 2210:2000, the standard governing safety footwear in Australia incorporates all safety aspects of boots so when it comes to the toe cap, the standard does not discriminate but also facilitates the variety of materials used to reinforce work boots. As far as toe caps go the standard addresses the force of impact the boot can withstand, not the type of material.

So for example, Steel Blue produces High Impact Polymer Alloy toe caps (plastic) to AS/NZS 2210.3. The '3' at the end means the boot can withstand an impact of 200 joules at the toe area. This is like dropping 20kg from a

height of one metre above the boot.

Vanessa Bradshaw of Steel Blue said the polymer alloy toe cap is not appropriate for all applications. There are limitations to all footwear, and non-metallic toe caps are not recommended for use with high powered hand held saws or nail guns for example.

The non-metallic toe caps are most useful in environments where boots should not conduct electricity (which can happen with steel toe-cap boots, particularly where the leather has worn thin); where the boots should not be able to transfer heat or cold (snow or freezer works); where they will not set off security alarms; can be X-rayed (high-security).

The two step

SOME recent international research and development by Bacou-Dalloz shows how partnerships between specific industries and suppliers can advance PPE research.

The company has developed the Energy Boot after working closely with leading companies in the oil industry for over three years.

In that time the researchers identified key footwear safety issues and the type of ankle and foot injuries that were affecting workers on the oil platforms, refineries and support industries on Scotland's east coast.

Bacou-Dalloz state health and safety managers had concerns that the rigger boot was contributing to an increasing number of foot and ankle injuries, primarily because of its loose fit.

Subsequent offshore trials on seven different work boots confirmed that close fitting lace-up boots showed reduced slip and fall accidents, but none of the styles tested

provided a complete solution.

Following these trials, Bacou-Dalloz worked for a further 18 months developing and testing numerous design iterations for a new tailor-made boot, with male and female workers in a variety of on and offshore jobs.

The unique design of the Energy Boot provides all-around ankle support, protecting workers against the industry's most common injury — twisted ankles.

The Energy Boot is also fitted with a flexible resin extrusion built into the rear outside quarter which prevents inversion injuries caused if the ankle turns inward.

Design features keep out oil and dirt, protect ankles from knocks, protect against slips and trips, and make the boot chemical resistant. The boot has a speed-lace system at the top quarter and is fitted with the latest, lightweight composite Spacium toecap, instead of the traditional metal one.

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She believes that employers in the resources sector often find themselves over a barrel in the current skills shortage climate. "Some people think they are Teflon coated due to the demand for skilled and experienced personnel and repeatedly push the limits knowing that they can easily pick up alternative employment," she said.

So what has changed since the day her husband Chris challenged her to define what she was good at and how she would define it, which led to the founding of OH&S Consulting?

The business is facing potential expansion and new partnerships and perhaps a move from the home office.

Thinking back to 1996 she remembers that it was quite a tough sell to get the resources industry to buy into safety management systems. "I was laughed at," she recalled.

However, more than a decade on, there are businesses that are now scrambling to implement systems to meet pre-qualification criteria in the resources market.

Alison has been shaped by her desire to learn and improve, hence the rather long list of completed qualifications on her CV. She has gained strength from personal challenges that have included running her own business and being mother of two children.

What's the best part of her professional life? "I really get a buzz when I do training and equally when pitching to a new client why they need to change their current methods of safety management," she said. "I feel reward when I can portray a dry, insipid subject and still manage to engage my audience and get them so involved that they are motivated to critically examine their work practice."

ASMM