

SRP 2019 Annual Conference, Scarborough, 21-23 May 2019
The BSS RPO concept can address corporate management challenges

Article 84 of the EU Basic Safety Standards (BSS) lists 13 tasks which may be performed by Radiation Protection Officers (RPOs), ranging from ensuring that work with radiation is carried out in accordance with local rules to liaising with Radiation Protection Experts (RPEs). In the UK this role is generally considered to refer to Radiation Protection Supervisors (RPSs). In the higher education sector the traditional RPO title has largely been retained, with one person typically combining RPO and RPE roles for the entire organisation, alongside multiple RPSs in different departments. In contrast, the RPO term has not been used widely in UK hospitals, although in practice many hospital RPEs (RPAs and RWAs) discharge radiation safety managerial roles in addition to their advisory roles.

Whilst this has by and large worked well over the years, with RPAs, and more recently RWAs, well-placed to implement good practice through their knowledge of relevant legislation and familiarity with the global system of radiation protection, this approach has come under pressure in some quarters from the growth of management hierarchies which is a feature of New Public Management, sometimes referred to as corporatisation. General managers may be appointed who do not recognize managerial/leadership aspects of RPE roles, and feel they are equipped to undertake them themselves. This can create serious problems, especially if the managers have difficulty understanding concepts fundamental to radiation safety, such as justification, optimisation and the linear no threshold hypothesis.

The EU BSS RPO definition encompasses an individual who is technically competent in radiation protection matters to implement radiation protection arrangements. The IAEA BSS refer to an RPO having both technical competence in radiation protection matters and designation by the employer to oversee the application of regulatory requirements. Adoption of this dual requirement at corporate level could go a long way to overcoming tensions which can exist when general managers without such competence over-rule radiation protection professionals on radiation protection matters.

HERCA 2017 guidance on the implementation of RPE and RPO requirements notes that the RPE is expected to promote safety culture, and should be on the same level as the management of the undertaking - i.e. not subordinate. It also notes the common understanding that the advice of an RPE is mandatory. The guidance comments that the RPO is a new concept in the EU BSS. It states that the RPO should be the central point of reference within a company for radiation protection matters, and that employees appointed as RPOs need to have adequate understanding of concepts related to radiation protection. It specifies a core level of training for this role, with a sample syllabus and learning outcomes in terms of skills, knowledge and competences.

Article 84 identifies that the RPO task may be carried out by an RPE. The RPO concept may facilitate greater understanding of RPE managerial/leadership roles, and thus help to improve radiation safety culture within organisations using ionising radiation.