



Diploma of Professional Competence in Occupational Hygiene

The Professional Discussion

What is the purpose of a professional discussion?

The Professional Discussion is an opportunity for you to talk through your experience of advanced occupational hygiene work. It is a way in which your peers can discover your approach to working as a professional at the forefront of occupational hygiene practice and when faced with novel technical challenges.

Is the professional discussion hard?

As the body entrusted by Royal Charter to set the highest standards for the discipline of occupational hygiene, it is our obligation to determine whether professionals have reached a level of expertise, denoted by the Diploma, equivalent to Masters level skills and outcomes. The Diploma is the highest professional occupational hygiene qualification awarded in the UK. On award of the Diploma, you will be entitled to apply to become a Chartered Member of the Faculty of Occupational Hygiene. [BOHS is the only organisation globally which can offer you Chartered status as an](#) Occupational Hygienist.

The Professional Discussion is a structured conversation, driven by prompting questions from the examiners. This is to help maintain focus (and manage time) and ensure that you have the opportunity to show the range of your expertise across the areas which the panel need to engage with. It also enables us to provide consistency across each panel, so that one panel discussion allows similar opportunities to any other panel.

It is not an oral examination in the sense of a set of questions with right answers or an interrogation, aimed at testing whether your assertions of professional expertise are justified. The professional discussion should be challenging, as any focused engagement between experts should be. The examining panel wants a successful outcome for you at this stage.

As a result, the professional discussion is necessarily focused and challenging. That does not mean that it should be approached with anxiety. The professional discussion panel want to explore your experience and expertise and help you structure and present your proficiency, rather than trying to find ways of tripping you up.

Why do we use a professional discussion?

BOHS uses a discussion format, since conversation, discussion and dynamic questioning represents an effective way of determining *how* you think and use your knowledge and expertise and *why* you make decisions in the way you do. The panel is not really concerned with *who* you are, including your current job and status and *what* you know or don't know. A discussion format is widely used by professional bodies because it is effective:

- to provide authentic evidence of the ability to communicate verbally
- to test the depth of your analytical skills
- to demonstrate an understanding of how you address ethical challenges

What do I need to know to do before the professional discussion?

It is assumed that you have a broad-based understanding of the material you have encountered in training and the core occupational hygiene challenges which are most commonly encountered in practice. If your work over recent years has focused you on specialist or narrower areas of practice, then it is advisable to take a step back and think broadly about the challenges faced generically by occupational hygienists before undertaking the professional discussion.

Does my current role have a bearing on the content of the professional discussion?

The panel are not assessing you as a person undertaking your current role and the journey that brought you there. BOHS respects and celebrates professional career accomplishments. However, the professional discussion is not about validating your career achievements, but understanding your approach to addressing leading edge issues that the discipline faces, which will inevitably take you outside your comfort zone.

Will I be disadvantaged if I come from a particular professional background?

The discussion is about your expertise across the discipline of occupational hygiene, not your level of seniority in a specific area of practice. A Chartered Hygienist can apply the principles of occupational hygiene across a wide range of challenging situations that may be unfamiliar.

That does not mean they have knowledge of the area in detail or expertise in managing the hazards, but they can hypothesise how process and context can impact on control decisions and extrapolate from general principles how a hazard may translate into risk to human health.

It may be that your experience has brought you into contact with some of the situations that arise in the professional discussion, but other than familiarity, it's not likely to be an advantage and the panel are likely to move onto less familiar territory .

The reason for the focus on the difficult, the unfamiliar and the uncertain is because this is where the most senior members of profession need to provide insight, expertise and leadership. Our understanding of workplace hazards is constantly evolving and workplaces and processes change. The leadership of the profession, which you are poised to join, are the people who need to be able to meet those challenges.

Does my specialism matter?

If you have a deep specialism, thinking and problem-solving from first principles may be quite unsettling. It often requires unwinding your subconscious knowledge into a conscious problem-solving approach.

The panel needs to address every individual in the same way to ensure consistency and a “first principles” approach using “novel situations” which you may not have encountered, means that nobody gains significant advantage because of the job opportunities that they have had. In a profession as diverse as occupational hygiene, this is critical to ensuring that we recognise the full range of practice and practitioners.

However, BOHS is developing a route to specialist Chartered Membership to take account of the importance of narrow but deep expertise in the field. If you feel that this better represents your professional practice, this may be a more appropriate route for you to follow.

What are the competencies that the professional discussion is seeking to assess?

The Professional Discussion Panel will be seeking to establish whether you:

A Can demonstrate highly specialised or advanced knowledge and original thinking in one or more field(s) of occupational hygiene practice.

i.e. at some point in the discussion, it should be clear that you have expertise and distinctive ideas about at least one area of occupational hygiene.

B Can engage in specialised or advanced enquiry and original thinking in relation to a field/fields of occupational hygiene practice which is at the forefront of the discipline.

i.e. at some point in the discussion, it should be clear how you think through and address a novel or advanced problem in occupational hygiene.

C Can demonstrate expert critical insights into the knowledge issues in the field of occupational hygiene science and at the interface with other professional or scientific disciplines.

i.e. at some point in the discussion, it should be clear that you understand what might be problematic or difficult about resolving a novel or advanced occupational hygiene problem.

D Can demonstrate specialised problem-solving skills required in practice or research in order to develop new knowledge and procedures in the field of occupational hygiene science.

i.e. at some point in the discussion, it should be clear how you go about successfully solving occupational hygiene problems that are new to you.

F Can demonstrate expert critical insights into effective and meaningful monitoring, review and evaluation in the field of occupational hygiene science and at the interface with other professional or scientific disciplines.

i.e. at some point in the discussion, it should be clear how you would use your technical and scientific knowledge and understanding (or draw on the expertise of others) in order to address occupational hygiene problems.

J Can provide guidance and governance in relation to occupational hygiene ethics and can address complex and novel ethical and professional challenges.

i.e. at some point in the discussion, it should be clear that you can recognise ethical challenges in the context of occupational hygiene practice and how you think through and manage these.

What practical arrangements are needed to engage with the Professional Discussion?

Once you have successfully completed your PEP (and researched essay, if appropriate), you will be invited to book in for your professional discussion. This can be booked online. If you have any difficulties, please contact professional@bohs.org.

Please note that the Professional Discussion panel is comprised of active Chartered Hygienists who have been recruited to serve on the panel. Because all our panels comprise busy professionals and we are a relatively small profession, the available panel dates may be quite limited. We do our best to make arrangements to have accessible times and dates, but please be aware that this is a constrained activity!

The professional discussion typically takes place online and lasts for around one hour. This means that you will need to have a place with access to reliable internet connections and camera, microphone and computer or laptop.

If, for reasons of disability or neurodiversity, you feel that an online discussion will be prejudicial to your ability to perform to your abilities, please let us know by contacting professional@bohs.org and we will seek to arrange an in-person meeting. This would normally be in the BOHS Head Office in Derby.

. Additionally, if for reasons of disability or neurodiversity or because English is not your first language, you feel you will need additional time to perform to your abilities you can request this by contacting professional@bohs.org. At the discretion of the Head Office team, taking advice from our Principal Examiners, the length of the professional discussion may be extended, this will typically be up to 20% additional time. We do not have the facility to support translation into a foreign language, but will endeavour to support British Sign Language.

Also, please advise us of any accessibility technology you may need us to engage with.

On the day of the discussion, please ensure that you are comfortable, are unlikely to be disturbed and have checked your equipment. We will be in touch in advance to ensure that you are set. You may find it useful to have materials to take notes to help you structure your responses.

If there are any issues which may impact the discussion and if you need to cancel the discussion, please let us know as soon as possible. Although there is an examination fee, this only accounts for part of the cost the Society incurs when holding the Professional Discussion, so last minute cancellations are not only costly, but prevent others from being able to have booked their assessment.

We record professional discussions for review, quality assurance and for training purposes. We will keep this recording confidential to the Head Office and examining team.

At the end of the Professional Discussion, the panel will meet together to compare their observations on the conversation and determine whether the outcomes that are being examined have been met. BOHS Head Office will email you the headline feedback, indicating which outcomes have been demonstrated.

How will my performance on the day affect the outcome?

The Professional Discussion is a means by which your examiners can confirm that you are able to demonstrate specific competences. Whether you are successful will be impacted by some factors which are directly about competence, e.g. whether you demonstrate the relevant skills and approaches in your answers.

However, the outcome can also be affected by “performance” issues. Being succinct and focused in your answers will help with time management. Careful listening will help minimise misunderstanding. Taking notes, taking a moment to reflect and to structure your reply will help in ensuring that you convey your thoughts in an ordered and professional way. While these performance matters are not directly competences being assessed, they are assumed competencies.

When reflecting on whether you need adjustments for a disability or neurodiversity (including performance anxiety), please bear the above factors in mind. You will better understand than anyone how your personal circumstances may affect these dimensions of the assessment.

We will do our best to put you at ease, but it is important that you ensure that you are in a relaxed frame of mind, are mentally prepared to engage in a high level and fast-moving conversation and have thought through strategies to manage any nerves and unexpected situations.

Do I need to revise knowledge for the Professional Discussion?

A Professional Discussion is not a test of knowledge, but it is assumed that you know the things that you have been assessed on during your journey through occupational hygiene. Basic principles of occupational hygiene and general occupational hygiene knowledge provide the common frames of reference that allow the professional discussion to take place. If you feel that you may be rusty on the basics, you might review these for your own peace of mind.

For some professional assessments preparation through revision of knowledge is a primary strategy. Other than to refresh existing knowledge for your own confidence, this is not a relevant strategy to assure a successful outcome in the professional discussion. The best preparation is to think about how you engage in technically challenging conversations, to engage in discussions about things outside of your comfort zone and to find people who can challenge your thinking and try to structure clear and incisive responses to them.

Hopefully, at the level of practice you will be at, this will be by reflecting on your current work and by engaging within the Society and indeed beyond. After all, at your level of practice and experience, you should already be demonstrating these competences in daily work – albeit perhaps with not such an intense focus.

You will be invited to Diploma days. These will give the opportunity to work through Diploma-like questions with peers and get a better idea of what you are going to face. They should also provide you with other useful information, the opportunity to meet examiners and mentors. They should also enable you to network with other Diploma candidates working in other sectors. In many ways having this network of peers to bounce ideas off can help tremendously not only in preparation for the Professional Discussion, but in future professional practice.

What is the structure of the Professional Discussion?

The discussion will be structured around a set of questions which serve as prompts to allow you to talk through how you approach challenging problems at the forefront of occupational hygiene practice.

The opening question is one which you can prepare for. The panel will ask you to provide an example of an activity, project or innovation that you think demonstrates some or all of the competences that the professional discussion is seeking to gain evidence for. Please don't describe your job! The question is about something that you have provided personal professional leadership in developing and delivering.

You should plan for this to take no more than ten minutes and please don't bring props, such as Microsoft PowerPoint presentations. It should be a verbal description. You have the opportunity to prepare, structure and review this and this should give you a confident way to introduce your professional practice to the panel.

The panel may ask you questions about the activity you have described but will not provide feedback. They may ask you to curtail your description if you are running over time. The remainder of the panel discussion will be around scenarios that the panel presents which they would like you to talk them through. There may be a photograph prompt, but you won't be presented with detailed data sets. The scenarios may be processes and industrial settings with which you are not familiar or substances which may not be in your personal knowledge.

The panel may have some professional experience of the scenario, but they will not consider your answers on the basis of any assumed knowledge of specific process or substances, unless these are very commonplace, such that any occupational hygienist would have an awareness of them.

You can and generally should ask questions to seek clarification and further information. Those questions may be an indicator of how you address problems and the considerations you think relevant. The panel may not be able to answer those questions because these scenarios may be hypothetical, but may redirect your line of thought if they think that you are going off in the wrong direction.

They will also ask you further questions or give you prompts to try and help you keep on track and structure your responses. Supplementary questions are intended primarily to be useful and to guide you. The panel can't give you feedback on whether you are on the wrong track or tell you the answers, so be prepared to use the additional question prompts to re-think the direction you are headed in. The panel are genuinely trying to help you succeed.

The scenarios don't necessarily have a right answer. However, there will be considerations and principles which the panel would expect to see addressed in the way in which you formulate your responses.

What happens if I am successful?

Results are issued to the candidates via email within two weeks of attending the discussion. If you have been successful, you will receive notification by email followed by the certificate of successful completion of the Diploma through the post. Because we are an Awarding Body by Royal Charter, you have the right to use the postnominals "DipOH" after your name from the date of receipt of your certificate.

If you are a Faculty member, you will be notified by the Membership team that your Membership status of the Faculty of Occupational Hygiene will be changed to Chartered Member. Chartered Members are invited to receive a Chartered Certificate in person at the annual BOHS awards ceremony, but can change their status and postnominals to CMFOH as soon as notified by the Membership team.

You will have achieved a status that few hygienists in the world attain and will have certain rights, including the right to CMFOH postnominals, the right to stand for designated positions on the Faculty of Occupational Hygiene Committee (which oversees and regulates the profession), the right to be on the Occupational Health and Safety Consultant's Register and to engage in certain other reserved professional activities. You will also have the right to use the legally protected title of Chartered Occupational Hygienist.

What happens if I have not demonstrated all the competences?

We don't always succeed in difficult challenges the first time around. Because there are so many factors at play, you should not see feedback that you have not demonstrated all competences as a "fail." The professional discussion is an evidence-gathering process to demonstrate that you are able to work at the very top of the profession. It is a genuine achievement if you are successful.

We won't make a decision that you have not successfully demonstrated the outcomes lightly. Where the process has not been successful, the recording will be subject to review by a further examiner. In reviewing, a significant consideration is not just whether the conclusions drawn by the panel seem to be evidenced by the performance, but also whether the conduct of the panel has been fair and free from factors which might have been prejudicial to you.

If we feel that there are factors that may have influenced the outcome that are not related to your own performance, there will be an investigation by our quality team and you will be provided with a report which will be sent through our quality processes to determine the appropriate course of action.

You will be emailed your feedback within two weeks of completion of the professional discussion. Headline feedback will be provided to you and the examining team. Because of the complexity of conversations, it will not always be possible to provide forensic feedback.

You will, in any case, be entitled to access a copy of the recording, which you can review with a mentor. The purpose is not to second-guess the decision of the panel. They are working against a backdrop of having seen other professional discussions and a common expectation of the range of acceptable responses. Professionals should always reflect on their performance to ask how they can improve.

If you have not been successful, but can't understand where you "went wrong" that's understandable. This is where the reflective feedback from colleagues and mentors on areas where you can provide a sharper focus on your competence comes into play.

Can I do the professional discussion again, if I am not successful the first time?

The panel may draw the conclusion that you might need more time or need to diversify your professional engagement. This is an opinion. The panel do not see your portfolio and this is a valuable safeguard against them being influenced by your job, role or experience. Their conclusions will be based on what they have seen and heard from you. It is for you, with the help of your mentor to determine whether you do need more time or experience, although the PEP process is designed to try and avoid this.

You can attempt the professional discussion again at any time that you feel you are prepared. Examiners' time, as well as your own is a valuable resource. Regardless of external professional pressures, we hope that you will not try to attempt the discussion as soon as possible, but only when you feel that you are fully prepared. Because each attempt costs the Society a significant amount of money, after the third attempt, we will ask you to pay for the assessment again.

Can you give me an example of the type of scenario I might face in the Professional Discussion?

Scenario

You receive an enquiry from a lawyer who is working on a case where he is representing someone who was a labourer on a civil engineering project. The Claimant was involved in an engineering project where they were hand painting a bridge where he was in contact with various paints. The Claimant states that he was provided with PPE including RPE (but he is uncertain of the type or make). The Claimant has developed asthma and considers that his asthma was caused by his work. The lawyer he has instructed is looking to pursue a civil claim for damages through the courts against his former employer and requires a preliminary view to know whether the claim is worth litigating. The solicitor has obtained medical opinion from a respiratory consultant who confirms that the Claimant has asthma, but because he is an atopic individual he has deferred to the view of an occupational hygienist to determine whether or not there has been exposure to a sensitising or exacerbating agent before coming to a view, on the balance of probabilities, as to whether or not the Claimant's asthma has an occupational aetiology.

The lawyer has permission from the Court to obtain the opinion of a professional occupational hygienist and wants you to provide an opinion on the following matters:

- Were any of the substances that the Claimant handled be capable of causing or exacerbating his asthma?
- Provide a view on the Defendant's compliance with their statutory duties under COSHH and applicable guidance;
- Given the circumstances of the task, on the balance of probabilities was development of occupational asthma a foreseeable risk?

Questions

Do you think that your role as an occupational hygienist allows you to express an opinion on all of these matters?

Do you know what the main aspects of the BOHS code of ethics incorporates?

What sort of ethical considerations would you expect to take into account for this sort of enquiry (framing your answer in the context of the BOHS code of ethics)?

Do you know ultimately who your duty lies with in this sort of case?

If it turns out you have been employed as an occupational hygienist by the company who is defending this claim do you think that would constitute a conflict of interests? How would you deal with this?

What sort of documents would you ask your instructing solicitor to request from the Defendant to be able to form an opinion on the matters you have been asked to address?

The lawyer goes off and seeks to recover the necessary documents from the Defendant. The documents he receives back contain very little information, but there are photographs of paint containers displaying the product name of the paints which were used. How would you use this information?

It turns out that there are no sensitising agents present in the paint. Given that the Claimant is atopic would you discount the Claimant's asthma being occupational?

At this stage there were no disclosures relating to risk assessments or monitoring. What provisional opinion would you take from the general lack of information that has been provided in this regard?

The Claimant states that he was provided with a disposable respirator during painting activities. What further questions would you ask your solicitor to ask the parties with respect to this equipment?

Would you expect the Defendant to have provided occupational health surveillance?

If you were appointed to the other side and asked to produce a report on the other side, would you adjust your approach at all?