In the offshore oil and gas industry, ethical responsibilities of companies extend to ensuring the safety of their operations and the well-being of their employees. The National Society of Professional Engineers (NSPE) Code of Ethics, specifically Canon NSPE 1, highlights that engineers must prioritize the safety, health, and welfare of the public in the fulfillment of their professional duties (NSPE, 2021). However, in the case of Piper Alpha, the pursuit of profit and the absence of previous safety issues led to a lackadaisical approach to safety (The Hon Lord Cullen, 1990). This lax attitude was further evident in the Piper Alpha disaster, as poor and outdated procedures resulted in the inoperability of the automatic fire extinguishing system and the manual control of the fire-fighting system during routine maintenance, despite prior concerns about its necessity (Royal Society Publishing, 1998; Parthenon, 2017).

Ethical obligations regarding safety regulations and their enforcement lie not only with the companies but also with regulatory bodies. The American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME) emphasizes compliance with codes and standards (ASME, 2021). For engineers, Canon NSPE 3 underscores the importance of issuing public statements objectively and truthfully (NSPE, 2021). Negligence in this regard was evident in the Piper Alpha disaster, where poor procedures led to the inoperability of critical safety systems, such as the automatic fire extinguishing system. Additionally, the fire-fighting system was put under manual control during a routine dive, which was not only unnecessary but also impossible to enable due to the evacuation of the control room (Royal Society Publishing, 1998; Parthenon, 2017).

Transparent communication between companies, employees, and regulatory authorities is ethically significant, as it aligns with the commitment to honesty and integrity in the ASME and NSPE codes of ethics. Canon NSPE 1a, in particular, emphasizes the importance of notifying authorities when engineers’ judgments are overruled in situations that endanger life or property (NSPE, 2021). In the context of the Piper Alpha disaster, a lack of transparent communication played a critical role. Important documents were not adequately managed, and vital information was not relayed as required. For instance, the engineer who removed the emergency pressure release valve and placed the blank did not personally ensure that the night shift was aware of these critical issues (Wiley, 1993).

Companies in the offshore oil and gas industry are ethically obligated to maintain robust emergency response plans and well-prepared teams, in line with ASME’s commitment to safeguarding public safety (ASME, 2021). Ethical obligations extend to ensuring the protection of human lives and the environment, as emphasized in the National Society of Professional Engineers (NSPE) Code of Ethics, which is dedicated to safeguarding public health, safety, and welfare. In accordance with Canon ASME I, engineers must prioritize the safety, health, and welfare of the public (ASME, 2021). However, the Piper Alpha disaster underscored the consequences of inadequate emergency response.

The Piper Alpha disaster serves as a tragic reminder of the ethical lapses and their catastrophic consequences in the offshore oil and gas industry. It is imperative to reflect on the ethical progress made since that disaster, as it has had a lasting impact on industry practices, regulations, and safety culture. The lessons learned from the Piper Alpha disaster have, over time, influenced improvements in the offshore oil and gas industry. These lessons have contributed to a greater emphasis on safety, responsible practices, and transparent communication, which align with the ethical principles outlined in the ASME and NSPE codes of ethics (ASME, 2021; NSPE, 2021).