

## Labor Management Viewpoints: Who in construction trains and why?

September 15, 2004

There are misconceptions about many things, but one of the most misunderstood is training in the construction industry.

Even people within the industry sometimes fail to understand who trains and why, so it is easy to understand how people outside the industry can be confused.

Some basic truths that are not well understood about the industry are:

- **All construction is performance based.**

Construction is one of the most competitive industries out there and, in order to secure work, contractors must keep current with technology changes and employ the best-qualified people to perform the work safely and in a timely manner.

Most union apprenticeship and training programs focus on two related issues to meet those needs: skill improvement, which addresses new processes, materials and changes in technology, and safety training, which addresses the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's regulations and health issues.

Never before has there been a greater emphasis on how safety affects the bottom line.

Current apprentices and journeymen receive extensive training on subjects that were unknown in generations past. The need for apprentices to have both mental and physical ability is crucial; most people assume that because you work with your hands and get dirty, little thinking is involved. Trades people often handle very expensive products and make life-and-death decisions, sometimes on a daily basis, with far-reaching consequences.

- **All construction unions are service providers.**

The service they provide is a pool of highly skilled craftsmen able to meet the ebb and flow of construction projects. The most important attribute of any union trades person is the ability to solve and resolve problems. On paper, everything works. In reality, it takes a combined effort from many people and trades to bring a project together. This is also an important focus of all union-training programs.

A second service provided is wage stability in the form of collective-bargaining agreements that define the cost of labor for a certain agreed-upon time. The agreement reflects what labor and management both agree wages should be and insulates the customer from swings in labor costs. A recent COCKSHAW's Construction Labor News article cited two studies that indicate skills and productivity – not wage rates – are critical determiners of bottom-line labor costs, again, main items of apprenticeships and training.

While it certainly costs money to provide training for apprentices and journeymen, few can argue the value that it provides to both the construction industry and customer. Better quality, more control of time and costs, and a pool of skilled crafts workers, proud of their union history and their place in the building process, benefit the entire community.

The building trades apprenticeship programs have given many the rare opportunity to literally set their own limits on their aspirations. All the trades have success stories of people who through hard work and the support of the system that they are products of now own businesses and repeat the cycle of apprenticeship training.

In the coming years, there will be a turnover of the construction work force as one generation pensions out and the next rises to replace it. The continuity will be achieved through the apprenticeship programs, with more people, we hope, knowing and understanding the process.

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