

Alberta Construction Safety Association: The Way to a Safer Future

The question of safety has been a touchy one for the construction industry for decades. For all our acceptance of the importance of human life, the average contractor's heart is closely meshed with his business sense. And rightly so: in a competitive industry, in a competitive world, in a recessionary market, contractors think of money first or they don't stay in business for long.

For years and years, construction gained a poor reputation for insecurity of life and limb as an accepted condition. Combining dangerous situations with undeveloped technology and a scarcity of safety professionals or standards resulted in construction's high accident rate, second to forestry in WCB's hierarchy of industries.

Contractors thought safety was expensive. Now they are discovering that it is not. In fact, safety returns money to their pockets. They thought designing a safety program was difficult and costly. Now they have the Alberta Construction Safety Association (ACSA) to handle that task.

Safety problems became so entrenched partly because we depended on statistics to show us the way to safer methods. Focusing on statistics only drove the problem underground. Contractors could see the problem, but without the tools to solve it, simply insisted that their employees "work safely." Their employees figured: if the boss wants no accidents, then we'll make sure he doesn't hear of any. To escape discipline, employees would not report accidents or damage to property if it could be hidden. To many, the solution was fudging the numbers, hiding accidents, keeping injuries off the records.

And unfortunately, the reported accidents rather than actual accidents made up the statistics. These unrealistically low accident rates then became the standard by which contractors measured their safety success or failure. And so, superintendents and foremen were given the inhuman task of achieving the unachievable.

The ACSA has worked hard to break that circle of intimidation and deception. They want the industry to focus on causes of accidents. On reducing accidents rather than miscounting them. And how? By education of contractors, employees and purchasers of construction.

Contractors? teach them to provide a safe work environment, train their supervisors in safe attitudes and employees in safe practices. Employees? teach them to protect themselves and each other. Owners? teach them to demand safe standards on their sites.

This new approach means employees are encouraged to report accidents on the understanding that it is only through investigation that the cause can be identified and steps taken to prevent it happening again. In the past, senior management in a construction company was at a loss to reduce real injury because they often did not know the truth about the actual number or type of accidents. ACSA now provides them with a workable means of achieving their safety goals.

Whether the scenario of deception is the true one or not, there is no doubt about the construction industry's average WCB rate of \$5 per \$100 payroll. It is high; it costs the contractor, the purchaser, and ultimately the consumer-public, enormous amounts of money. We are talking about almost \$10,000,000 for a year's construction industry premiums. This pays for medical care and lost income but does not cure the emotional stress on injured parties and their families. To reduce all these things - cost and suffering - is the goal of ACSA and its members.

What is the ACSA's track record? Since it started late in 1988 with a one-person staff, its programs and success rate have grown remarkably. Says Executive Director Don Toth, "Success is measured in significant reduction of injury to workers. In 1991, claims were reduced by 32% over the previous year. We targeted the roadbuilding sector for our Partners in Injury Reduction (PIR) program in 1991. This is an incentive program to work safely and in return see a rebate of WCB payments for an accident severity rate lower than the contractor's assessment rate. A whopping \$850,000 was returned by the WCB to the participating contractors who showed enhanced performance."

Statistics from the roadbuilders PIR program are impressive: the goal for 1991 was a reduction in claims by 15%. The actual reduction was 53%. This was accomplished primarily by open shop roadbuilding firms.

Refunds this year mean premium reductions for next year. Successfully contractors can have as much as a 40% reduction in their assessment for the subsequent year. Obviously, cost reductions will give those contractors the edge in bidding projects. Contractors whose WCB rates have been reduced can get further credibility through an association-based health and safety audit. Alberta Occupational Health & Safety verifies successful audits and issues certificates confirming that the company's safety program meets the industry standard.

That certificate is important because construction owners are being educated too. And they are asking for more than a low price; they want evidence of a high standard of safety. Not just a low WCB rate but safety training programs in place.

A number of purchasers of construction are now setting a safety program as a pre-qualification procedure for bidding on their work. For example, Alberta Transportation and Utilities has endorsed the ACSA's Safety Basics program and PIR accreditation as their minimum standard for safety evaluation criteria, certainly a direct outgrowth of the success of the Roadbuilders PIR program. The City of Edmonton is setting a similar pre-qualification standard, as are a number of the larger private companies like Dow and Celanese.

The Safety Basics program, one of the first developed by the ACSA, is becoming one of the most often used. It provides instruction on the requirements of a sound safety program and teaches management how to tailor one for the needs of their own companies. Other courses include WHMIS, Transportation of Dangerous Goods, Leadership for Safety Excellence, Safety Auditor Training, and situation-specific courses such as training for flagpersons, for entry into confined spaces, use of respiratory protection devices and first aid courses. No wonder their 11 professional staff are in continual demand; course registrations are up over 35% over last year. Contractors are increasingly committed.

ACSA staff members do even more than conduct training courses around the province. They research and design new programs, drawing on feedback from the industry about what needs to be done. They meet with eight regional committees made up of employee representatives as well as management and other industry professionals. This is the most effective way to get input from the almost 16,000 contractors who make up the ACSA's membership.

In addition to the very tangible results we have mentioned, Don Toth sees a "culture shift" taking place. "Contractors are accepting that safety is an essential part of supervision. The spectacular rate of reduction in lost-time accidents and corresponding lower premiums cannot continue indefinitely. When savings level off, the culture shift becomes important. Employees and supervisors feel better about their jobs when all levels are productively involved in safety."

The future? "We want contractors to become actively involved in bringing their peers into the picture. I think it is conceivable to have a WCB average under \$3 per \$100 in a few year's time through full industry participation. We want to develop programs that emphasize the importance of health issues: hearing conservation, backs, respiratory illness."

It sounds as if there is still a lot of work to be done. Contractors in Alberta are fortunate. In a world that places a higher value on health and safety in the workplace, they have a safety association that provides top notch services they would otherwise have difficulty in providing themselves.