Non-Union Goes the Training Route

Merit and Open Shop Contractors Are Facing a Trained Manpower Shortage More Acute Than Ever—And They’re Responding

For a long time the advantage had been an almost overwhelming one. Now, perhaps, the wheel is turning.

Until just a few months ago, the unionized contractor could boast of his manpower superiority over the non-unionized contractor. With his own and the support of the building trades unions with whom he had agreements, the union contractor knew one thing: at his beck and call were the hiring halls with skilled, trained, available craft workers.

Furthermore, because of the apprenticeship training programs, a full supply of the same were on the way. In lock-step with craft unions, unionized contractors virtually held a monopoly on skilled manpower.

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It wasn’t anywhere near a balanced competitive situation. Statistics bore out the blunt truth. Even the Business Roundtable’s Construction Industry Cost Effectiveness Project reinforced the obvious: with 60 percent of the national construction market, open shop contractors were providing a mere 10 percent of the newly trained workforce. This low percentage matched the 10 percent of the funds utilized for craft training that were generated for open shop programs.

That was the obstacle facing the Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) until this year when the association for merit shop construction decided to do something about it. A whopping $230 million for apprenticeship training by the building trades programs vs. the $13 million pittance for open shop training was not only embarrassing—it wasn’t even responsive to the abrupt emergence of the open shop contractor as a head-on, expanding competitor.

The open shop contractors for the past few years have been attacking violently heretofore union contract markets. If the attack was to continue, training had to be a vital segment of the frontal assault.

Price alone isn’t the answer to having a bid accepted. Properly trained workers, and the professionalism they bring to their work, help to maintain a company’s good track record. And owners and other contractors prefer...
to work with competent professionals.

Thus was born the idea of the ABC’s competency-based, task training program called Wheels of Learning.

Under this program, employees work full-time while they learn a variety of tasks at their own pace, both in the classroom and on the job. It is possible to complete a Wheels program, the equivalent of a conventional four-year apprenticeship program, in only 24 months.

What Wheels of Learning consists of is a modular training format which allows employers to design their training program to suit their own needs and their workers’ interests.

Each trade, says ABC, is broken down into individual skill modules. A module can be used to learn a specific skill or, in conjunction with other modules, can form the basis of broader training programs, including formal apprenticeships. Its combination of classroom and on-the-job training offers students the best in both areas.

Because the economics of open shop are different from the joint efforts of management and building trades, the biggest benefit to the open shop contractor with this type of approach is that once an individual completes the first module he or she can be on the job and productive. The speed with which employees can pick up valuable skills means more immediate entry into the industry for beginners, including minority and disadvantaged youths.

Offered nationwide through ABC chapters, the program offers flexibility. Students advance at their own pace and can learn in group or individual settings.

Using the Wheels of Learning educational format and materials, students are offered the chance to study in one trade or many. Furthermore, skilled workers can also use the Wheels of Learning materials to “brush up” on their own skills—or learn new ones.

Program Reevaluation...

The Wheels of Learning program wasn’t a quick, rush-into-it response to an immediate problem. Its curricula were developed at some of the nation’s most highly regarded universities including Auburn University, the
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University of Wisconsin, Ohio State University and others.

The ABC’s Technical Committee and an Instructor Review Committee worked directly with the universities so that each craft module would properly reflect the experience and knowledge available for course materials.

Major reevaluations of the curricula are to take place every four to five years, thus affirming the need that material be comprehensive in its reach and as up-to-date as possible and necessary.

The curriculum for any one craft is developed over a number of years equal to the number of years that the program is traditionally taught in the trades. As an example, carpentry is traditionally a four-year apprenticeship. Therefore it will take about four years to develop a carpentry wheel. The apparent slow process balances off against assurances that high-quality training is involved.

Because only a portion of the training material is developed at a time, any problems that arise can be accommodated prior to the completion of the course.

A contractor has the chance to customize his training efforts through the Wheels Training program because each year of every Wheels curriculum is divided into a number of modules.

For example, if the goal for a craftsman is to be well-rounded in all phases of drywall, a contractor could teach Wheels “cover to cover” with greater emphasis on the modules most applicable to the company’s current craft needs whether they be finishers or hangers or specialists in various wallcoverings or coatings.

Other contractors may choose to teach only those task-modules currently needed. A typical program consists of 20 modules per year.

As ambitious as the open shop training program appears, the real crunch is the commitment to training from contractors and their readiness to devote the time and finances. The CICE project put it bluntly when it observed that not only do open shop contractors lack training but the shortage of funds could be described this way: “... the open shop is starved for training funds.”

To rectify this situation, the Associated Builders and Contractors has announced the establishment of a fund to promote open shop training programs. This fund will be set up to receive and distribute funds from contractors and users, as well as public foundation grants and individual contributors.

CICE, in its report, urged contractors to include a cents-per-hour provision in contract bids for the funding of an in-house or association training program, similar to the approach that building trades unions have used so successfully. A typical collective bargaining agreement, the CICE said, provides for some nine cents-an-hour for union training.

“A comparable funding method is needed for the open shop sector,” the CICE said.

With a commitment to provide training to merit shop contractors, the ABC has a heavy responsibility. Al-
ready, a number of areas have begun training in the more than 21 skills that the Wheels of Learning program is set up to accommodate. The response from merit and open shop contractors has been enthusiastic—and the reaction of apprentices has been equally high.

From the time the first module is mastered, those involved in the program say, an employee begins developing into a much more productive member of the jobsite crew. This has been the experience among veteran employees as well as unskilled people entering the industry for the first time.

**Program Works . . .**

What are the specifics for how the program works? They’re very simple and functional.

Each module consists of a student manual and an instructor guide. This guide includes a lesson plan, organized into two one-and-a-half hour class sessions. The goal states what students
should know by the end of the session. Suggested learning activities, supplemental reference materials unit tests and answers to the student exercises are also provided.

The student manual introduces the subject, defines new terms, and illustrates the tools and materials of the trade, and how to perform the tasks. Written exercises help the student to reinforce what’s been learned and allow the instructor to evaluate individual progress.

Once these written instructions are mastered, the students practice what they learned at work stations in the classroom, under the supervision of the instructor. Upon completion of a lesson module, each student is further tested on their new skills using either a written or performance-oriented examinations, depending on the nature of the task.

It’s expected that the demonstrations by the apprentice of his or her competence in a particular task, that individual should be ready to use the new knowledge in the field. The apprentice who succeeds in completing every module will receive a certificate similar to a diploma.

This can later be shown to any prospective employer as evidence of formal course of classroom and job training and experience.

ABC cites a number of benefits from their new program. First, the program’s flexibility permits the contractor to conduct his training effort in the most costeffective way.

Second, inasmuch as modules can be taught in the classroom in the shop, on the job-site or through self-study, Wheels of learning encourages the development of in-house training facilities, reducing the need for large and costly training facilities.

In-house training also encourages the involvement of supervisors in the training process, further ensuring that the worker’s skills match the contractor’s need. Ultimately, the program aids construction in general by expanding the number of truly skilled craftsmen in the workforce, not only by encouraging entry of new workers into the field, but also by providing an opportunity to retrain those with outdated skills.

There are a number of marketing and bidding advantages available now to open shop contractors. Those hoping to land lucrative federal contractors and utilize Wheels of Learning to: obtain lower wage rates for apprentices. Under the Davis-Bacon regulations governing federal construction projects, only those workers in registered apprenticeship programs can be paid training wages, or rates less than the prevailing minimum journeyman’s wage otherwise required.

To be registered, an apprenticeship program must be approved by the Bureau of Apprenticeship Training (BAT), the federal agency responsible for setting minimum training standards and certifying training programs, or State apprenticeship Councils (SAC), which also implement BAT standards.

Each program is approved on a case-by-case basis. Wheels has satisfied BAT guidelines and ABC chapters using the Wheels of Learning have received both BAT and SAC approval.

Much progress has already been made in the drive for a comprehensive and responsive training curriculum for construction apprentices, including ABC’s recent announcement of its intention to offer modules in an audio-visual format.

Still, until the basic funding problem is solved, the open shop contractor will continue to face an uncertain—and limited—future because he lacks the first essential—a trained workforce.

But, ABC promises—this goal is now within reach. The first major steps have been taken and the rest will ultimately be made.