

Harris Rebar

Tying the future to safety

When it comes to reinforcing for tomorrow, Harris Rebar understands that it begins with young workers. The ironworking company's six week orientation program is a progressively complex mix of classroom instruction, hands-on learning, and on-the-job mentorship.

According to Roger Lussier, Placing Manager for B.C. Operations, the framework for a safe and successful workplace is integrated training and mentorship.

Young workers begin with a three week initial training program in Delta. Small classes of about a dozen people learn the basics from an instructor with decades of experience. Afterwards, young workers apply their newly acquired knowledge at the nearby pre-fabrication work yard.

"We broke it up a little bit," says Lussier. "A couple hours of theory in the classroom itself, and then we would supplement that with some field training on our site."

Training in the yard provides a safe, controlled environment for young workers to apply and perfect what they have learned under careful supervision. For the next three weeks, young workers are taught the fundamentals. For example, they learn how to work in a partially-built building, or from a height.

"Fall protection is extremely important," says Lussier. "We wanted to make sure that students knew how to use the gear until it became second nature to them and that they did wear it at all times."

By the time young workers are ready to move onto real job sites three weeks later, they have already learned the basics like how to safely tie wires and hook off on a wall.

For 90 days, young workers are closely monitored and gradually introduced to their new workplace. In addition to applying their skills and knowledge in a different environment, young workers must also adapt to the presence of other trades that were absent in their training yard. To help them out, they are partnered with a journeyman tradesperson who will mentor and work alongside them.

Additional supervision during this period is provided by the site's foreman who monitors the young worker's progress and writes a daily evaluation. Young workers also take ownership of their safety by reporting to the union hall and documenting their activities.

The company's young worker program continues even after a person successfully completes training. For their first year, young workers wear a lime-green hard hat to identify themselves as new to the trade. This visual indicator gives other workers the opportunity to provide guidance and support to their new colleague.

For Harris Rebar, proper training benefits each young worker, but also the company as a whole.

"Simply putting a body out there and hope that he does the work is not the answer," says Lussier. "We've found that once we had a person who knew the basics of our business, he became a competitive worker. And he enjoyed working because he knew what he was doing."