

WHAT'S OLD IS NEW AGAIN: ON-THE-GROUND TRAINING FOR LOGGERS

By Pieta Woolley

Back in the 1980s in his home province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, industry education expert Russel Robertson faced a huge challenge. A quarter of his workers were sick with HIV or dying from AIDS. At any time, another quarter were trying to flee the country because of the Apartheid-era atrocities, crime and violence. With an annual turnover rate of nearly half his workforce, he had to figure out how to constantly train new workers in the pulp and paper industry—many of whom could not read—to be safe and productive.

“We were just desperately trying to educate people,” said Robertson, who also designed training programs for South African workers in the sugar, petrochemical and automotive industries. “You see rapid, exponential growth and productivity when you get the right training. And I am a total believer it needs to be industry-led.”

Surprisingly, those old skills from desperate times have come in handy nearly 40 years later, on the other side of the world. Robertson, the BC Forest Safety Council’s Director of Programs and Training, is behind a new on-the-job learning program for this province’s contractors: the logging truck drivers, yarders, road builders, mechanized harvesters, boom boat operators and more.

It’s competency-based and administratively-light. This spring, Western Forest Products will try it out as a pilot. Contracting companies are also encouraged to try it and give feedback before it is formalized next year. (How do you participate? See call-out box on this page.)

The reason Robertson’s skills are so applicable is that BC’s timber harvesting contractors are also facing a double-whammy training challenge—though slightly less dramatic.

First, as anyone running a contracting business knows, much of your workforce is aging and inching closer to retirement—if they haven’t retired already. How do you capture the knowledge and competency of your elder

workers and pass it on to the less experienced new hires?

Second, when accidents do happen in British Columbia’s woods, investigators look for companies to demonstrate their due diligence that the workers involved were properly trained and supervised. Increasingly, the RCMP is involved in what have become criminal investigations. You can’t send your processor operator to university, so how do you document that you know he is qualified to safely run the machine?

The model works like this. In short, supervisors assess their workers for competency on each task they do. Workers also self-assess. If there are gaps, free, brief online-learning resources help augment the worker’s knowledge. There is no pass or fail. They are either competent or not yet competent. Supervisors continuously assess whether that worker is competent to perform a task based on a checklist and evidence of his or her work. When they are considered competent, they can move on to the next modules—leaving a defensible trail in the event that due diligence must be demonstrated during an investigation.

A similar process will be in place to train supervisors.

“This is going to make training a lot more consistent and cost-effective in the long run,” said Robertson. On-the-job training is often overlooked in education discussions—but perhaps no longer. The TLA is advocating for a job training tax credit for employers who invest in on-the-job training for employees and Elstone is hopeful. The tax credit would help alleviate some of the intense burden timber harvesting contractors are facing to ensure their new, younger workers are safe and productive.

“The reality is that a lot of people who are working in the industry didn’t want to go to post-secondary school. They wanted to go to work and pursue

a career in the bush,” said Elstone, noting that path often attracts those who have a more hands-on aptitude that make them excellent forest workers. “With so many industries, the trend is towards the professionalization of the workforce. We’re seeing this in oil and gas and mining. But a lot of the skills in logging, you just can’t learn them at school. You have to be sitting in a machine or on the ground. And that kind of training impacts a business’s productivity for over a year as the employee builds their skills.”

Elstone noted that industry has been developing similar plans to Robertson’s for a long time. That said, he still has apprehensions. “We are concerned about the balance between the need for doing this and it becoming an administrative burden,” said Elstone. “That’s why we want contractors to field test this. More paperwork is not going to make you more safe at the end of the day. This is about demonstrating competence.” Elstone continues, “Also, given that the incentives for contractors to remain in this industry are dwindling, industry is going to have to come to grips with the value proposition that Russel’s work is laying the foundation for.”▲

Field Test New Competency Training

Calling all contractors!

The regulated faller standard, along with non-regulated industry guidelines for other forestry occupations are ready for testing. Subject to WorkSafeBC approval to pilot the faller program, the BCFSC is looking for contractors to be involved in the pilot. Contact Marla Guldbransen at guldbransen@bcforestsafe.org for more information. If you are interested in field-testing the guidelines for road construction, yarding, mechanized harvesting or transportation, please contact Gerard Messier at messier@bcforestsafesafe.org.