



By working together, owners, contractors and unionized trades are reducing construction and maintenance safety incidents to historic lows.

Safety in the construction and maintenance industries in Canada has undergone a revolutionary change since the late 1990s. Safety on construction and maintenance sites has become a key measure of corporate success for contractors and owners. Building Trades Unions, which have a longstanding concern with safety, are working in partnership with other stakeholders to reduce the number of injuries and safety incidents on industry sites to historic lows.

While federal Workers' Compensation statistics from 2008 showed that construction had the highest injury rates of any industry in Canada, major industrial sites such as those in the Alberta oil sands have been achieving remarkable results. In 2011, for example, the Royal Dutch Shell Group recorded zero Lost Time Incidents in 43 million hours of construction during the expansion of its Scotford Upgrader near Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta. At its peak the project employed more than 15,000 construction workers.

Not every project achieves results like that, but over the last decade contractors and owners throughout the industry have dramatically reduced both the frequency and severity of injuries, according to Jason McInnis, National Director of Health and Safety for the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers. "People are so well trained that they routinely do the right thing in high-risk situations," he says.

Boilermakers, like other Building Trades Unions, emphasize safety training at every level, from apprentice to shop steward. As a result, McInnis says, workers are more conscious of the issues and are

asking more informed questions about health and safety. "That comes from the evolution in training and also from good employer and owner programs," he says.

"Safety has become a paramount concern," McInnis adds. "It's gotten to the point where running a safe operation is a business necessity."

Rod Reynolds agrees. "There are corporate leaders now who genuinely believe that safety and social sustainability are essential business practices," he says. Reynolds is site manager for FT Services, the principal maintenance and turnaround employer at the Suncor Refinery in Sarnia, Ontario. Since starting the contract in 2008, working under the site General Presidents' Maintenance Agreement, FT Services has provided over a million work hours with no Lost Time Incidents.

Reynolds has been on the job in Sarnia for only two years, but he's already seen a change. "You now see initiatives that engage the workforce," he says. "In the past, the industry relied primarily on compliance—rules and regulations that told people what to do. Now, more and more companies provide tradespeople with guidance while giving workers the tools to make decisions based on the risks they face. Responsibility is in the hands of the worker, who can decide to stop work if it's too risky. So there's been a fundamental shift."

Reynolds's goal is to foster cultural change. The construction workforce is transient, he points out: "To sustain the culture, you have to have a core group that 'walks the walk' so the culture doesn't change when new people come in."

For Reynolds, the key to success is engagement. "It's about communications and consistency," he says. "Our supervisors go into the field and talk with individuals about the work and about work standards. The result is engaged conversations about safety."

As a leader, you have to talk about safety and lead by example so people understand that you care, while dealing with safety issues consistently to maintain credibility.”

Safety statistics for the industry are improving, but the ‘low-hanging fruit’ has been harvested, Reynolds says. As the number of incidents approaches zero, it takes more effort to get incremental change. “You can have an incident in a flash. It’s hazardous on these work sites—you’re on the edge and you have to be mindful all of the time,” he says.

Most owners and contractors in the industrial construction and maintenance sectors now have full-time safety officers or managers whose goal is to prevent accidents, not just to report them. Companies make use of a range of new procedures to improve safety. Most workplaces conduct safety analyses on a routine basis. Foremen and supervisors regularly discuss safety issues with workers and monitor work sites to ensure that workers are taking safety precautions. Some managers use behavioural-based observations to try to determine why well-trained workers put themselves at risk and to address the causes. Others employ peer reviews, mentoring and coaching as non-confrontational techniques to improve safety.

Building Trades Unions are also very committed, and are developing initiatives that support owners’ and contractors’ safety commitments. In one such initiative, the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters (UA Canada) Union Local 488 in Edmonton, Alberta has created a Safety Officer position for the first time. The local hired Doug Dory, a pipefitter with more than 30 years of experience in the trade, for the post.

Dory’s job is to reinforce the importance of safety among union members and to spearhead the cultural change that clients, contractors and local unions are all striving to achieve. Dory visits work sites where he talks with tradespeople about safety issues, helps to develop safety programs aimed at fostering cultural change, and speaks at contractor and tri-partite safety meetings.

“It’s new for unions to have safety officers and this is a major step,” he says. “We now have clients, contractors and labour all on board. Clients love it and most contractors are very engaged. Our workers are buying in too. Ten years ago, a lot of guys were proud of taking risks—now the same guys are older and wiser. They’re reading the procedures and teaching young workers how to work safely.”

In addition to working with union members, Dory sits on a committee that makes decisions about union training priorities. The committee is considering adding safety components to union courses. Members and apprentices welcome the development, Dory says: “They’re telling me that ‘If it’s going to make us the best in the field, it’s what we want to do.’ ”

While cultural changes in the workplace are improving the day-to-day safety of workers, they are just part of an industry-wide cultural shift driven by the changing relationships between all stakeholders—owners, contractors and tradespeople.

“Safety is no longer treated as a nuisance that you have to deal with in case of inspections. Today you have to deal with it or you won’t be in business,” says Jason McInnis. “Owners and contractors understand that safety contributes to higher productivity, reduces costs such as workers’ compensation, and makes it easier to recruit workers.

“Building Trades Unions are very committed to safety and, compared to 20 or 30 years ago, union members are far more aware of their role in making sure that everyone is safe,” says McInnis. “They are also more aware of the competitive world in which they operate. Workers look for companies that run ‘tight ships’ and a good safety record can help corporations become employers of choice.”



The GPMC/NMC

The General Presidents’ Maintenance Committee for Canada, which administers contracts for 13 member Building Trades Unions involved in industrial maintenance, supports its members and industry partners in developing and maintaining safety initiatives and programs.



For more information contact

General Presidents’ Maintenance Committee for Canada/
National Maintenance Council for Canada (GPMC/NMC)
447 Frederick Street, Suite 100, Kitchener, Ontario N2H 2P4

Tel: 519-744-GPMC (4762) « Fax: 519-744-4763
Email: inquiries@gpmccanada.com
www.gpmccanada.com