

Crane & Hoist Canada Magazine

How compulsory certification can help relieve skills shortages: *The BC Crane Safety Example*

British Columbia's crane operator certification program addresses in a unique way some of the traditional arguments against compulsory certification.

If a trade is compulsory all work performed must be done by a credentialed journeyman or indentured apprentice. Historically, this has meant that employers and workers are limited to a single established credentialing process and must keep job roles strictly defined. Credentials have traditionally been tied to hours of experience on the job.

BC Crane Safety's crane operator certification program is compulsory because WorkSafeBC regulations require that all operators have a credential be certified.

Many employers argue against compulsory trades on the grounds that the heavy up-front commitment of time and money reduces the number of entrants to the trades. Meanwhile, some journeymen end up performing tasks for which they are overqualified. This is inefficient. The result is fewer people working in the trades and those that do are less productive than they could be.

Is it possible to have compulsory credentials, increased participation, and improved productivity? We think so. A paper recently prepared for BC Crane Safety argues that, under the right circumstances, it can.

Says Clinton Connell, BC Crane Safety's Executive Director, "The key to success is to have a certification model that focuses on evaluating people's competencies instead of relying too heavily on time in trade, or 'seat time.'

Traditional certification programs that rely heavily on time in trade as an indicator of ability can be problematic in both slow and hot economies.

In a slow economy, a new operator may not get as many opportunities to learn and gain experience on the job. Since time in trade is not clearly defined in Canada it is often calculated in terms of payroll hours and can therefore include other unrelated activities. In this scenario, a candidate can earn their time but still lack some essential competencies. Competency-based models are more responsive to economic conditions and don't allow this outcome.

In a hot economy there may be ample opportunities to gain needed experience but formal training requirements can cause delays in obtaining full certification. A competency-based model avoids this outcome as well.

Let's look at this more closely.

Measuring competency

Competency can be described as the ability to meet essential standards of performance for an occupation. When competency is measured against established standards, it can be directly recognized and rewarded. How or where people acquire those competencies – whether it was from formal training, informal learning or experience in related jobs – is less important than the fact that they have them.

Says Mr. Connell, “No recruiter needs to confirm whether professional hockey players know how to tie their skates. The ability to put a puck in the net during the game incorporates the relevant competencies without having to test for every detail that contributes to a successful performance.”

This is the kind of assessment process BC Crane Safety and its stakeholders chose for crane operator certification. Candidates have to demonstrate their competence by successfully completing practical assessments that are administered by independent, professional assessors in real-world settings.

Equally important, employers have the responsibility under the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation to ensure their candidates are ready to work independently before they challenge the practical assessment. After a period of on-the-job training operators can challenge the assessments when they and their employers believe they are ready.

Says Mr. Connell, “The program has safely expedited the certification process while widening the talent pool and also supporting diversity and inclusion.”

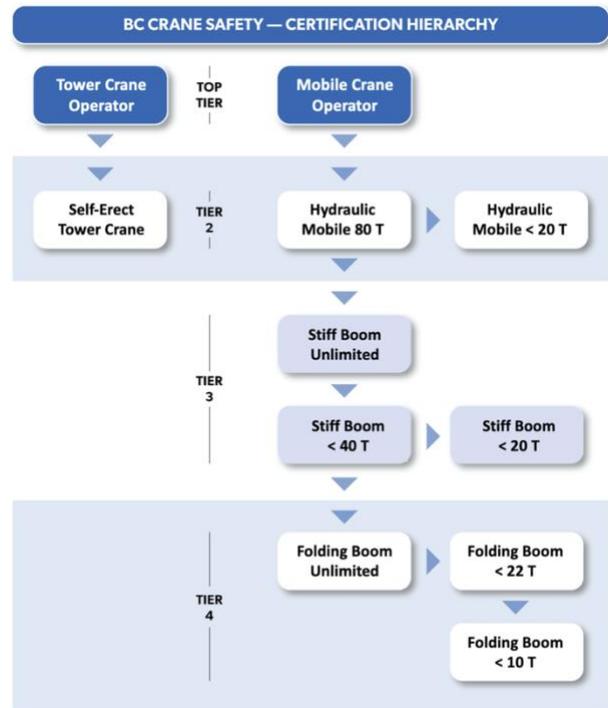
Sensitivity to market conditions

Since operators in training must work under the supervision of an employer, their initial choice of crane is guided by prevailing market conditions as they can only train on cranes that are in commercial use at that time and place. Yet depending on industrial needs in a given region, operators may eventually gain access to their cranes of choice and begin preparing to earn a higher level of certification by challenging the practical assessment on these cranes.

Flexibility

BC Crane Safety's certification model is tiered and allows people to enter at various levels. Those who choose to certify at the top tier of the mobile crane class will also be certified to operate any mobile crane or boom truck. Those who choose to certify to operate a boom truck with unlimited capacity will also qualify to operate lower capacity cranes in that class.

Operators are not required to demonstrate competencies they don't need and can look forward to becoming certified on their crane of choice in a relatively short period of time. The amount of time it takes depends on their individual abilities and the type of crane they are going to operate.



“Most new operators start their careers on cranes in the lower tiers,” says Mr. Connell, “but one of the advantages of the tiered system is that operators can gain experience on the job and eventually certify on more specialized cranes by challenging the assessment.”

Conclusion

The identification and application of clear standards of competence is a truly reliable way of ensuring that certificate holders have the skills to work according to expectations for quality and safety.

Because it is competency-based, BC Crane Safety's certification program does not overburden candidates with requirements that don't apply to them in their work. Candidates who fail to pass the theory or practical tests on more specialized cranes are not lost to industry but can work at the level of their certification until conditions and/or their skills allow them to advance.

This certification model and its development merits consideration by other trades and professions at a time when all are facing growing skills shortages.

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Contact: Path4ward@protonmail.com