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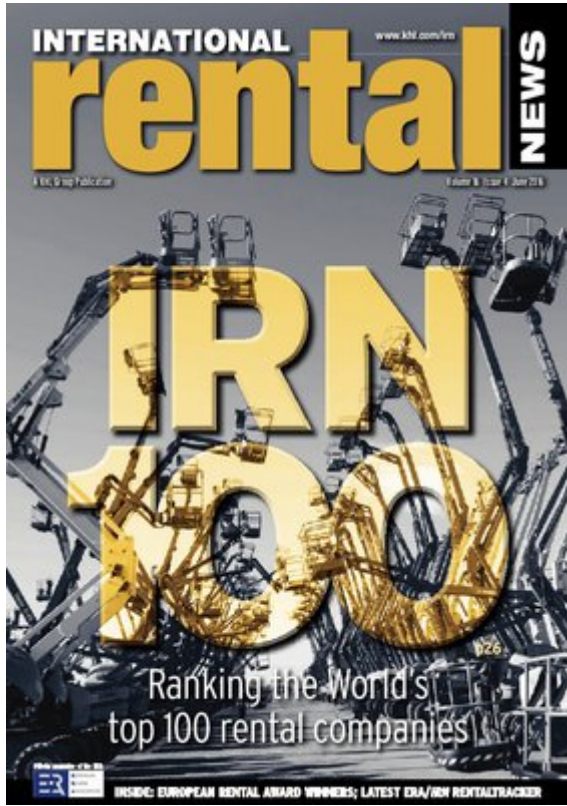


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## Operator training and certification

Written by Katherine Weir - 04 Apr 2016



In Singapore three recent initiatives relating to operators are earlier health checks, a tightening of mini crane rules and an operators' database. Smart crane companies are putting training at the heart of their recruitment and retention strategies. Phil Bishop reports: "Crane operating companies are businesses, like any other, and are liable to voice some well-known phrases. "Our employees are our biggest assets," you might often hear them say. Most of them really do mean it.

For many, however, a professional management system for recruitment, training and retention is an alien concept. Even the best crane operating companies sometimes struggle with managing their human resources, as witnessed by recent industrial action at the leading UK rental firm Ainscough Crane Hire. The truth is that managing crane operators and rigging crews carries very specific challenges.

Crane crews are delegated enormous responsibility for running very expensive equipment. They are often well remunerated but they earn every penny of it, often working anti-social hours in anti-social locations and under anti-social conditions. It takes a certain kind of person to be good at this work and, while they may often be great team players on site, they also often have a certain independence of spirit.

For the best of them, crane operating is not just a job, or even a career – it is a profession. They have formal training behind them and recognised qualifications.

The challenge of managing this cadre lies in getting the right people (recruitment), ensuring they can do the job well (training), and keeping them happy enough that they will stay with the company (retention).

In many parts of the world, there are concerns about where the next generation of crane operators will come from. Andrew Claypole runs Liebherr Great Britain's training school. As far as the UK is concerned, he says, this is a major issue. "There is going to be a massive shortage," he says. "There is no one coming in because it's not perceived as an attractive job, despite the pay."

Crane rental companies are not bringing young people in because "they all want the finished article", Claypole says.

#### Generation X (Box)

Young people wanting to be footballers or pop stars rather than mechanics or plumbers is not a new phenomenon but as more and more people go to university, even realistic aspirations tend towards management roles rather than site operations. It had been hoped that the X-Box generation might regard crane operating as just another great game and be queuing up to get their hands on the joysticks.

There are all kinds of schemes and initiatives – from structured training and qualifications to propaganda campaigns to win hearts and minds – to encourage young people to consider technical careers in engineering and construction.

In both the UK and the USA there is a big push on apprenticeships of all kinds and the promotion of vocational education (known in the USA as CTE – career and technical education).

"American education has finally woken up to the need to improve the status of math and science in schools," says Elliot Apatov, who has been teaching bridge-building and crane-building to school students in Portland, Oregon, since 1995. "STEM is the new buzzword," he says. STEM stands for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

Promotional campaigns in the UK include Go Construct, to promote the construction industry as a career choice, and an awards scheme for apprentice mechanics in the industry called 'Stars of the Future'. There is also a new apprenticeship scheme being developed for 'construction lifting technicians', with work here being led by construction company Laing O'Rourke.

In Germany there will be a substantial programme of events aimed at schoolchildren at the forthcoming Bauma exhibition. More than 12,000 children from 230 schools have registered to attend the Think Big! Events, which will promote career opportunities in the construction machinery industry.

In the USA the Specialized Carriers & Rigging Association (SC&RA), in conjunction with the National Commission for the Certification of Crane Operators (NCCCO) and assisted by KHL, has a programme of careers fairs under the banner Lift and Move USA. The events were set up after SC&RA members aired concerns about the difficulty in attracting young or new people to the industry.

The most recent event, in February, was held at TNT Crane & Rigging's headquarters in Houston, Texas. The 700 attendees heard speakers from a list of companies that included Mammoet, Deep South, TNT, Lifting Gear Hire (LGH), Bengal Industries and Berard Transportation. They explained the career opportunities in the US crane, rigging and specialized transportation industry. TNT human resources director Antoy Bell explained how high demand for skilled workers coupled with low supply was driving wages up.

Buckner Companies is hosting the next event, in South Carolina, in May. Then it will be the turn of Bragg Crane in California in November.

#### Training forces

Significantly, it was not just high school and college students in the audience at TNT's event – there were also young ex-military personnel exploring civilian opportunities. On both sides of the Atlantic, it seems, the armed forces continues to provide a substantial recruitment pool both for cranes and rigging, specifically, and construction in general. Liebherr GB training manager Andrew Claypole used to be a soldier and he estimates that somewhere between 30 and 40 % of the UK crane industry is ex-military. Soldiers have initiative, work hard and "can get out of bed in the morning", he says.

Labour shortages are a corollary of the economic cycle, of course, and not everywhere finds it hard to recruit. In Australia, for example, although

business is picking up, it seems there are currently plenty of experienced people from mining and oil & gas projects in Western Australia and Queensland who are looking for work. “We have just advertised for the position of dogman/rigger and I have been surprised at the high number of good quality applications we received,” reports John Gillespie, owner and managing director of Gillespies Cranes, one of Australia’s biggest mobile crane rental companies. He needs experienced operators for his bigger cranes, he says, but adds, “We do try and employ at least one young person (19 to 22 years old) and train them up, commencing on low capacity pick & carry articulated cranes (Frannas).”

Finding new people is the just the first step. Next they have to be trained. And then they have to be managed in such a way that they choose to stay with the company and help it prosper. In many countries around the world crane operators are required to be not just trained for the job but also certified or licensed – as proof of competence.

Smart companies go further than the bare minimum of what the rules and regulations demand, however, and use training as a management tool. Both Ainscough Crane Hire in the UK (see sidebar) and Sarens, the Belgium-based international heavy lift and transportation specialist, have staff development programmes designed to bring on their future managers.

At Gillespies, formal training is outsourced to specialist providers but there is also continuous on-the-job training and assessment. “Training is progressive,” says John Gillespie. “Each employee is monitored. Some are happy to stay on small capacity cranes while others want to progress on to the larger capacity cranes. So future training needs demands on the individual.”

Full circle

It is not just the crane operators who have to be trained. In the UK there are cards (licences) for slingers/signallers, lift supervisors and appointed person, which is the role that, according to legislation, carries ultimate responsibility for the lift. In the USA too, the NCCCO may soon have to start thinking about a rebrand. Chief executive Graham Brent explains, “The type of certification programmes we are now developing have evolved from operators to signalling to inspectors, completing the circle of the whole lifting team.”

Some of the most interesting initiatives in managing the competence of crane operators are in Singapore, where the government’s Ministry of Manpower (MOM) is pushing for higher standards to reduce the incidence of accidents and near misses. In 2014 MOM officials visited 80 construction sites in a safety blitz targeted at unsafe lifting practices and crane operations. They found 194 crane-related safety contraventions.

Subsequently, there are now three initiatives in Singapore relating to operators: earlier health checks, a tightening of mini crane rules and an operators’ database. At present, registered crane operators aged 60 and above are required to undergo health checks every two years. From 1 April 2016, crane operators in Singapore will have to have biennial health checks from the age of 50. “The earlier health checks will improve the employability of crane operators by enabling crane operators to identify early signs of ill health so that we can manage the conditions early. This also helps to prevent future health risks and crane operators can remain in the profession longer,” MOM minister of state Sam Tan said during a crane safety symposium last October.

Second, it is raising the requirements for training in the use of mini cranes in Singapore. Cranes below five tonnes capacity have previously had certain exemptions. Crane operators who hold a valid mobile or crawler crane licence can continue to operate mini cranes. Those without will have to attend an approved training course.

Thirdly, the Singapore Crane Association, with government support, is setting up a database of crane operators to track their experience and safety record. This database, called iReCORDS, is expected to help employers find the crane operator with the experience and training to operate their particular crane. Sam Tan explained, “This registry can also pave the way for a continual training programme to ensure that crane operators are adequately trained and continue to maintain a good safety record. Crane operators will also be able to tap on this platform to showcase their work experience and relevant skills and safety records to potential employers. This will help to increase the employability of crane operators in the long term.”

While the training of blue collar employees and those working on site is generally set out in legislation or industry standards, white collar training and development is much more dependent on each company’s own attitudes and resources. Sarens, for example, one of the world’s largest international heavy lift and transport companies, has at any given time approximately 20 or 30 students that it sponsors in universities around the world. Typically, about 60 % of these go on to have a career with Sarens, says Machteld Leybaert, group human resources director.

At group level there are corporate sales training programmes and management training – three or four employees are currently studying for an MBA. The aim is to develop the future leaders of the company, Leybaert says.

#### Technical learning

The next step will be to take this from white collar to blue collar, Leybaert says, providing centralised technical training. There is no group-level programme for training site workers and operators, since this is carried out locally to meet local rules and regulations. However, an overall group apprenticeship scheme is in development.

UK-based international heavy lift and transport specialist ALE has already developed in-house Standard Schemes of Training (SSOTs). It introduced them five years ago after identifying a need for formal operator development where no off-the-shelf courses exist. ALE has 10 vocational training schemes, covering its fleet of specialized equipment, from SPMTs and gantries, to jacks and the AL.SK350 crane. It is compulsory for all its equipment operators to enrol on a scheme, which gives them the opportunity to progress through different belt levels from yellow to brown and potentially all the way to black. The schemes are constantly revised. This year ALE plans to introduce new SSOTs to cover additional equipment and sectors, including marine.

“SSOTs run across the whole ALE group and, as far as we know, this type of training scheme is completely unique in our industry,” explains ALE global training specialist Kay Sproule. “What is great about the SSOTs is that they are specific to us and our people. They have skills that cannot be learnt in a classroom environment – we find that people learn best by ‘doing’. The training is designed to help prevent incidents, injuries or damage and maintain global consistency and quality. More and more our clients want to see traceability and evidence of the training our teams undertake, and SSOTs deliver this.”

Managing a global workforce and keeping it happy is a particular challenge. Sarens, for example, has approximately, 4,700 employees around the world, of whom two-thirds work in the field, from Chernobyl to Angola to Korea to Brazil.

#### In the family

Training and communication are central to the plan to develop the company’s recruitment and retention strategy. “We are a family company and still want to be one big family so it’s important that they feel like they are part of the family,” says Machteld Leybaert. To this end, Sarens also has a new group communications strategy to keep its remote workers feeling connected to the company.

This initiative is led by group communications manager Kleopatra Kyrimi. Employees around the world are receiving company tablet computers so that head office can communicate with them – “instil in them the blue blood of Sarens”. These tablets are not just for receiving company news; they might also be used as training tools, with employees being able to access the company’s virtual learning programmes.

It is a similar story at Mammoet, where the safety, health, environment and quality programme is underpinned by training and development programmes, meetings, campaigns and safety booklets. It has dozens of safety officers working to ensure that all Mammoet employees operate as one team, maintaining consistent standards, wherever they are from and wherever they are working.

The company says, “Mammoet devotes much time and energy to the promotion of our one way of working throughout the organisation. We do this through our general policy statement, continuous training and development of all employees, clear work instructions, strict safety procedures and company-wide safety, health, environment and quality campaigns.”

In the future, there is reason to hope that companies that operate internationally like Sarens and Mammoet will find it easier to centralise their operator training as well as management training, should they wish to. After all, the cranes are pretty much the same around the world and so are the competencies required to operate them. The only reason why one country or state’s operating licence is not recognised in another region is lack of trust – and the protection of vested interest among training organisations. The professional qualifications of architects, rocket scientists and brain surgeons are recognised around the world. They are free to practice around the world.

Motorists are allowed to drive on the roads of foreign countries with a home-country driving licence. Crane operators cannot. The day will surely come when the qualifications of crane operators are given the same respect and credit. The NCCCO has broken down inter-state boundaries in the USA. ESTA, the European crane association, is developing a European Crane Operators’ Licence (ECOL), drawing on NCCCO experience. The big hurdle will be getting the various national authorities to recognise and approve the new licence. But Canada and Ireland have recently struck a mutual



recognition agreement for their crane operators, so it can be done.

HR at Ainscough

Interview with Amanda Hesketh, resourcing and retention manager, Ainscough Crane Hire

IC: How difficult is it to find and keep good people?

Hesketh: It can be a challenge but it really depends on the job role we're recruiting for. Having a reasonably settled workforce means we require around 40 to 50 new operatives annually. This includes replacements for retiring staff, career changers and additional roles demanded by company growth. Demand does outstrip supply at times but we work hard to mitigate that with systems to track both the development of existing staff and capturing data from speculative applications. The success of our recruitment activity depends on the detail and accuracy of our knowledge and we aim to have the best knowledge in the sector.

Where do you get new people?

We have a talent pool system, which we manage on a constant basis. It consists of a series of different external streams that feed into a central database of personnel each with different levels of experience and competence.

During recruitment phases, this becomes our first port of call and enables us to identify new recruits quickly and efficiently. Technology is helping and is continuing to drive changes in our recruitment activity.

We are also engaged with the Construction Industry Training Board in developing a trailblazing apprenticeship scheme for operators. We work with them to engage with secondary school pupils highlighting the options available to them when they leave education. Through this we aim to bring more people into the sector.

What training programmes do you offer?

In house training focuses on safety, leadership qualities and maintaining mechanical knowledge of the fleet as it develops.

We go above and beyond the minimum requirements... We ensure there is ongoing training and development of operators. We do this through various means including work shadow opportunities and clear development pathways to allow operators to assume the role of an appointed person. This moves an operator into a more strategic, planning role.

All of the regulatory training is outsourced but we recruit at all levels, meaning operators don't always come to us with a [licence to operate]. We'll fund operators training and provide ongoing support up to and beyond their achieving the necessary competency levels

Contractually, we require staff whose training we have funded, to remain with the company for 12 months unless they opt to self-fund their training in which case there is no requirement to remain.

What sort of training does Ainscough find particularly effective? Do you use simulators, for example?

We don't use simulators, no. There's no specific objection to their use but we source a considerable volume of training through Ainscough Training Services Ltd [no longer under the same ownership as Ainscough Crane Hire], which has a Liebherr crane that it uses for training. The opportunity to let trainees literally get to grips with the real thing is enormously valuable to us.

Do you do anything above and beyond the industry standard in the field of training for your employees?

We have an agreement with Ainscough Training Ltd that everybody who completes their training can take part in a 'guaranteed interview scheme'. The vast majority take us up on the opportunity which enables us to maintain visibility of some of the new entries to the sector.

We also have a mandatory four-day training regime for all new recruits. It is a mixture of classroom and 'hands on' training covering safety and maintenance among other things. It also provides good company acclimatisation for new recruits.

Following on from that, we establish a work shadowing programme, which is about sharing knowledge between experienced staff and new recruits.

Once qualified, what ongoing needs assessment and training is provided?

We have instigated an ongoing monitoring programme for all staff, which ensures that best practice is shared between staff at all levels of experience. This is designed with staff progression at its heart, establishing a clear progression for new operators working with our fleet of cranes to grow their careers. Many have gone beyond the crane operator to achieve 'appointed person' accreditation and become part of the planning team.

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