

Prove your competence

In today's litigious world, project firms are looking for new proof of engineering competence. Brian Tingham looks at proposals in the safety-conscious rail sector

“Within the next 18 to 24 months, industry will have to be much more proactive about proving the competence of its engineers and technicians at all levels. That's certainly the case in the rail sector. We're going to want to see external validation and/or EC(UK) registration through a licensed professional engineering institution – and that applies to all contractors and subcontractors.”

So says Garry Gilby, compliance engineer with the Engineering Directorate at London Underground. “Demonstrating competence is one of the key drivers at the HSE and HM Railway Inspectorate, and the big issue is going to be the robustness of your evidence. In that regard, the value of external verification is obvious. Operatives won't just have internal training records to fall back on; they'll have independently verified certification.”

Gilby's observations are a logical extension of existing policy common among a growing number of engineering organisations. At the senior levels, it's long been mandatory for engineers involved with design, signalling and so on to show competence through qualifications and formal registration at CEng and IEng. And more recently, London Underground, for one, has been passing similar requirements down the supply chain, requiring contractors and subcontractors to demonstrate robust mechanisms for ensuring their engineers' competence at all levels.

Professional engineering


What surprises Gilby is that, so far, few seem to have understood the value – both commercially and in terms of staff retention – of going the professional engineering registration route. “Some have introduced internal competence reviews, rather than going externally to the engineering institutions, perhaps because they're concerned about costs. But Metronet, for example, went to the SOE IPlantE [Society of Operations Engineers plant engineers professional sector] for its engineer assessments, and Mansell is moving in the same direction. Both of these organisations' experience shows that it's a low cost and very worthwhile approach,” he says.

Very worthwhile? “Yes,” says Gilby. “People want to be recognised and rewarded, and on-the-job training and certification, tied into NVQ qualifications, are part of that, especially when NVQ3 can satisfy the criteria for EngTech through

IPlantE. It means they get post-nominal letters and access to CPD [continuing professional development] through the professional engineering body. That's a big incentive for all age groups.”

Meanwhile, for their employers – the companies in the supply chain – there's the benefit of clear advantages over competitors, he adds. “For example, we shouldn't need to be so intrusive into their work and processes. The key for new contracts is to make sure that the contractors we select are able to demonstrate high levels of competence, not just a track record of doing projects well in the past. That's the way forward.”

Andrew Jellis, senior planner with Mansell Construction Services, agrees: “We're taking independent third party verification very seriously. We're talking to SOE IPlantE about registering some of our NVQ courses at EngTech and we have a lot of HNC standard engineers we can also now put forward for IEng registration through SOE, which will give complete proof of competence.”

“As more of the industry follows our lead, we're expecting considerable improvements. We're a project management company, so we deal with a lot of subcontractors and, at the moment, there's no sure way of ascertaining the engineering competence of their maintenance staff, fitters, labourers, or people involved in construction – and that applies to everyone. Yet there could be safety, as well as quality, implications. Subcontractors that can offer guarantees in the form of EngTech certified staff will have a significant competitive advantage over those that can't.” 

Railway

- SOE IPlantE is pursuing the rail industry and validating training courses leading to EngTech through EC(UK)
- Ian Chisholm, head of technical services, says: “Whether they're operations engineers managing sites, or engineers working on heavy plant, workshop equipment or machinery, they'll find a useful home and worthwhile qualifications with IPlantE”
- Andrew Jellis of Mansell states: “If people want to progress from being, say, part of a gang taking down ceiling systems, to become maybe a foreman or lead engineer, they need proof of competence. IPlantE is a great way of getting that”

West line engineering work at Rugby on 2 January 2008



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