



Case study – Southern Electric Contracting

Southern Electric Contracting (SEC) has around 3,000 workers and provides services in the areas of mechanical and electrical building, electrical inspection and testing, communications, street lighting, electrical engineering and power supplies.

Background

SEC currently has around 400 apprentices and trainees aged between 16 and 21. In 2005 the intake was 103; we intend to take on around 130 in 2006. The new workers mostly undertake an electrical apprenticeship over four years or so, which leads to a qualification at NVQ level 3. In terms of existing qualifications, we look for at least three GCSEs at grade C or better, ideally in maths, English and the sciences.

Scope

There is a detailed and stringent selection procedure using a number of popular and effective employment selection tools. We usually take around 10 per cent of applicants. All the apprentices also have a pre-employment medical examination, which includes drug and alcohol testing.

The aim is to enable the apprentices to contribute safely to work activities almost from the moment they arrive on site. They are taught the basics of risk assessment and often get the job of assessing on-site risks while it's fresh in their minds. They also receive full sets of corporate workwear, including all relevant protective equipment, and are trained how to use it.

All new starters attend a full week's safety induction course to give them the best possible start in their working life. This course is usually residential and held on a university campus or at a training/conference centre. We run two induction weeks – one for those in Scotland and the north of England and one for southern England and Wales.

The course's aim is to influence the trainees' behaviour through explaining the rules and standards expected at work. Teaching takes place in the traditional classroom environment, through on-site visits and in practical exercises, held in a simulated workplace where possible.

The basic work-related skills training includes:

- working at height
- safe use of steps and ladders
- basic scaffolding awareness
- safe use of hand tools
- simple electrical safety, including 'Test B4U Touch', a basic life-saver for the electrical trades
- asbestos awareness

- accident causation, reporting and investigation
- use and care of protective equipment
- practical risk assessment and method statements
- the basics of health and safety law
- manual handling
- first aid to 'appointed person' standard.

Other 'soft' skills sessions include:

- customer care
- human resources and personnel issues
- administration of jobs and projects
- time sheets and getting paid
- employment terms and conditions
- expected standards when attending college
- meeting your manager.

To emphasise the fundamental importance of this training, the courses are opened and closed by a senior board director.

The week is run by SEC's training and safety teams, supported by the craftsmen, supervisors and managers whom the apprentices will be working with at their depots and workplaces. Delegates attend both whole-group presentations in a lecture theatre and smaller sessions in groups of under 20. Each day is split into four 90-minute sessions. After the end of the structured training day, we arrange a simple 'homework' exercise, followed by various social activities such as sports, quizzes and cinema visits. It's a full and challenging but enjoyable programme.

At the end of each session we usually run a short assessed test and at the end of the course the trainees take a test assessing their performance over the whole week. This assessment includes the IOSH *Working safely* test, as our training scheme more than covers the *Working safely* syllabus.

Results and evaluation

Between 1994 and 1996, before this training scheme started, around 30 per cent of apprentices had to go to hospital at some point during their apprenticeship to have a work-related injury treated. We now go years between incidents with apprentices.

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