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Business Resources

The value of hiring a safety-conscious builder

Extensive safety programs are cost-effective and good business
By Jerry Kingwill
Friday, January 2, 2009

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Although some business owners tend to shy away from investing in new safety programs due to the current economic environment, the reality is that hiring a builder that is not cognizant of safety standards and regulations can be extremely costly (and potentially devastating) to a company.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and the National Safety Council offer companies a plethora of information on implementing extensive safety programs that can improve overall worker wellness and the productivity and safety of a work environment.

Hiring builders who engage their employees in one of these programs will limit the risk of an injury occurring during a project while decreasing liability exposure both to the contractor and the owner.

A construction company that has chosen to invest in a health and safety program demonstrates that it is invested in the performance and overall well-being of its employees. Above all, it understands that these programs can be implemented for a fraction of the cost of injuries caused by unsafe working environments.

Intelligent and qualified builders understand that engaging in a workplace safety program is a cost-effective and necessary part of the construction business. The American Society of Safety Engineers found in a recent study that for every \$1 spent on a quality safety and health program, businesses saved \$8. Even in these difficult times, safety is both responsible and profitable.

Among the many resources for builders is OSHA, part of the U.S. Department of Labor.

OSHA focuses on preventing work-related injuries, illnesses and deaths by issuing and enforcing standards for workplace safety and health. Many construction companies have partnerships with OSHA to ensure proper standards for their employees.

According to the OSHA Web site, an estimated 1.6 million Americans are employed in the construction industry, half of whom work in residential construction. Each year, roughly 38,000 construction injuries are reported, with approximately 21,000 associated days of lost work.

NIOSH is a research agency focused on preventing work-related illnesses and injuries. The organization, part of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, moderates a WorkLife Initiative that focuses on worker wellness.

According to the NIOSH Web site, the initiative "creates an opportunity for both the occupational safety and health community and the health promotion community to develop and implement workplace programs collaboratively that prevent workplace illness and

injury, promote health, and optimize the health of the U.S. workforce.”

The National Safety Council, a nonprofit, non-governmental public service organization, focuses on protecting life and promoting health. Its Web site has a vast library of fact sheets, statistics, tips and suggestions for safety both in and out of the workplace. The library features over 80 topics and answers to nearly any question a construction professional, homeowner or business executive may have.

Although these organizations offer companies excellent suggestions and partnerships, the greatest challenge to the success of these programs is long-term maintenance.

Many companies will hire or recruit a professional safety expert to help engage and motivate employees and managers in safety programs. Safety efforts cannot succeed without the continued enthusiasm and support of management.

Some builders find ways to promote participation in safety programs, such as establishing an incentive system to get and keep employees involved and motivated. Incentives may include a system of earning points exchangeable for gifts, redeemable “safety cards” for safety compliance, safety games and promotions, tracking the use of proper safety precautions by department and providing company-wide incentives for days without safety violations. These and similar methods can help keep safety at the forefront of employees’ minds.

Worker wellness is another aspect of a safer workforce, since a healthier workforce promotes higher quality work. Construction companies may promote a healthy workforce by aiding employees in stop-smoking initiatives, discounted gym memberships or offering first-aid training classes. These programs can improve worker morale and ultimately result in a reduction of sick time, disability and medical leave.

Safety is a small investment that can amount to huge returns while ensuring that a builder’s employees stay healthy and safe and that your project gets completed on time and within budget.

Jerry Kingwill, principal of Cobb Hill Construction Inc., Concord, is author of “The Value of a Safety Conscious Builder: How Extensive Safety Programs Encourage a Healthy workforce.” He can be reached at jerry@cobhill.com or 603-224-8373.

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