



Harmonization of OHS education, training, competency needed

Headway being made among construction safety associations

Canada can be a confusing place to try and establish strong programming in occupational health and safety. We operate with 14 different occupational health and safety jurisdictions — one federal, 10 provincial and three territorial. This diversity of rules and regulations causes considerable problems for people who work in more than one jurisdiction because their education and training may not always be transportable. It also causes problems for companies that work in more than one jurisdiction because their employees may be qualified in one province but not in another. It also causes difficulty for organizations that offer foundational OHS education and training as they struggle to keep up to date and ensure their programming meets all jurisdictional requirements. What is really missing is a national competency framework that is informed by these varied and diverse OHS rules and regulations.

While these differences cause concern in general, we do have the benefit of some harmonized rules and regulations. For example, Transportation of Dangerous Goods (TDG) regulations are a set of rules that set safety standards and shipping requirements for hazardous goods and are consistent across Canada. We have also aligned legislation related to hazard communication for hazardous materials, known as the Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS). The purpose of WHMIS is to give all working Canadians a uniform and appropriate quantity and quality of information about hazardous materials used in the workplace. TDG and WHMIS were deemed such significant risks that the effort was put into national harmonization.

Many of the basic elements of OHS legislation (such as rights and responsibilities of workers, employers and supervisors) are similar in all jurisdictions. But this is largely where

the harmonization ends. The detailed requirements of the occupational health and safety legislation and how the laws are enforced vary from one jurisdiction to another. The legislation governing fall protection in Canada, for example, is a crazy and inconsistent hodgepodge of requirements, to say the least.

Depending on what province or territory you work in, the requirements can vary significantly. This leads to variations in the education and training requirements for these workers who must work at heights. Further, in some provinces there are regional requirements for workers to have even more specific fall protection training, such as in the oil sands area of Alberta.

In Fort McMurray, an employee needs to not only have basic safety training, he may also need specific fall protection training that would not only meet Alberta provincial requirements but also the specific requirements of the Oil Sands Safety Association (OSSA). Fall protection training provided by anyone other than an OSSA-approved provider will not meet the requirements and a worker could reasonably be denied access to a site to do work at heights.

How can it be that all of this variability makes sense? Is working at heights more or less a risk depending on where you are in Canada? Are workers less prone to injury and death in certain parts of the country due to falls? The statistics would suggest otherwise. Across Canada every year there are more than 50,000 lost-time injuries from falls and at least 70 fatalities. Is the OSSA-approved fall protection training or any other provincially specific or territorially specific fall protection training really any better than the fall protection education and training provided elsewhere in the country?

To be clear, I am not suggesting that the inconsistency in the legislation or the education and training requirements is the cause of these incidents, but harmonization in legislation would allow for harmonization in education and training. Surely consistency in managing these high-risk aspects of work operations would be a first step to reducing the risk of death or disability. We need to find a path forward through the maze and work towards harmonization and reciprocal acceptance of each other's education and training standards.

Fortunately, a path forward is currently being carved by construction

safety associations under the umbrella organization the Canadian Federation of Construction Safety Associations (CFCSA).

Currently, construction safety professionals can obtain various designations, including the National Construction Safety Officer (NCSO), Construction Safety Coordinator (CSC) and Construction Safety Officer (CSO). Up until now, the education, training and work experience requirements to obtain and maintain one of these credentials have been as varied as the OHS legislation in Canada. This situation had limited cross-jurisdictional opportunities for safety professionals and construction companies because the education, training and credentials of these safety professionals were not always transportable.

The CFCSA has been working for more than 10 years towards harmonization of the education, training and work experience requirements for construction safety professionals. They are moving towards a standard competency framework for construction safety professionals along with a standardized exam and requirements for professional development and ongoing recertification. The result will be greater consistency in competency development and assessment along with complete portability and national acceptance of the NCSO, CSC and CSO designations across Canada. This will be a great benefit for the construction safety professional as well as the thousands of construction companies that work cross-jurisdictionally.

The standardization of construction safety professionals' education, training and competency requirements is a major accomplishment. The people in CFCSA and their provincial and territorial organizations should be congratulated for breaking through the old regional way of thinking and working towards this nation-building way of thinking. This will hopefully be a signal that harmonization of other aspects of the occupational health and safety framework in Canada is possible.

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