

Training Crisis in the Plastering Industry

A National Study-Training Challenges for 21st Century Plastering Contractors (Part 1 of 3)

by Joseph A. Scarcella, Ph.D.

Present day plastering contractors are running and operating plastering contracting businesses without having the training (knowledge, skills, and abilities) that industry contractors have had in the past. Specifically, for the last 20 years, delivering training has been a problem for the plastering industry due to the downsizing of union members in the early 1980s. In the past, the union could be considered as a feeder program for training future contractors who had successfully completed an accredited training program during their apprenticeship. Unlike in the past, contractors today are not as fortunate when it comes to training needs. This has had a tremendous effect on today's plastering industry because contractor trade knowledge was limited to only one or more aspects of the industry, but not all (i.e., plaster, lath, dry-wall, EIFS, metal-stud-stud framing, fire-proofing, insulation, decorative, and ornamental and specialty).

Moreover, because more than 60% of plastering contractors are currently nonunion, a continued degradation in contractor quality has occurred. This deterioration of contractor training has caused serious problems. Across the nation, contractors have been recalled to jobsites to rectify faulty workmanship due to poor job performance. Mistakes cost time and money and poor quality is eroding the reputation of the industry.

This lack of definite National Training Standards for the plastering industry presents a training problem in the trade because there is a lack of specific standards that can be used as a basis for competency certification at the contractor level.

With this in mind, significant changes that are occurring in the plas-



tering industry have necessitated the development and need for upgrading national plastering contractor certification requirements and contractor, journeymen, and apprenticeship training standard profiles. These changes include politics in the industry, new and emerging technologies, labor law issues, increased competition, federal legislation, and the decline of unions. Considering this, the following research questions guided the study:

What Can Be Done To Help Solve This Training Problem?

In an attempt to help rectify this problem, a study was recently completed by the author in an attempt to develop validated skills that, if accessed and used, could provide a much needed point of departure for addressing many of the industry's problems. A Plastering Contractors Competency Rating Scale (PCCRS) was developed for the study. Forty-eight managerial competencies were arranged into 19 knowledge related items, 23 hands-on items, and 6 attitudinal items. The technical skills section contained 26 items which were organized into 4 knowledge related items, 19 hands-on items, and 3 attitudinal items. Each item contained an importance rating scale, ranging from 1-6, Important to Unimportant.

Twenty-one contractors and 21 policy makers (individuals working in leadership positions of trades associations, bureaus, or organizations) were selected randomly from a list of panelists, nationally nominated by key representatives of the plastering

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1. What are the current and emerging competencies considered important for contractors in the plastering industry to have achieved to enable them to be competent and responsible business persons?

2. What degree of importance should be attributed to each of the tasks?

industry. Those that participated in the study were nominated by executive directors of the Joint Apprenticeship Committee, the Association of the Walls and Ceiling Industries-International, the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training, the Operative Plasterers and Cement Masons International-

al, and the International Institute for Lath and Plaster.

What Was Found?

By the conclusion of the study, over 95% of managerial skills and over 40% of technical skills competencies were confirmed as important across the sample of panelists that participated (21 contractors and 21 policy makers combined).

For managerial skills, over 95% of the managerial skill items that were valued as important were associated with job-site safety and construction methods, quality control and workmanship related to materials, methods, and application and procedures, and the tools, materials, and equipment required for maximum job-site productivity.

For technical skills, under 5% of the technical skill items that were valued as important were associated with equipment repair and maintenance, erecting scaffold, job-site set up, material installation and application methods, and the tools required for maximum job productivity. Moreover, seventeen of 50 states were represented in this study (plus the District of Columbia). Demographic data indicated that the participants averaged 52 years of age, had greater than 28 years of industry experience, and had been actively working in the plastering industry for greater than 15 years. A minority of these individuals had been members of the union at some point during their career.

What Were The Training Issues Raised?

The findings of this study raise some important issues. One question raised is "why were managerial skills found to be more important by the participants than were technical skills?" One possible answer could have to do with type kind of backgrounds that many plastering contractors have at this point in history. Specifically, many of these individuals began their contracting as managers rather than by "coming up through the ranks" as technicians or apprentices. Throughout much of its history, the culture of the plastering industry has tended to be family-oriented, where young men have worked for family-owned and operated businesses for a number of years until the company was eventually "handed off" at the

retirement of a company patriarch. In recent years, as company sizes have grown, the industry has experienced numerous changes, and these patterns have shifted in favor of contractors with more managerial and educational expertise rather than family ties and technical experience.

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A second reason for the emphasis on managerial over technical skills could be due to the size of companies represented in this study's sample. In larger companies, contractors must be able to manage multiple job-sites with

numerous personnel, financial, legal, and business concerns that must be addressed. While some knowledge of the technical aspects of the trade is certainly important for these individuals, it is more critical that they be able to manage and direct others who have specialized technical skills (i.e., foremen, apprentices, and technicians). While some plastering contractors continue to move up from technician level jobs, the industry is increasingly including individuals with more education, business training, and experience, particularly in medium to large sized companies. Had this study been conducted with a sample of contractors from small companies, it is quite likely that the competencies in the technical category would have achieved a greater degree of consensus if the size of the companies were less than 50 employees.

Of course, a third reason for the emphasis on managerial skills could be that this study's results accurately represent the needs and realities of the modern plastering industry. Specifically, the panel of experts in this study, with a rather unified voice, have indicated that this set of managerial competencies are, in fact, highly important

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if 21st century contractors are to be competent and successful in the industry. It is also important to note that this list tends to represent the views of those more oriented to, and familiar with, residential rather than commercial construction. A slightly different set of outcomes might have evolved if a group of commercial contractors had been represented.

Historically, most contractors achieved their positions because of technical ability. Much of this ability was developed through formal union-delivered apprenticeship programs. In recent years, many are joining the contracting ranks of the plastering industry through other mechanisms (i.e., on-the-job training, industrial technology, or formal management education, etc.), without obtaining the technical skills via an apprenticeship program. Whereas union-trained apprentices knew the technical aspects of the trade, many today are assuming contractor responsibilities without being technically proficient; thus the emphasis has shifted

from technical expertise to management concerns (i.e., profit margins, and financial matters, business law practices, safety, and building code and regulations).

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that many are performing. Specifically, most are involved in working with lath, plaster, exterior insulation finish systems (EIFS), fire-proofing, and drywall rather than with insulation,

decorative and ornamental applications, and specialty contracting. There are some important reasons for this: (a) There are greater profit margins in production operations than in the specialty areas, (b) few qualified applicators are trained and available to perform decorative, ornamental, and specialty work, and (c) insulation is not accepted as part of the plastering trade.

Where Do We Go From Here?

With these factors in mind, and given the results of this study, some important implications for practice, particularly related to the development of training programs and licensing requirements for plastering contractors, should be discussed. One recommendation is that specific training should be developed to expand and formulate the development of managerial skills for practicing contractors. The competency list developed in this study could provide a solid base for this type of curriculum and program development. To accomplish this, it is recommended that the relationship among plastering contrac-

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top, associations, vocational-technical schools, union-based apprenticeship training programs, the job corps, community college trade training, and other educational delivery systems be strengthened and assessed to assist in the development of curriculum and

need for formal and structured training mechanisms across the plastering industry. The results of this study indicate that consensus can be (and has been) achieved regarding the skills needed across the industry. What is now needed is to take the

development, training planning, licensure standards, and certification standards could be addressed and enhanced. To this end, professionals involved in the industry should take an active role in establishing training curricula for plastering contractors.

Nationally, companies of all kinds are recognizing the importance of product quality and employee workmanship. It is critically important that the plastering industry take the cue from others and consider the implementation of similar, quality and standards-based program alternatives. ☞

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training needs. Various combinations of these organizations could collaborate on the development of a strategic plan for the development of the industry (i.e., union associations, bureaus, and state educational agencies) to establish long term coordinated efforts and for broad based improvement on a national scale. Enhanced communication across these organizations would also serve to reduce the fragmentation within the industry.

A second and related recommendation for practice has to do with the

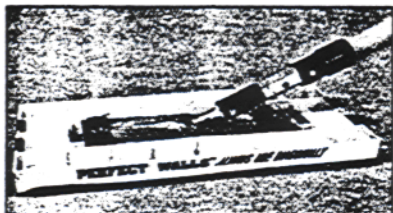
next step and build on this foundation. The potential exists for standardizing plastering industry training, improving the image of the profession, and increasing the level of the industry's workmanship.

Preliminary indicators are that leaders in the plastering industry are quite interested in the results of this study. The study provides a sound base of validated skills that, if accessed and used, could provide a much needed point of departure for addressing many of the industry's problems. As a result, curriculum

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About the author: Joe Scarcella, a former plasterer and manager in the plastering industry, holds a Doctorate of Philosophy from the University of Missouri-Columbia. Currently, he is an assistant professor involved in teaching and research activities related to technology and industry at Southeast Missouri State University. This series of articles are excerpts from Mr. Scarcella's doctoral dissertation. Complete references and the entire dissertation can be obtained from the author. Mr. Scarcella can be reached at (573) 651-2651.

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