



Reaching new heights

By Helena Bryan

Certification requirements will help ensure crane operators have the qualifications they need to keep themselves — and others — safe.



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With a building boom underway in B.C., they are a familiar sight: hulking tower cranes swinging their massive loads over construction sites, closed-off streets, and power lines. People walk by with hardly a second thought – most would assume that the person at the controls must have some sort of certification to operate such a large piece of equipment.

Yet until recently, there was no requirement in B.C. for crane operators to be certified; surprising when one considers that these machines are working everywhere – close to workers and the public alike. The potential for disaster was illustrated in the worst possible way in November 2006, when a 64-metre (210-foot) construction crane collapsed in downtown Bellevue, Washington, injuring the operator and killing a resident in a nearby apartment.

The accident in Bellevue is a reminder of how serious crane accidents can be, which is the reason that operator certification is a big step in the right direction, according to Don Nelson, Industry and Labour Services manager at WorkSafeBC. “Many crane operators are very good at what they do,” says Nelson, “and those are the operators who typically support certification. But when it comes to operating these huge pieces of equipment, everyone needs to be competent.”

According to Nelson, experience in other jurisdictions suggests that more than 50 percent of crane operators fail the complex but critical load-chart tests used to calculate the maximum weight a crane can lift in various configurations. “Some operators have been flying by the seat of their pants when it comes to planning lifts,” he says. “And with loads nearing 100 percent of capacity in recent years, you can’t afford not to know how to read load charts.”

A certification solution

After several false starts over the years, stakeholders in B.C. agreed in late 2006 to new crane regulations that came into effect January 12, 2007. Under the new regulations, crane operators will require certification to operate in this province. (WorkSafeBC will begin enforcing the new regulation July 1, 2007.) Stakeholders, including WorkSafeBC, crane operators, owners, and users from industries across B.C., believe that stakeholder-driven certification will improve the safety of operators, other workers, and the public.



Choosing a training provider

There's no magic formula for choosing a training provider, but given what's at stake, finding a good one is worth the time and effort. Here are some guidelines from WorkSafeBC Certification Services:

- Approach colleagues, industry associations, and professional groups for potential candidates.
- Before contacting prospective trainers, have a clear idea of what the certification requirements are and the courses you need to meet the requirements.
- Assess the provider's qualifications. Ask the following:
 - How experienced is the trainer in your industry?
 - Can they provide relevant references? Ask for their last five clients to avoid getting only favourable references.
 - Can an independent group attest to the qualifications?
 - What special conferences or symposia has the trainer attended in your field of interest? When were they held?
 - What professional associations does the trainer belong to?

"This is an initiative with no downsides," says Rob Magee, president of GWIL Industries, which employs 40 crane operators. "While there's a little trepidation on the part of operators as to how all of this will pan out, certification is necessary. Without it, workers and the public remain at risk."

Gary Kroeker, business manager of the International Union of Operating Engineers, puts it another way: "You need a licence to drive a scooter down the street, but you don't need one to run a crane that has a 500-tonne capacity? That's crazy." Kroeker has been pushing for years for some sort of licensing or certification for operators of all hoisting machinery, including cranes.

Third-party assessment

There are an estimated 5,000 crane operators in the province. Whatever their age or

experience, operators will have to demonstrate that they have the knowledge, skills, and ability to work safely – whether they're operating tower cranes, boom trucks, or mobile cranes.

There will be many categories of cranes that operators can be assessed on, and the certification they get will be specific to that crane type. Operators who want to be certified on all types should be assessed on the most complex crane.

Operators don't need certification if they operate cranes with boom lengths of 7.6 metres (25 feet) or less or capacities of 4.5 tonnes (5 tons) or less.

Certification will be administered by an independent third party, the recently formed B.C. Association for Crane Safety (BCACS), which was established late in 2005 and opened its doors for business in January 2007. The certification process is

similar to the standard provincial driver's test, in that it involves an assessment of both theory and hands-on practice.

Simplifying the certification process

The regulations are intended to be as inclusive as possible, emphasizes Fraser Cocks, executive director of the BCACS. "We're trying to remove as many fears as possible," he says. "Existing operators will be required to perform a practical assessment, in which their theoretical knowledge will be tested verbally. In other words, operators won't have to sit down and write a huge exam, and we're communicating with them about exactly what they need to know."

The BCACS web site (www.bcacs.ca) includes a complete list of the skills that will be assessed. Assessment teams will travel to the operators so people can be

assessed on equipment they're already comfortable with. The process will also accommodate people who speak English as a second language, as well as those with literacy challenges.

Training not included

As a third-party assessor, the BCACS is not in the business of training. "We've defined what the requirements are so that training can meet them," says Cocks. The process is similar to driver licensing – training and assessing are done by different entities, and individuals choose their own trainers (see the sidebar "Choosing a training provider" on page 10).

Deadline incentive

While the process is as accommodating as possible, there is a deadline. By July 1, 2007, operators will need a document issued by the BCACS to indicate that they are fully or partially certified, or that they

have registered (online or by mail) and are awaiting assessment. There will be no "grandfathering": no one is exempt from the certification requirements.

Existing operators who register by the July 1 deadline will be considered incumbent operators, as opposed to new operators. The advantage of being an incumbent mobile crane or boom truck operator is that you will be assessed during the hands-on assessment only, rather than having to complete an additional separate written assessment.

In addition to improving safety for everybody on and near the worksite, certification makes graduated entry possible for new crane operators – much like the graduated licensing system does for new drivers. Before certification, the only route into crane operation was through the full apprenticeship model. Now there are options for the worker and employer

to shop around for training that meets their needs. "For example," says Nelson, "a novice might take night courses to pass the theory assessment, then – with hands-on supervision – operate a crane in a limited manner until passing the practical test, including reading load-lift charts and performing trial lifts."

With no end in sight for the economic boom in B.C., cranes will likely continue to operate in cities and towns around the province. Certification ensures that the workers inside the machines will be up for the challenges of the job – and that the chances of disaster will be down.

For more information on certification for crane operators, visit the WorkSafeBC web page at www2.worksafebc.com/portals/construction/coursesandevents.asp?reportID=33541 or the B.C.

Association for Crane Safety web site at www.bcacs.ca. 

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