

THE ACADEMY OF ELECTRICAL CONTRACTING

Paper presented by

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Being The Best We Can Be Using Old Concepts

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BEING THE BEST WE CAN BE USING OLD CONCEPTS

As times change we must also change to be competitive, produce quality services, and be the best that we can be. You have heard this many times during many of our Academy presentations; however, in looking to the future, we should never forget past practices and we must try to incorporate some of the beneficial aspects successfully used in the past with today's needs.

Today, I would like to share with you some of the past traditions of Trade Guilds or Trade Unions, how those traditions are still utilized in Europe today, and some benefits we could realize from past practices. Some of the benefits are:

1. A higher level of competence in the electrical journeyman craft.
2. Technical advances brought about by a high level of competence in the trade,
and
3. Resultant improvements in our industry.

The Trade Guilds or Trade Unions were formed in Europe in approximately the fourth century. The purpose of the Guild was to set a standard for a craft, to promote the growth of that craft through an apprentice training program, and to promote pride and quality of the product produced by that craft. Still today in Europe, and I will speak specifically of West Germany which I frequently visit, the past has not been forgotten as many of the ingredients of the Guild tradition are still practiced.

The electrical apprenticeship program in West Germany starts after the employer contacts the employment service which has pre-interviewed and pre-aptitude tested the prospective apprentice for competence in the chosen craft. After this pre-interview, the employer selects potential candidates and hires the apprentice. From that time the apprentice is required to go to a formal public trade school staffed by professional

full time teachers, eight hours per week for the next four to five years. To advance from one year to the next, a practical test must be passed or that year must be repeated before attaining the next level of the apprenticeship program.

At the completion of the apprenticeship program, a two day written technical content and oral exam, followed by a three day practical examination is given by the Public Trade School Commission, which is part of the Chamber of Commerce. If the exam is not passed, the apprentice must repeat an additional year of the apprenticeship program and schooling prior to being allowed to re-take the exam. He is allowed only three trials and then is eliminated from that trade for life. This program, as you can see, sets the standard for the craft and the controlled growth of that trade. During the apprenticeship program, the eight hours per week of training is at the employer's expense; however, this investment is realized through increased skill of the electrician, productivity increases, and the quality of the work performed improves.

Although most of the German trades are unionized, the union is more of a professional organization, as an employer will have union and non-union journeymen and apprentices working side by side, as all wages and benefits are negotiated by the union for specific geographical areas of the country by specific trades.

Union membership in Europe, specifically, again in West Germany, is somewhat different than that in the United States, as it is one of choice by the craftsmen as one politically is a Republican or a Democrat. The purpose of the union is more of a fraternal organization which provides family entertainment, assistance in geographical relocation if desired by the member, legal help to the family of the member, and one of professional pride for a specific craft. Also part of the member's dues go toward a retirement fund maintained by the specific organization, paid for by the member, which is an additional benefit over the pension fund we are all aware of here in the United States.

In order to keep the past tradition of the old Trade Guild concept of quality and performance to specification, no electrical work can be

made by an unlicensed person and permits for new work and electrical improvements are strongly enforced and rigid electrical inspections are conducted by government inspectors to assure compliance to the code.

Through the strong attention and strict training provided by the trade schools, a strong relationship based upon professionalism has resulted between the trade and engineering organizations which has contributed to technological advances in the electrical field.

As a result of the strong cohesiveness of the trade and design engineering organizations, a large number of code changes were enacted to satisfy the massive rebuilding effort in Europe after World War II. The trade unions and design engineering organizations formed the code committees with the objective of satisfying quality electrical installations while utilizing less expensive materials and methods of installing these materials. One of the major changes enacted was the utilization of PVC conduit vs steel conduit in electrical installations which not only spawned the growth of the plastics industries in Europe, but also helped to reduce steel consumption due to material shortages and promoted a more cost effective means of electrical installation to the consumer.

Approximately 20 years prior to World War II, again due to the strong emphasis placed on trade training and professionalism, the trade unions and engineering organizations met with government officials and a 220 volt system was adopted throughout Europe replacing the 110 volt system. When you consider the advantages of the distribution system resultant to this effort, you can see the dramatic reduction in material and installation costs to satisfy electrical needs to all consumers while conserving on the use of copper which is a precious metal.

There are many other examples as noted above which can be cited from the past trade union influence based on professionalism due to intensive schooling and practical training, but what does all of this mean to us here today?

The answer is obvious; in learning from the past, we must not be willing to accept unsatisfactory levels of training. We must strive and be determined to assure that our people are trained to the levels necessary, so that pride, performance, and a high quality standard is maintained in our business.

To meet our ever increasing need to improve our material utilization, personnel performance and the quality aspects of our business, we must work with our local unions to insure that training is paramount in everyone's mind. We should be innovative and promote in-house training of our personnel and we must work together with our respective state and local governments to assure strong compliance to code requirements and licensing of all personnel within our craft.

LET'S BRING THE PRIDE OF THE OLD CRAFT GUILD BACK INTO OUR BUSINESS AND BACK IN AMERICA.