

Y-12 apprentice programs through the years

Apprentice programs have been in existence at Y-12 at various times over the years beginning as early as the 1960's. With only one exception, in 1991 when an apprentice program was used to facilitate retraining workers whose jobs had been eliminated, these programs have been intended to take a person from the introductory levels of the various crafts to the journeyman level.

By checking for apprentice codes in the compensation database, 1968 seems to be the first year that apprentices were on the payroll. Most of the craft skills were included and have continued to be listed in this database through the years. For example, there have been apprentices during these three periods: 1968–1973, 1977–1981 and 1990–1992. The last apprentice program before the current one began in 2008.

Paul Norris, a retired Plant Shift Superintendent, during a recent Oral History video interview, recalled the day his electrical department manager, A. K. Johnson, asked him to consider creating an electrical apprentice program. Paul had a teaching background and was delighted to get the chance to teach again and to do it at Y-12.

There are other instructors who, I am sure, share Paul's feelings about the importance he placed on teaching workers who are interested in learning a trade. Like the old Training and Technology School, such programs have intrinsic rewards because the trainees truly appreciate the help they are getting.

Most of our current craft workers come from these apprentice programs held at Y-12 and taught by folks just like Paul who had a sincere interest in seeing them learn. For many of them, their skills today and the abilities they have developed during their careers at Y-12 had their beginnings in an apprentice program.

Two other important aspects of the apprentice programs are the relationships that develop between the apprentice and the journeyman and between both of them and their supervisor. Both the journeyman and the supervisor have roles that are exceptionally important to assuring that the apprentice develops the skills and attitude necessary to succeed. These aspects are also apparent in the current apprentice program.

However, unlike past apprentice programs, this one has a most unique feature. The multiple training sessions held each week either on weeknights or weekends are done through the union organization rather than at Y-12. The supervision of the work is done as it normally has been done and the matching of journeyman and apprentice is still the same.

This arrangement was mutually agreed upon between management and the unions. It is being executed in a manner that is most economical and has produced significant cost savings associated with this recent apprentice program. The training is provided by the hour rather than being paid up front as is common with the union-based training.

This special relationship enabled this latest apprentice program to be funded as it is being implemented rather than seeking a large budget outlay at the beginning. This arrangement proved to be an excellent method for getting the program going when it was needed. Having the training done in the evenings or weekends off site by local unions avoids impacts on the normal daily workload at Y-12.

Additionally, the cost for training the apprentices is more than offset by the differential between the salaries of journeyman craft and apprentice, so the program essentially funds itself. What a way to grow a skilled workforce. With 32% of the workers at Y-12 eligible for full retirement at the time of the apprentice program and 20% could retire at reduced benefits, no wonder it made good sense.

Looking back on all these apprentice programs at Y-12 makes one proud of the people who have had the foresight to know that training and “growing our own” workforce is the most effective way to assure the necessary high quality workforce is sustained for the future work required of Y-12.

Regardless of the outcomes of any future treaty negotiations such as the New START (for **ST**rategic **A**rms **R**eduction **T**reaty) signed in April, 2010, by President Obama and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev, Y-12 will continue to need skilled crafts for the foreseeable future. We cannot afford to allow the nation’s Uranium Center of Excellence to lack any needed skills.

The pride that is apparent in the apprentices in the most recent program also reassures me for the future of Y-12. As the Y-12 workforce, we must continue to bring new people on board and teach them the needed skills that are often unique to Y-12. The Y-12 workers must also instill in the new employees the same pride in our Y-12 heritage that those of us who have been around for a while sometimes take for granted.

So, when one of us experienced Y-12 workers get an opportunity to interact with new workers at Y-12, we must try and recall our early days here. We have to think about how much it was appreciated when someone who had more savvy than us regarding the “things Y-12” took the time to tell us about the details and helped us to “learn the ropes.” We must take the time to do that for others.

After all, Y-12’s “Can-Do” attitude and our rich heritage of supporting the freedom of our nation and the world is a special thing. Patriotism is strong here and pride in accomplishment goes along with our job.

So, it is good to share one’s enthusiasm for the importance of Y-12’s missions and demonstrate by example the importance of our work. That’s part of an apprentice program too!