Interview with Michael Caro

Michael Caro, CUSP, is director of safety and training for UtilX Corp., which is headquartered in Kent, WA. In this interview, Caro discusses approaches to safety training for electric utility workers and explains how UtilX promotes its safety culture throughout the company.

Please provide a brief description of your professional background and of your position as director of safety and training for UtilX.

I began my career in the utility industry in 1989 as a lineworker and worked for both contractors and utilities. My longest single stretch was with Ameren/UE in the St. Louis, MO, area (15.5 years). In 2006, while still with Ameren, I made the switch from lineworker to safety professional when I accepted a position as the safety supervisor at one of Ameren’s coal-fired power plants. Two years later, in April 2008, I accepted a position with UtilX. The director oversees a staff of four safety and training specialists and one quality control auditor. I also interact with the safety leadership of our parent company, Willbros, as well as with directors and managers from the other business units under Willbros. UtilX’s safety and training department is ultimately responsible for all training (both regulatory and job-related) that takes place within the company as well as for developing, reviewing and maintaining all safety programs.

Each member of UtilX’s safety and training department is a fully qualified and experienced journeyman lineman. What other criteria must department staff meet?

Preference is given to persons who also have professional safety and/or training experience.

What methods are used to train UtilX workers—online, classroom, hands-on, etc.? Which approaches seem to work best?

We use a combination of online, classroom, hands-on and on-the-job. Hands-on and on-the-job seem to get the best results, both in terms of retention of knowledge and engagement of employees in the training process.

How often does UtilX provide refresher training to its workers to ensure that they follow proper safety, health and environmental (SH&E) practices and procedures while on the job?

All employees must attend training on regulatory topics, as well as first aid/CPR/AED, at least annually. If deficiencies are noted in an employee’s performance in the interim, additional training may be part of the recommended solution.

How does UtilX ensure that the training it provides contains the most up-to-date SH&E information, particularly when it comes to regulations and standards?

The safety and training staff uses a variety of resources to ensure that we are aware of any changes to regulations that affect our industry. These include paid services, professional memberships and diligent attention to regulatory bodies (primarily OSHA, of course).

How does UtilX ensure that the training it provides contains the most up-to-date SH&E information, particularly when it comes to regulations and standards?

The phrase “utility workers” is a bit too broad in this context. Utility can mean water, gas, electric, sewage/water treatment, etc. or any combination of these things. UtilX is specifically concerned with the electric utility industry, and some differences definitely exist in the hazards faced and the types of training associated with them. Whereas other industries typically only concern themselves with the possibility of electrical contact or electrocution as a peripheral matter, for us, it is a daily fact of life. The chief risk our workers face every day is that of making contact with energized parts that typically operate at voltages ranging from 4,000 to 35,000. We have a regulation that is specific to us (29 CFR 1910.269), which is, incidentally, within about 90 days of being reissued—it just went to the Office of Management and Budget and should be published in the Federal Register in October.

The unique nature of our risk exposures naturally means that we have training requirements specific to our industry. This is especially applicable to the training associated with recognizing the hazards of working around high voltages and energized equipment.
Do UtilX workers have an opportunity to provide feedback on training? How is their input used to improve future training courses?

Every training class, no matter how short or long, is accompanied by a feedback form that allows participants to rate the content, trainers, facility, etc. and asks specific questions designed to solicit feedback that helps us adjust class content and training techniques as necessary to improve the presentations. We review every training class at least once a year and use the feedback forms as part of that process.

UtilX has developed a safety management system that combines rules, compliance, enforcement and recordkeeping with the behavioral aspects of workplace safety. Does this safety management system draw from the ANSI/AIHA Z10 standard?

The Z10 standard certainly contributed to the overall management system—especially where the concepts of employee involvement and continuous improvement are concerned. However, the system itself is based on safety performance standards. Our parent company, Willbros, designs the performance standards that the enterprise expects business units to follow. Then, within the context of the business unit’s industry and specific exposures and risk profile, the nuts and bolts of the management system are constructed—always with an eye on complying with the broad strokes of the performance standards.

Based on your experience, what is the best way to deliver safety training that is fresh, relevant and useful to both new and seasoned utility workers?

The comment we receive most often on our evaluations—and it supports what I have seen in my own experience—is that participants would prefer more hands-on work during training classes. Even if you need to simulate certain equipment or situations, a hands-on scenario is always the best bet. And in the circumstances where it just is not feasible to have a hands-on component, we try to design the courses with plenty of built-in feedback and class participation opportunities. Avoid uninterrupted lecture at all costs.

How does UtilX promote its safety culture from the top down throughout the company?

Our senior staff is the safety steering committee for the company. They (and the company president) are the first word and final authority on our safety programs and safety management system. They are tasked with approval, annual review and continuous improvement of the system. Our company president is a great advocate for safety within the company, both from his office and on the visits he makes to our field locations.

Michael Caro, CUSP, is director of safety and training for UtilX Corp., which is headquartered in Kent, WA. He may be contacted at mcaro@utilx.com.

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Utilities Branch
2012 Conference Call Schedule

Third Thursday of every month at 2:30 pm (Central)
Dial-in: (605) 475-3200
Passcode: 986477#