



Slow and steady wins the young worker safety race

When it comes to young workers, speed demons are not wanted at one of the province's largest industrial operations, the Alcan aluminum smelter in Kitimat.

"One thing I've always found is that young workers tend to be over-eager, and try to please by working quickly, possibly too fast," says Art Emmerson, the plant's occupational safety specialist. "You've got to slow them down, make sure they take their time — to really understand and use safe work practices."

The concept is even the official motto of the smelter's joint safety committee: "No task is so important or so urgent that you can't take the time to do it safely."

The point is emphasized regularly for the young workers who are roughly 15 per cent of the plant's 1,560 regular employees, and another 80 post-secondary students hired into summer jobs each year.

It's a given, according to Emmerson, that younger Alcan workers will always hear this: "Take your time; understand what you're doing; stop and ask if there's any doubt. It only takes a second and no one's here to rush you."

The message is heard first in the general plant induction process, more than a third of which deals with safety. Then it's reinforced in work area inductions where the focus narrows to specific job locations. This is when new employees receive their personal protective equipment, including boots and gloves, that Alcan supplies free.

For a young worker starting regular employment, the next step is up to three weeks of area-specific training and hands-on supervision. Each summer student is assigned to a mentor. Both groups wear brightly-coloured striping on their hard hats — new regular employees for three months and the students through the summer.

Hard-hat striping lets more experienced Alcan workers recognize the newcomers and offer help and encouragement as needed. Supervisors also use it to monitor young workers and, says Emmerson, keep an eye on any who might be affected by a sense of invincibility — the ‘it-won’t-happen-to-me’ syndrome of youth.

“We really try to impress upon young workers, especially those here for the first time or coming from small businesses, that work in a plant like this is literally another world,” he says.

The new workers expect molten metal at 950 degrees Celsius, but other hazards can be surprising — for instance, pedestrian safety. The company is careful about designating walkways with guardrails and crosswalks because it’s not unusual to see several vehicles like ore trucks, trimmers, crust breakers and wheel breakers moving at once inside the large buildings of the one-square-mile operation.

Young worker safety concerns aren’t confined to the plant. In 2005, Alcan and CAW Local 2301 launched a joint annual outreach activity to mark North American Occupational Safety and Health Week. This year, union and company representatives made a Grade 11 presentation using WorkSafeBC’s *Lost Youth* video and took Grade 12s on a half-day tour of the smelter.

“It’s a good time for this because they’re just starting to work, or at least thinking about it,” says Emmerson.