

# Mott Electric



## ***Positive approach avoids short-circuiting safety***

Safety and productivity make a complete circuit at Mott Electric Ltd., and the connection starts at the top. General Manager Graham Trafford also serves as corporate safety officer, an unusual arrangement because many companies don't make safety a hands-on senior management concern.

Trafford's office is the first stop for every new hire, and he emphasizes the 76-year-old company's commitment to individual safety.

"They need to hear it from owners, managers and foremen," he says. "We want you to be safe, and go home in one piece every night. This is our philosophy."

The Burnaby-based company employs approximately 175 electricians and apprentices--about one quarter of them are under 25 years old.

"Mainly due to all the talk about skill shortages" according to Trafford, "more qualified young people have gone into trades in recent years; and they're seeing bright futures now" says Trafford.

"Still, most start with no concept of what construction work is like, or the hazards they can come across," he says. "In the first week or so on a job site, they're dazed, taking it all in — like trying to sip water from a fire hose."

In the first-day interviews, Trafford gets "a feel for their experience and attitudes, and then I send them where the fit looks best for them and for us." Mott's projects in the Lower Mainland and other parts of the Province range from two-person job sites to those with 40 electrical employees.

Before new Mott employees set foot on a job site, they all receive:

- ▶ A safety handbook developed by the Electrical Contractors' Association of B.C., which they sign off after reading it.
- ▶ Assignments to mentors — journeymen or senior apprentices responsible for keeping an eye on and helping individual newcomers.
- ▶ Orientations to electrical issues on the specific site and, for large projects, to broader issues from representatives of prime contractors.

A pair of common scenarios often play themselves out, as young electrical workers start their careers, according to Trafford.

“A lot of them act as if nothing can hurt them, as if they’re invincible,” he says. “But a few days on a job site tends to change that. They come to realize how much they don’t know, how much they have to learn; and that’s good news. After a while, it’s odd hearing about an apprentice so arrogant he’s not listening.”

The other side of the invincibility coin can be fear of showing lack of knowledge or even suggesting that by asking questions. Beyond declaring “there are no stupid questions”, a solution is to confirm young workers’ understanding indirectly, according to Trafford. Mentors or supervisors can probe whether their explanations are clear, or ask young workers to talk about what happens next in a work process.

In all this, Mott’s mentoring system is critical. “It’s not 24/7 supervision,” Trafford admits, but the foremen always know from the mentors what’s happening...or not.

“I know a lot of young workers are good because I never hear about them. Those I do hear about get attention, often without being singled out, for instance, in general comments at weekly tailgate meetings. We take the time because it serves everyone, and the final outcome is a better, safer journeyman.”