

Controlling hazards you can't see, taste or smell

Take your typical construction industry hazards; then add potentially deadly airborne contaminants. This is the daily routine at Quantum Hazmat Inc. It sounds like no place for young workers, but they are part of the safe, productive atmosphere of this Richmond company that is part of the Canada-wide Quantum Environmental Group.

Young workers play a key role in the firm's "labour-intensive work with asbestos, lead, mercury, mould, PCBs — any regulated chemical or biological building substance," according to Quantum Hazmat Safety Manager Russ Dosenberg.

Company projects range from residential mould remediation in remote First Nations communities, to asbestos removal from large urban malls and institutional settings. With such diverse projects, it's not unusual for Quantum Hazmat's basic force of 150 regular employees to grow to as many as 400 with temporary hires. This is where many young workers come in.

Every new employee starts with a multi-part orientation Dosenberg calls "a hands-on coaching experience." It includes a project orientation, Quantum's own corporate health-and-safety program, and key points from the detailed environmental hazard control plan that the company develops for each site.

Quantum Hazmat focuses its greatest attention on new hires under the age of 24, and first-time arrivals to the industry or the company, according to Dosenberg. They receive extensive mentoring in the form of a "green hands for green hands" program adapted by Quantum from a similar program developed by the Canadian Petroleum Safety Council.

Besides working alongside designated experienced mentors for at least three months, those newcomers also wear distinctive “green hand” stickers on their hard hats. The stickers invite other Quantum employees to introduce themselves, offer help or advice and, in case of emergency, watch out for green hands. In this way, the larger group’s depth of knowledge reinforces and amplifies the efforts of mentors and supervisors.

Company foremen spend a lot of time explaining how proven safety measures, such as respiratory protection, Tyvek® coveralls, showering and other requirements, give employees necessary protection. Young workers react to the safety controls in a variety of ways, according to Dosenberg.

“It’s not so hard to convince young workers about traditional construction site hazards, like the dangers of confined spaces or falls from heights. But it can be challenging to explain how hazards that can’t be seen or smelled are real and require effective control measures.”

“People come in with preconceived ideas,” he says, “sometimes at opposite ends of the spectrum. They run from ‘this stuff is just too dangerous to work with’ all the way to ‘it’s not really that risky.’”

What’s most important when training young workers, according to Dosenberg, is to never assume anything.

“They may say, ‘yes-yes-yes’ without really understanding the instructions. Even if the head nods, there may be a reluctance to ask questions — so we always check. It’s a matter of ‘trust them, but verify everything.’”

Quantum Hazmat makes young workers central to its corporate commitment to workplace health and safety. It reflects the reality that the company’s core business is assuring safe and healthy environments for clients.