



Don Hurst is the Director of MHCA's  
WORKSAFELY, Education and Training

# VIRTUAL DRIVER'S SEAT

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BY DON HURST

Ever imagine climbing behind the controls of an excavator and giving the toothy, long-arm shovel a lift? Enticing thought – but for the risk of taking out a telephone poll, maybe.

The Manitoba Heavy Construction Association has a fix for that.

The MHCA has a whole line of heavy equipment simulators, virtual machinery that puts you in the driver's seat.

And, working with the University College of the North Workforce Development Center, the Manitoba Construction Sector Council and the Manitoba Metis Federation, it has delivered workshops in Thompson and Winnipeg in the past months. The workshop uses simulators, sponsored by Brandt Tractor and Toromont Cat, to put students at the controls, in a classroom setting.

"We are very excited about the opportunities that this simulator lab opens up for those looking to get into the industry, as equipment operators," said Phil McDaniel, MHCA WORKFORCE™ program coordinator. "This is really great for taking training directly to the students, especially for reaching those in northern or rural communities, where programs and practical opportunities can be sparse."

Simulators can be transported and that opens up the introduction to heavy equipment operations to various areas of the province.

The introductory program runs four weeks. Students get a week of heavy construction industry awareness, safety orientation training and 3 weeks of in-class theory and simulator training on dozer, grader, loader and excavator operation.

Phil Bourgeois saw the benefit right away.

A student in the course, Bourgeois said there was more involved than just virtually hopping on the mammoth machinery.

"What was an eye opener for me was the depth of safety training on practices and procedures that needs to be done before you even step foot on a piece of equipment," he says.

"The goal of this program is to build opportunities for workforce development

across Manitoba," said McDaniel. "This is done through strategic partnerships and programming that can provide safety and equipment-operator orientation to newcomers to heavy construction."

The introductory program sets up the individual for further training, to prepare them to become certified heavy equipment operators. The heavy equipment simulators build skills and allow for evaluating potential operators before they are hired.

"Part of the introductory course is you can immediately identify and assess strengths and weaknesses," added McDaniel.

The simulators also help potential operators to "test the metal" and identify what piece of equipment is the right fit for the individual, this can be done through evaluating the potential operator on basic operational techniques, general controls knowledge, and ergonomics of the equipment simulators.

"Through these training programs the instructor and simulators can correct bad habits, identify machine misuse, identify safety violations, track cost on the proficiency of the operator and set bench marks for operator improvement," McDaniel explained.

"Because by the end of the day, a safe and efficient operator is a profitable one."

Geoff Greenfield, MHCA WORKFORCE training instructor located in Thompson, said "the simulators offer the students an opportunity to work around or in equipment in a safe way, right from the start."

When Greenfield started in construction many years ago, a new hire "was just thrown the keys to an excavator and told to figure it out."

Ultimately, the program is intended to help build skill sets of individuals and improve job readiness to strengthen their prospects for employment into the heavy construction industry, and, to grow the future workforce of skilled labour for the industry.

Feedback from students indicated they liked the hands-on nature of simulator-based training and, for some, the training has already led to employment. >>>



Left: Students training on heavy equipment simulators at MHCA's WORKFORCE class. Above: Good training reduces risk of error on the worksite. Photo by DARCY FINLEY

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