



How do you build a supportive office for employees who are always busy at someone else's workplace? You wire the care right into the system



Bridge Electric

Gerald Reinders, President & CEO

## Trust for Trade

Pam Withers

If there was a song called *Mothers, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to be Contractors*, it just got yanked off the charts. That's because for the first time, a member of the B.C. construction industry - known in general for dirty, wet, cold, hazardous jobs with brutally cyclical employment opportunities - made it onto the list of The 10 Best Companies to Work for in B.C. Parents, it's time to steer your children towards the trades.

Not just trades at any firm, of course, but positions at a company such as Richmond's Bridge Electric, which jumped from 11th place last year to seventh place this year. Bridge, one of the largest electrical contractors in B.C., has installed wiring, lighting, power and fire-safety systems in dozens of modern landmarks across the province.

Newly nestled on a list dominated by white-collar professions, with annual revenues of \$20 million, the firm knew it was a long shot to prove that employees without flextime or comfy workspaces can be just as loyal and engaged as staff at firms with game rooms, cafeterias, gyms and daycare.

President and CEO Gerald Reinders (who bought the company in 1987, five years after it was founded) was floored when he got the call from *BCBusiness*, but was quick to identify what brightens electrical workers' lives: a trusting, caring environment. "So many things flow from that," he says. Such as an emphasis on safety, ample tools in stock, steady work and clear orders never to compromise on work to complete a job on time.

While it may seem a no-brainer to tout 'an emphasis on safety', construction-site supervisors are notorious for occasionally compromising safety to deliver on schedule. Bridge employees (80 per cent are electrical workers and the company is non-union) know that Bridge sends out no double message on this; they gave the company high marks for safety consideration on last year's *BCBusiness*/Watson Wyatt survey. In 1999 occupational health and

safety consultant W. Denault & Associates in North Vancouver gave the firm the highest score to date for any construction employer in western Canada. Investing money to stockpile quality tools - proper-height ladders, for instance - is another employee-wish-list item often regarded as cost prohibitive by rival firms' management. The employees who have worked for other firms tell John Reinders, general superintendent at Bridge (and brother of Gerry), that the company spends significantly more on good tools and logistics.

As for steady work, every firm in the industry suffers cyclical ups and downs, but not every firm's manager spends hours on the phone during Bridge's slack times arranging to loan out staff for short terms to other contractors who may need them. Bridge liaises with 24 companies. "It's rewarding being with a company that lets them do a good job, and lets me treat my people well," says the superintendent.

While Bridge's demographics (90 per cent male, median age 32, 30 per cent apprentices) may be standard in the industry, having a profit-sharing plan is not. Bridge's plan is formulated on a percentage of profits, length of service, level of responsibility and individual contribution. There are also monthly awards for ideas that boost safety or productivity, and a plaque plus cash award of several hundred dollars for the best idea of the year. The annual Christmas banquet features awards for safety and length of service, including gift certificates for dinner out.

Within a few months of the September 11 crisis, construction hit a dry spot; not only were clients canceling jobs, but Bridge fielded many requests for reducing costs on already-approved projects. Despite such challenges, the firm has doubled its growth over the past four years and will move in March to a new South Richmond facility. At 2,300 square metres, the building has nearly twice the company's current capacity, and rumor has it that a lunch room, gym and 'space for fun' are under consideration, even access to a daycare centre just 400 yards away.

If these tickle the fancy of Bridge's more than 100 employees (many of whom drive straight from home to their job site), they are not the benefits that hold highest sway. Employees are more likely to point to the training that Bridge ensures its foremen give trainees (60 per cent of Bridge foremen are former Bridge apprentices), and the serious money the firm invests in helping employees deliver service "on time, every time" to customers - from paying air freight on materials needed immediately, to not flinching when overtime or additional manpower are required. Employees also like the fact that the company eschews time clocks, focusing instead on results. Unlike most construction firms, it discourages employees from trading in vacation days for money, to ensure they return to work rested and unstressed.

Projects in which Bridge has been involved include the Delta Sun Peaks Hotel (two years, \$3 million), Bentall 5 (two years, \$3.5 million), the new Shaw tower on the Coal Harbour waterfront (two years, \$4 to \$5 million) and the new B.C. Cancer Research Center at Vancouver General Hospital (two years, \$7 to \$8 million).

In 1998, after Bridge won an Excellence in Construction award from the Vancouver Regional Construction Association (it has since won two more VRCA awards, in 2000 and 2001), employees secretly sank \$4,000 of their own money into photographing staff and projects that year, to present a surprise collage to management. (It's on the second page of *bridge electric.com*.)

"Ever seen tears in an electrician's eyes?" Gerry Reinders asks, recalling the gift. It's enough to make students training for white-collar work consider short-circuiting their plans.