# OPERATOR TRAINING IN NEW ZEALAND

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## INTRODUCTION

Machine operator training and certification in New Zealand, as far as we are concerned, has been basically addressed by the prime contractor himself, in most cases. In the small gang situation the prime contractor is usually the machine operator.

Perhaps the reasons for this are that he knows the machine's capabilities, perhaps it's the most expensive item for his business, so has to be looked after. He usually feels that he can control the productivity of his gang in that sense, and he knows that any machine downtime is lost earnings for him. He can normally identify the operational faults of his machine reasonably readily, especially if he's doing it first hand. He can also relate pretty directly to the supplier, or the mechanic, when anything is necessary.

I would say that, in this type of set-up, the skills of the machine operator (the contractor himself), are good. Perhaps not so much the mechanic skills, but the operator skills are good. I guess that's because he has to pay the bills if he gives his machine too much rough treatment. That's perhaps the main cause of machine operator training at the moment, that the machine operators themselves, if they own the machine they respect them.

However, when the operator is other than the contractor, the problems do arise of, perhaps what we call "cowboy operators". I think Wally Taylor referred to a few of them when he was out here recently. But I think one of the main reasons for this sort of thing is that the contractor himself, if he's putting on an operator, doesn't take sufficient time to pre-select that person.

Pre-selection of machine operators I feel is critical. What really makes a good machine operator? Perhaps on the negative side is that not everybody makes a good machine operator. And I think it's critical that when a machine operator is considered that the person is pre-selected, and that the contractor looks for the necessary traits in the person.

Contrary to what a lot of people think, and I know it's been said quite often, machine operator training has been on-going in New Zealand for a long time. I'll only go back as far as the last two or three years and give some idea of the certificate numbers as an example.

In 1987, there were 25 certificated as machine operators, in 1988 there were 28, in 1989 there were 58, and in 1990 there were 91 certificates issued. Since 1987, there have been 215 machine operators that have been assessed and certificated.

Earlier on the major companies conducted plant operator training programmes. I know Kinleith had one run by the Kinleith Garage, and the New Zealand Forest Service had them dotted throughout their conservancies. Tasman Forestry at Murupara in the KLC days, had these plant operator training programmes. I guess the money dried up, the same as in everything else and that's why they folded.

But we have had considerable input into machine operator training in New Zealand, in the last 10 years and certainly through the certificate system.

The machine operator training now though is normally carried out on-job, either by specialist trainers, or by the prime contractor, or by another experienced operator. Unfortunately in these circumstances, the skills are developed just as opportunities arise or as the pressures of work dictate. Production requirements often interfere with any training that is being undertaken and it normally makes the training pretty stop-start and not very effective.

In this sense, the guy that does the bulk of the training is the prime contractor himself, and it is important for him to consider that if he's doing it in a stop-start fashion, it's not going to be very effective.

1. General Knowledge
2. Safety
3. Planning
4. Communications and Signals
5. Operating
6. Maintenance
7. Efficiency

Table 1 : Training Requirements for Machine Operating: Tractor/Skidder

This table gives some idea of how the training requirements of machine operators are identified. It normally includes a general knowledge section, followed by safety. These are the areas he needs to be trained in. He also needs to be trained in the area of planning his job. He needs to know and understand the communications within the operation, the process of operating the machine itself, and he needs to know how to maintain his machine.

Perhaps this is where Wally Taylor and I will differ, but as far as the certificate system is concerned, the contractor only needs to know the basic maintenance requirements of the machine on a daily and regular basis. And all that information is normally contained in the operator's manual.

Last but not least, the guy is evaluated for his performance on the machine and how well he can produce. Those are some of the competencies that are required in a machine operator. We do have competencies that are also spelt out like that for hauler operations, wheeled loaders, and just about any machine type you can think of.

## CONCLUSION

Finally, here's a few of my own personal thoughts.

- An off-site induction, and awareness programme for both contractors and their operators, certainly would be beneficial.
- Every operator should have access to and understand the contents of the Operators Manual for that machine. It doesn't matter whether it's an old machine, a new one, high-tech, or simple, he should at least have an operator's manual for that machine.
- Machine suppliers have a responsibility of inducting both the contractor and the operator on any new equipment. Some machine suppliers do this very well, and they have specialist trainers that do this sort of thing. Others have salesmen that do it.
- Operators must be pre-selected, inducted, developed and monitored continuously by the prime contractor for them to be effective. The prime contractor being the guy that foots the bills.

Finally then, there are a lot of skilled contractors and operators out in the field today. There are also a hell of a lot that aren't very skilled and aren't very efficient.