Roundtable Discussions Get People Talking

The Business World is constantly looking for new ways for people to meet, interact and discuss pertinent topics. From the traditional business meeting to telephone conference calls, brainstorming sessions and more recently, web-based meetings via webcam, there is a continuing need to have people discuss views and ideas.

One format that has proven to be successful for members of the Concrete Sawing & Drilling Association (CSDA) in this quest is the roundtable. This type of setup allows all participants the opportunity to express their ideas and opinions in a structured, yet informal manner. A roundtable discussion format is ideal for those who may not usually speak up during meetings but who may feel as though they have worthwhile points to make. The layout of a traditional board room meeting can often be quite intimidating, whereas a roundtable layout can provide a much more informal atmosphere for participants. The chance to sit with peers and discuss a series of topics informally can provide those who often remain silent with a newfound confidence. Meanwhile, roundtables are overseen and moderated in order to keep discussions on topic and moderators can help provide guidance if needed.

For those who are unfamiliar with the idea of a roundtable discussion, the format is relatively simple. Participants sit at a table and discuss a series of predetermined topics for a set amount of time. At the end of each time period, a spokesperson from the table gives a summary of the pertinent points raised, to the rest of the room. If attendance is large and multiple tables are filled, moderators can be assigned to ensure discussions remain on topic and that each table has an opportunity to share the results of their discussions.

CSDA has found that roundtables are a great way of gleaning information from members and non-members alike. The sharing of knowledge and ideas has proven to be invaluable for all involved. One CSDA member who has experienced the benefits of roundtable discussions is Morgan Steiner of Viking Concrete Cutting, Inc. of Klamath Falls, Oregon. In 1994, Steiner moved his concrete sawing business from Southern California to Southern Oregon, an area east of the Cascade mountain range, with an elevation of over 4,000 feet. One of the biggest changes he encountered was the change in climate and the effects this change had on his operators, equipment and cutting operations. Operating concrete cutting and coring equipment in a geographic area that experiences below-freezing temperatures, several months of the year, has many challenges. Relocating any company is a challenge, but relocating one to a different climate is another matter.

Steiner attended a CSDA roundtable, and during the discussions learned a great deal from other contractors. More importantly, he found an opportunity to meet people in the industry who have first-hand knowledge about the challenges faced while cutting concrete in cold climates. In talking to fellow contractors from areas like New Jersey, Chicago and Canada, Steiner was able to get a lot of ideas about sawing in a cold environment. Tips included parking trucks inside in warmer garages, draining water from equipment, rolling and storing hoses in cabs of vehicles and bypassing water systems in saws. Steiner was also given useful information on employee comfort and safety, and how to deal with the changeable weather conditions while traveling to and from the job site. “To be able to talk to people who are in this industry and to exchange ideas with them was incredibly beneficial to me, and helped me greatly when I moved the company,” said Steiner.

CSDA has held three roundtables during 2009. Discussions on the topics of slurry recycling, risk management and different methods of billing cutting services attracted many CSDA members and other industry professionals keen to learn more about those subjects and the discussions were quite in-depth. The proceedings from all three roundtables have been transcribed and are available for review, another benefit of being part of the association and actively taking part in these events. “Roundtables provide attendees with a great format to share information and learn from the knowledge and experiences of others,” said CSDA executive director Pat O’Brien. “The association is extremely pleased with both the attendance and outcomes of these discussions,” he added.

2009 CSDA Roundtables

Sustainable green building construction is a very hot subject. The purpose of the Slurry Recycling roundtable was to share collective experiences on the topics of concrete slurry containment and recycling, including individual state regulations; knowledge of acceptable pH levels for waste materials; the understanding of what constitutes a Spill Prevention Control
and Countermeasure (SPCC) and the implementation of a Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plan (SWPPP).

The general response from participants suggests that the control and safe disposal of slurry and other waste materials can be handled in differing ways depending on the individual regulations enforced by each state in the U.S. or governing body. Several states have imposed tight regulations with expensive fines for those contractors who do not adhere to them. However, the environmentally-safe disposal of slurry and other waste materials is not as strict in other states, but contractors in more loosely-regulated states are bracing themselves for similar levels of control in the near future.

For those who are already under tight state regulations, the containment, transportation and disposal of slurry is an expensive, but necessary, part of the work routine. Many feel that before too long there will be nationwide regulations in place, requiring compliance from all companies in the sawing and drilling industry.

Several contractors within CSDA have been working with companies to separate and reuse water mixed with slurry, saving on water consumption and reducing the amount of waste material produced. Other companies provide the means to return alkaline-rich slurry water to a neutral pH 7 so that it can be disposed of safely, another important factor that governing agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency are keen to enforce. The requirements for documentation such as SPCC or SWPPP were also discussed, and some attendees told of their experiences of being fined for not having such a plan in place on the job site. The sharing of this kind of information with fellow industry professionals, about the positive or negative aspects of various kinds of regulations, greatly enhances the value of participation in roundtables.

Embracing risk management strategies will result in long-term claim cost reductions of companies by incorporating industry-specific loss-reduction techniques in conjunction with aggressive claims management procedures.

Contractors discussed how their approach to risk begins during the hiring process with procedures that require physical exams, drug screenings, driver’s license reviews and employment history checks. Some employers use third-party contractors to carry out a series of background checks on a potential employee. All agreed that ensuring the right person is chosen to fill a position is paramount to instilling a good sense of safety in the workplace.

In addition, in order to maintain a safe working environment, some contractors have put incentives in place so that operators adhere to safety guidelines and avoid accidents and injuries. Others take advantage of the Toolbox Safety Tips, provided by CSDA, to educate operators and to keep them ever vigilant of potential hazards.

The issue of insurance claims brought about some lively debate, and elicited many
DID YOU KNOW?

CSDA ROUNDTABLES

In recent years, CSDA has held 17 roundtable discussions. They are:

2004
• The Value of Training
• The Future of Information Technology in Concrete Cutting Companies
• Safety Adds to the Bottom Line

2005
• Safe Work Practices for Contractors
• Building Solid Working Relationships with Specifiers
• CSDA Membership Benefits

2006
• Wire Sawing: Tips and Techniques
• Highway Safety for Concrete Cutters

2007
• Adding Selective Demolition and Removal Services
• Contract Language, Exclusions, Legal Protection and Coverages
• How to Avoid Buried Hazards
• How to Get Politically Active

2008
• Securing Your Business Future with Business Succession
• Hydraulic or Hi-Cycle: Which Best Fits Your Company’s Needs?

2009
• Different Methods of Billing Cutting Services
• Risk Management
• Slurry Recycling

Transcripts for all of these discussions are available to view and/or download via the Members section of the CSDA website. www.csda.org

anecdotes about how certain situations can quickly escalate and greatly affect a company’s bottom line. Contractors felt that stressing the importance of an operator’s health and well-being is an excellent way of showing employees how valued they are. Hopefully, this leads to a mutual respect between employer and employee, a relationship that can be critical if an employee files a medical claim. Another recurring theme was training and the importance of having a structured training program to ensure a high level of operator safety. Contractors explained how participation in the CSDA training program has proven to be an excellent way of achieving a high level of safety throughout a company. “If you have the CSDA certification process in place, where your employees go through 101 and 201 levels of training and then achieve certification, that really makes an impression,” said Susan Hollingsworth of Holes Incorporated. “It’s not you saying your operators are qualified. It’s a professional body saying that they have addressed operational issues, they’ve addressed safety, they’ve addressed proper equipment usage. And your operator has participated in training and has the knowledge to go forward.”

A roundtable entitled Different Methods of Billing Cutting Services was held to discuss how cutting contractors handle billing. Participants offered ideas and opinions on issues such as the pros and cons of various billing methods, how quotes are broken down to show job-specific requirements and how the introduction of online billing has affected business.

This roundtable provided an insight into how estimators approach their jobs and what methods work best for developing estimates depending on the size and complexity of the cutting work. Moderators asked participants to look at how they are currently billing work and determine whether that method is the best suited for producing an accurate cost breakdown for the work being bid. Contractors agreed that a strong focus on accuracy, serious attention to detail, foresight of potential additional costs and a high degree of openness and honesty with the client are traits of good estimators. Whether basing an estimate on a fixed, lump sum, unit, cost-plus or hourly price, an estimator should consider all of these factors to ensure the bid is developed correctly.

Online billing was a topic that received mixed reviews. While some contractors have embraced the idea of online invoicing and billing, others still feel that the tangibility or reliability associated with physically having the paperwork in-hand is not ready to be replaced yet. However, all were in agreement that the speed and increased ease of dealing with electronic payments could not be ignored. “Anything that gets paid faster, quicker, we’ll take it. If somebody wants to pay with a credit card, great, but anything that speeds up the invoicing, billing and collection process is a good thing, because sometimes time spent on those activities are just a waste,” said Jeremy Martin of Hilti.

Roundtable discussions provide something that other types of meetings or formal documents cannot—real life accounts. Participants can choose to enter into the discussions or sit still and listen but either way, they get the opportunity to hear what their peers think about given subjects. Communication, particularly between people of similar circumstances, is key. The thoughts and ideas shared during these discussions do not just help CSDA or its members, but the sawing and drilling industry as a whole. A lot can be learned when you get people talking.

CSDA members have the benefit of viewing or downloading all three of the 2009 roundtable transcripts via the Members section of the CSDA website; however the Slurry Recycling roundtable is available to all via the CSDA homepage. For more information on CSDA roundtables, contact the CSDA office at 727-577-5004 or email info@csda.org.

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