

Turning a Challenge into Results

Contractor Training Center Educates Employees, Customers and Community

Janet R. Knowles, Publisher

A challenge from Fire Chief Dan Jones at the 1997 AFSA Convention in Albuquerque, N.M., spurred Bruce Agan, president of USAutomatic Sprinkler Corporation, Carmel, Indiana, to step up to a higher level of commitment to industry and public education. Chief Jones of Chapel Hill, N.C., who addressed AFSA members at the convention's opening session, insisted that the fire sprinkler industry must devote more resources to educate the public and the fire service about automatic fire sprinklers.

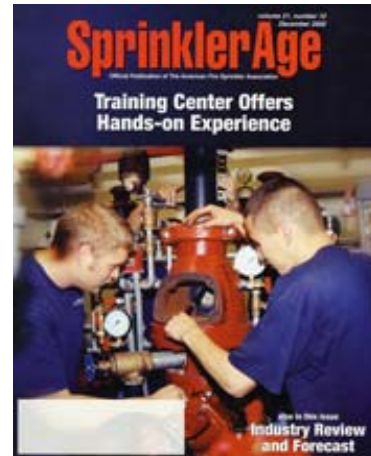
"His passion made a deep impression on me. I came back with the decision that I had to do more than just run the company and train my employees, I had to tie this back into the community, vocational schools, and the fire service," says Agan.

Agan, who already offered an employee training program using AFSA's apprenticeship materials, accepted the challenge. He began working on an educational program that would complement the company's employee training as well as benefit the local community and fire service. USAutomatic Sprinkler is now in the second year of a four-year program to build a Technical Education Center (TECenter) that displays fully operational water-based and chemical-based systems from major fire protection equipment manufacturers and a burn room that demonstrates how this equipment detects and extinguishes fires.

USAutomatic uses the TECenter to enhance AFSA's text books with hands-on lab training. New employees spend about six weeks in the TECenter learning some of the basics about fire sprinkler systems before going out in the field with a foreman to begin actual on-the-job training.

The company developed training plans for new hires that are similar to the assembly instructions you might find if you purchased a workbench still in the box from Home Depot. These plans show an illustration of each piece in the sprinkler system and how that piece connects to the next piece. The in-office training also includes video and DVD instruction, as well as presentations by representatives of the various equipment manufacturers.

Within the TECenter is the TEHouse, a wood frame structure similar to that used in AFSA's National Apprentice Competition, where the company's apprentices learn to cut and thread pipe and install a basic wet pipe system. Another area of the TECenter is set up as a mock-warehouse. There, more advanced trainees learn to install overhead and in-rack sprinkler protection.



Harold Lawson (right) describes the operation of a fire pump in the TECenter.

Other features of the USAutomatic's training center include chemical-based extinguishing systems, CO2, FM 200, and foam, as well as electric and diesel fire pumps. All fire sprinkler system equipment is tied into the fire alarm training panel, so trainees have the opportunity to learn about how alarm and detection equipment is installed and how it interacts with the fire suppression systems. In addition, all of the equipment can be linked to the burn room, allowing trainees and visitors to see how specific equipment alters the method, and speed, of the fire protection system.

At an open house last April, USAutomatic showcased its new 7,000 sq. ft. TECenter to its clients and the local fire service. Besides using the center for training employees, the company plans to offer the facility for training fire service personnel about various types of fire protection equipment and systems.

USAutomatic has invited local high school and vo-tech students to the new TECenter to learn more about the importance of fire protection as it relates to preservation of life and property, as well as a potential career choice. The company also works through a local vo-tech school to find new employees.

"We developed a relationship with the John H. Rinds Career Center in Elwood, IN, and have hired seven trainees in the last two years. The school basically does the screening for us, and we get higher quality applicants than by just running an ad," says Agan.

Overcoming False Perceptions

When USAutomatic Sprinkler Corporation opened its doors in 1993 as a merit shop fire sprinkler contracting company, Bruce Agan faced an unexpected hurdle.



All of the equipment in the TECenter can be linked to the burn room, allowing trainees and visitors to see how various equipment alters the method, and speed, of the various fire protection systems.

"I started the company as a merit shop company because I wanted flexibility to manage the company as I believed it should be run. I saw no reason to run the business for the benefit of a third party that has no interest in the success of the company or the quality of the company's performance. I was surprised when I found that once you put on that merit shop hat there is a perception, at least in this part of the country, that your company is not as good and your employees are not as well trained as a union contractor," he says.

Agan was determined to prove that perception wrong.

He began researching training options for his employees and ordered a set of training books from the American Fire Sprinkler Association.

"The more you research the fire sprinkler industry, the more you realize that there are a lot of high-quality merit shop contractors who are just as interested in training as the unions," Agan says. "As soon as I went through the AFSA books, I realized that they covered the same basic information as the union training program, so I started getting my employees into the AFSA program."

"Part of our training program includes open discussion of the employees' right to organize, and we compare line-by-line the union contract with what we have to offer. We tell them, 'You have the fundamental right to organize. This is what they offer, and this is how you make that choice.' When employees have the opportunity to compare the benefits, side by side, they will make an informed decision.

"Our new employees can become productive very, very quickly. They can try, and fail, in a safe environment. They can work with a system in the training center and then see how well it performs when we connect it to the burn room. It's a learning experience that they won't get in most other training programs," Agan says.

"Our doors are open to constantly improving our training program. Our TECenter was created for our employees, our customers and our fire service. From an owner's standpoint, it is just good business risk management," he adds.

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(l to r) Design Technician Larry Dunham, apprentices Matt Coleman and Stephen Gaiser, and Special Hazard Salesperson Harold Lawson take a closer look at a CO2 system in USAutomatic's TECenter.