Omaha's Electrical Industry Training Campus —A $4 Million Commitment

"We built this building with the idea of promoting our product," says Jim Paladino, training director at the multi-use facility in Omaha which contains the NECA-IBEW training center. The building is also the new home of NECA's Nebraska Chapter, IBEW Local Union 22, and the Health & Welfare plan and credit union the organizations jointly administer. And, to the partners, it's even more than that.

"We want this to be the industry's building," says Chapter Manager Ruth Chermok. "It's the physical manifestation that we've made a $4 million commitment to each other, and everyone in the community can see that."

"To me, it's not just the partnership," says LU 22 Business Manager John Bourne. "It's not just the training we can give our people. Our facility is a sales tool for the entire organized electrical industry. And that was intentional."

In no way minimizing the state-of-the-art equipment and training available to the apprentices and journeymen in the region, those involved are speaking of a larger mission for the concept of the campus-like facility which has made the entire structure a training lab.

The facts: Classrooms and labs, though utilitarian, are fully wired for audio-visual equipment. "Our facility is something our 200-plus enrolled students can take real ownership in," says Paladino. "Everyone seems to have a better attitude about becoming electricians when they're here. It's a better learning environment. All the classroom materials can come off the computer from the CDs provided by the NJATC (National Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee), and all the AV equipment can be controlled from each instructor's desk. The instructors are more effective, and it's made their jobs easier since they have better tools."

The partnership has also invested some $100,000 in the teledata training lab. Omaha is already recognized as the telecommunications capital of the U.S., and Paladino predicts that low-voltage work in their area will grow from its current 25% to 50% by 2010. In fact, the structure's use as a center for teledata transmission is already paying dividends.

Nebraska has a "curtailment" program that allows any facilities with a generator to take up some of the load for the operations of their own building. And this is where Omaha's showcase facility diverges from those excellent centers built and opened around the nation by similar partnerships: They installed an enormous Cummins/Great Plains diesel generator that can be controlled by Echelon's LonWorks network control systems either onsite by the partners or remotely by the local utility company, Omaha Public Power District (OPPD) over the Internet if they need some additional power added to the grid. At the time of this writing, the Electrical Industry Center is one of only two facilities selling power back to the utility.

"The existing curtailment program grew in our case through our partnership with OPPD," says Bourne. "Whenever they need some extra generation, they just fire up our generator and pay us for the privilege."

These partnerships—with Cummins/Great Plains, OPPD, and Echelon, among others—have allowed the building itself to become a showcase not only for the superior training the union electrical industry offers the construction community, but also the systems and equipment available to other industries through these corporate partners.

"We've had someone from Cummins come here with a bank facilities manager to show him how their switchgear, their generator, and the LonWorks system tie together here, so he might use the same set-up for his 46 bank locations," says Bourne.

"A large group of engineers came through recently," recalls Chermok, "because we were able to physically demonstrate the LonWorks system to them, and show how it could work in other projects." →

"We've been appointed by the NJATC to be one of three national training sites for the Lon Building Automation systems training now," says Paladino. "We're fortunate to be able to help our national training effort in this way, and it's happened because of our partnership with the NJATC, and our investment in the low-voltage systems training. If we don't keep up with the technology, someone else will. You just have to make that investment."

The building also houses other attention-grabbing amenities, such as its third-floor "Partnering Room," a publicly available, comfortably furnished meeting room which serves as the setting for NECA-IBEW labor negotiations and a whole lot more. OPPD's labor negotiations processes were held there as well.

And, "we've had NECA members use the room for a staff seminar on 401(K) plans," says Chermok. "The general contractor who's in charge of building a new power house in the region held his required pre-job meeting here. The chapter uses the facilities for MEI (Management Education Institute) activities. Our congressman visited shortly after the regional blackout in 2003, and we talked about backup generation systems for essential businesses, both regarding terrorism and the grid issues that blackout brought up. So we've had the opportunity to affect energy policy in Washington, possibly."

"If the contractors can use this building to sell their product, then we're all winners," says Bourne. "We want the building to sell the product. If the product happens to be our qualified electrical workers, that's essential. If the product happens to be generation, and the technology available for that, then so be it. If it happens to be integrated networked control systems like LonWorks, fantastic."

"Our biggest challenge into the future is going to be keeping up with the new technology," Paladino adds. "Photovoltaics, hydrogen power, low-voltage systems—there are so many new technologies, keeping up with and keeping our people trained in these systems is critical." The new training facility is among the tools the partners employ to meet this critical challenge. ■

For more information on Echelon's LonWorks networked control systems, visit www.echelon.com/solutions and for Cummins/Great Plains, go to Cummins at www.cummins.com.