

Boilermakers have a go-'round with orbital welding training

Not long ago, Magnatech President John Emmerson received a desperate call on a Friday afternoon from a welding contractor building a power plant on a Caribbean island.

Twenty percent of his workforce walked off the job that day, and he had a tall order: could Connecticut-based Magnatech deliver orbital mechanized welding machines to the island by Monday morning? The contractor figured that even though his existing workforce had little or no experience with orbital welding, the use of the machines - which cost an average of \$50,000 each - could make up for the loss of manpower, and keep his construction project on schedule.

"It didn't matter whether we could get the machines there, I told him he's got it all wrong," said Emmerson. "You can't expect this machinery to come in on one day, and the next day make it work for you. That's why I like what the Boilermakers are doing. They're giving their people adequate time to train, without saying, 'tomorrow, you're going to have to produce.' The machine is dumb. It needs trained people to operate it."

Last month, Boilermakers Local 169, in conjunction with Magnatech and two other firms, sponsored a two-week-long seminar to train union instructors in the use of orbital mechanized welding. The process was first developed about 30 years ago in the nuclear power and aerospace industries, and today the system is used in just about any industry that uses welded tubes and pipes.

Orbital welding takes the task of holding a stick and torch and puts it into a machine process, which results in an orbital weld 360 degrees around a tube. The process can yield greater speed and productivity - in the right application. The system works best when the handler sets up the workflow to include similar-sized pipes in a repetitive set-up.

"It's an expensive technology, but it's here to stay," said Local 169 Business Manager John Marek. "More and more customers, particularly the utilities, want people who are qualified in orbital welding, and this is our way of making sure our people are able to man those jobs."

In some ways, use of the machine is effective simply because it doesn't require breaks and doesn't get sore shoulders. Given a suitable application, mechanized welding productivity can realistically increase three-fold over manual welding, but preparation means everything in the process.

Ten Boilermaker instructors, from both Local 169 and Toledo Local 85, took part in the week-long training. The local bought a machine and rented two for the training program. Tony Jacobs, Local 169's president and apprenticeship coordinator, said armed with their new knowledge, the local's training staff will develop a training curriculum and mesh it into the Boilermakers' existing certified welder program.

"It's pretty slick," said Local 169 instructor Rich Cowley. "At times you just can't use it, especially when there are space limitations. But in the right application, it definitely saves time."



ATTENDING THE ORBITAL Welding training session were (l-r) Boilermakers 169 President Tony Jacobs, and instructors Stu Bass, Mike Card, Jim Robb, Ed Kowalski, Magnatech's Ken LeDuc, and instructors Tom McKinney, Dan Prodan, Ron Heringhausen, and Jim Howard.

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