

The Smart Card: An Intelligent Approach

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As the single largest industry in the United States, the construction industry employs more than 6 million workers through 700,000 different companies. Construction can be a transitory business in which workers regularly move from one job to another as one project ends and another begins. Although some United Association (UA) members work at a single location for a long time, others have distinguished careers working on countless different jobs for many employers.

The technical demands of the plumbing and pipefitting industry are changing and evolving all the time. More and more workers, whether they move from site to site or stay put in one place, participate in state-of-the-art certification programs to stay competitive. And because of the transient nature of the workforce and the "just-in-time" hiring practices of many construction companies, there can be tremendous costs associated with keeping track of worker information and qualifications such as certifications and licenses.

The UA has been the leader in providing training and certification to ensure our members are the best in the business. Now we are also leading the way by using the latest technology to manage this information through a centralized system. The UA is starting to implement a Smart Card program for our members. The program currently is in operation on a limited basis, but soon it will be nationwide. A Smart Card is a plastic identification card complete with a computer chip to store information such as full name, Social Security number, union affiliation, work experience, and optional emergency data. The card also stores a digital picture of the worker, certifications received (with renewal

requirements), and security clearances.

For many years, the UA has created certification programs that have been models for others in the industry to follow. Among them are our programs in welding, medical gas installation, valve repair, CFC removal, and instrumentation. All of these certifications rely on objective, third-party evaluation and testing of our journeypeople's skills and abilities. When UA members complete such programs, they demonstrate a willingness to go beyond their already-extensive training and prove yet again that they are the best tradespeople out there.

One drawback of these programs has been that they can create extra paperwork for the worker and employer to track. The Smart Card can replace the different papers that workers might need to carry to prove their work and training experience. The card can also contain records of Smart Mark and safety courses completed, such as the 10-hour course offered by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Contractors will never again have to wonder whether a worker is trained, certified, up to date, or safe to have on the job. One swipe of the Smart Card can communicate all of this important information.

Owners and contractors are already finding that the Smart Card helps to streamline the hiring process by dramatically reducing the time it takes to process new-hire paperwork and check credentials. Record keeping can be significantly simplified. Employers can easily demonstrate to safety inspectors that their workforce is in compliance with requirements. Because injury and loss of life have been shown to result from improper training and lack of certifications and qualifications, the

system will almost certainly help reduce the incidence of on-the-job death and injury.

The most important benefit of the Smart Card may prove to be in the area of national security. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, changed our world, and we have all become more aware of the importance of security checks and screening. UA members often are employed in industries vulnerable to attack, such as construction and maintenance work on nuclear facilities, chemical plants, water treatment facilities and food processing plants, so they are often among the employees being closely monitored for security reasons. With the Smart Card, employers are able to monitor who enters and exits their facilities and to identify the specific areas in which a worker is entitled to work. The card can also hold information such as credentials, background checks, and security clearances.

Although the Smart Card provides a great deal of important information to employers and contractors, it fully protects the privacy and personal security of UA members. Access requires the input of the UA member's secret personal identification number, so no information can be read without the member's knowledge.

We are enthusiastic about this new technology. We believe using Smart Cards will greatly benefit the security of our communities, the efficiency of our employers, and the careers of our members. ■

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