

Construction Safety & Compliance: An Interview with Rick Denham

Safety Manager R. H. White Construction Company, Inc.

Construction Outlook magazine editors recently caught up with Rick Denham at a busy construction site in Worcester, MA. Rick is the Safety Manager at UCANE member firm R.H. White Construction Company, Inc. We were able to get a few minutes of Rick's time to speak with him about the importance of safety in today's heavy construction industry.

Q *Will you please tell us a little about your background and why and how you chose to get into the field of Construction Safety?*

A I'm originally from Roswell, New Mexico. My Safety career started back in 1975, when I entered the U.S. Air Force as a firefighter. Early in my assignment I was detailed into the Base Safety Office and was taught the importance and the team value in keeping my fellow soldiers and firemen safe. During my 20-year military career, I traveled around the world on various assignments and safety was always as important as the mission itself. After I retired from the military, I obtained my Bachelor's Degree in Safety Management at Columbia Southern University. I became certified as a Trainer through OSHA for various occupations including construction. I freelanced for a short period of time doing OSHA training for some local firms. In 1998 I got an offer to be a Safety Officer with a construction company and I have been concentrating on construction safety ever since.

Q *How long have you been with R. H. White Construction Company, Inc., and what type of work does the company focus on?*

A I have been with R. H. White for 16 years. The company is a very diversified contractor doing both heavy civil work and vertical building construction. Our main focus is gas and water pipelines. We also build water and sewer treat-



ment facilities and perform sitework. In addition, R. H. White does some building construction work, sometimes involving multiple stories, and we have crews that will do facilities management. The company employs approximately 400 people, more than 200 of which are construction workers representing about a dozen different trades.

Q *Will you please describe the safety culture that exists at R. H. White ?*

A Safety is a core value at R. H. White and nothing is more important than the safety of

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our employees, our customers and the public. R. H. White subscribes to the philosophy that all incidents/accidents are preventable.

Our Safety Culture is based on the book titled "Safety 24/7 - Building an Incident Free Culture." We have used it to develop a roadmap for R. H. White to get to ZERO (incidents) in everything we do because anything else is unacceptable.

We empower our employees to stop work, to call a safety timeout when something isn't right. We believe that if our employees are safe and work in a safe manner then the rest will fall into place. It's never about production, it's always about the Safety of our team members.

I believe R. H. White puts more investment into safety per employee than most companies in the construction business. I oversee a staff of four safety officers and we have a 10,000 square foot Safety Training Center dedicated to training and safety meetings. All of our new employees get extensive training prior to stepping onto a jobsite and we are doing safety refreshers for all employees on

a rotating basis. We have state-of-the-art training equipment and we are sticklers when it comes to PPE use by all employees.

Our low Workman's Compensation Mod and accident statistic rates have proven that investments in safety pay dividends to the company and our employees all appreciate working for such a safety-minded company.

Q *What are some of the safety training topics that you and your safety staff have been emphasizing to your field employees in 2022?*

A Each year we have a theme, or sometimes multiple themes. For 2022 we are driving home Stop Work Authority, our Safety Six (which are our golden rules of safety), and the OSHA Fatal Four (Falls, Caught-Between, Struck-By, and Electrocution). We make sure every tradesperson and field supervisor understand our goals when it comes to working safely.

Our crews work throughout New England and I stay in touch with all my Safety Officers and the operations going on at each site. I take it personally to ensure that all of our employees – as well as

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Q As a Safety Professional what is your advice to others who are considering a career in Construction Safety?

A It's not always an easy job and as a Safety Professional we must all realize that every day we are dealing with employees who are only human and no two days on a worksite are ever the same. Despite extensive training, it sometimes only takes a momentary lapse in judgement or attentiveness to cause an incident and create a bad day for everyone. But overall, I believe Construction Safety is a very rewarding career.

If an individual is looking for a career that challenges them beyond what they have learned either in school or in life, then Construction Safety is it. To be able to start a project and be totally involved, and to be able to be a key contributor in keeping everyone safe each day, is one of the most rewarding feelings ever. ■

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