

Editors Blog

“FROM OFFICE TO BASEMENT – FIRE-WATCH EXPERIENCE THROUGH MY EYES”

Being somewhat low in leave I got the option to help on the shut in the capacity of ‘Fire Watch’. I was warned it could be boring, and to bring my ipod. I also had to attend a 4 hour training session prior to the shut. OK, I thought, this will be an experience. And I was not wrong.

Early starts are not a favourite of mine at the best of times unless it involves a plane trip somewhere, but I managed to get up at 5:30am on a Sunday in a positive frame of mind. I donned my ‘maintenance-appropriate- working clothes including safety gear and turned up with thermo mug of coffee in the #3 basement with a few minutes to spare for our 7am tool box talk.

I was met by Jo Spod who was in charge of the PM3 Vacuum Pump Replacement, Tommie Heerschap (Beca Engineer) and a team of ‘Contractors’ from Kawerau Engineering, and United Group. Everyone was friendly and in bright spirits ready to go. My key fire makers (welders) introduced themselves to me and advised me of their schedule for the day.

I was offered a chair, put on my ‘ears’, and settled in to watch.

First observation: The basement is not like my office. It’s dark and cold when there is limited power. In fact it is bladder numbing cold. What does that mean? I didn’t defrost till 8:30pm that night. It is open to southerlies, and there was a constant drip, drip, drip from up above. If it wasn’t for Lyn Kameta kindly providing me with an extra jacket at smoko break I would have been hypothermic. You may think harden up, or dress properly? I thought I had – including hat, scarf and gloves which was clearly not enough. Mental note to self: add extra layers for the following days. I couldn’t access tea breaks or comfort stops when I wanted, and the 10 hour fire watch shifts left me exhausted.

Second observation: Is ‘maintenance person’ an appropriate title?

I like words and meanings. The dictionary says Definition: [That which maintains or supports; means of sustenance; supply of necessities and conveniences.](#) Or Definition: [activity involved in maintaining something in good working order](#)”.

What I observed was a unified effort by specialist skilled men. The different trades were like different cultures.

The welders were akin to ‘westies’ complete with trademark facial hair and caps worn backwards. They performed a ritualistic preparation and completion of work; the uncoiling and re-coiling of leads, checking and priming of equipment. It was like watching a surgeon carefully laying out his tools before an operation. Their hands carefully guided the grinder or gas to cut precisely, and then mended with a dexterity that distinguished them from some other trades. They moved with litheness, and were able to work wonders in often difficult areas that were cramped, high, or required twisted positions. Welders often stood silently apart waiting for other preparation work to be done before they came in and completed the task as a higher ranked expert.

Riggers are the primates of the trades. Not meant in an insulting manner, but my maternal instinct was on high alert as I saw them skirting here and there in the rafters hooking up strops and bits and pieces. Their skill with the Merlo and forklifts was impressive.

Electricians appear more refined than the welders – on the outside a ‘cleaner trade’. They leaned towards wearing more safety gear even though their work didn’t get them as grubby as the fitters or welders, or expose them to nasty fumes, flames, sparks, substances or physical work areas. Of course the risks in their jobs are just as real should something go wrong. Their work involved a lot of thinking, action, thinking, testing, checking diagrams, in contrast to other more activity based trades.

Carpenters brought with them their skills and precision similar to welders, except with wood.

Fitters appeared the ant workers of the trades, which belied the skills they brought to the task. They needed to know a bit about all the other trades, in order to pave the way for the 'specialist' work of the others. They got the grubbiest and dampest, worked the longest physically, and took a most of the pressure.

So, taking into account the observations listed above I wondered if it was appropriate to group all this unique and specialist work under the umbrella of 'Maintenance' and 'Maintenance Person'? I feel that by not acknowledging the differences or specialisation, one is in fact denying the value that the different specialties contribute. It would be like having a census saying 'New Zealander' and not allowing for us to choose Maori, European, etc.

Summary:

Coming from an HR perspective I am not suggesting that we should change our system, but that we can certainly change our thinking about maintenance and 'maintenance people'. They are a group of specialists that I have a new found respect for. One day I might even spend some time with hubby and see what he actually does at work (even though I am told by others that it involves a lot of sleeping).

I enjoyed my time on Fire Watch, as I learned a lot. I had no fire emergencies but felt part of the team that contributed to the overall success of the shut. Thanks to my group of people on PM3 Vacuum Pump replacement that included me, and the Valve Crew for the use of their lunch room and facilities.





Note in the photo above whilst there is a group of people on the right there was a lot more activity going on such as two lots of welders, riggers, electricians, fitters. This would be my third observation that it was impressive seeing all the different company contractors working together so well on 'our' machine.

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