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International Training Institute Ramps Up Distance Learning in Response to COVID Lockdowns

The International Training Institute (ITI) will add five more classes to its online offerings by the end of this year, further helping its instructor pool gain the skills they need to train new talent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We currently have offered 11 week-long classes and five more are scheduled for the end of the year, all of them using live instructors,” says Michael Harris, ITI’s program administrator. “We’ve also launched evening distance learning classes on various topics for members who are employed during the day.”

This is in addition to the self-paced online learning catalogue ITI already had in place prior to COVID, with classes ranging from Trimble Total Station tutorials to Lean construction methods.

ITI is jointly sponsored by the International Association of Sheet Metal Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART) and the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors’ National Association (SMACNA) and caters to over 73,000 journey-level workers and 14,000 apprentices that perform work in architectural sheet metal, Building Information Modeling, HVAC, roofing, industrial welding, and other sectors of the industry.

ITI provides and maintains training and retraining programs; conducts train-the-trainer programs; develops and distributes training materials; and investigates, researches, and monitors changing technology and specialty fields in order to meet evolving industry demands.

The Institute had spent years prior to the pandemic implementing self-paced online learning modules and more recently online courses taught live by instructors (which cumulatively reduce the need for fledgling instructors to commute to different parts of the continent for training).

But when the COVID lockdowns were imposed in March, iTi quickly kicked remote learning into high gear. “We scrambled to develop webinars and distance learning classes to replace the scheduled in-person classes,” Harris says. In-person courses were reworked into five-day, online webinars with two, two-hour sessions held daily.

iTi credits its ability to advance its curriculum partly on the good relations it enjoys with both labor and management at the National and local levels. Tim Myres, administrator, Sheet Metal Workers’ Local 104 and Bay Area Industry Training Fund in San Leandro, California, noted that drawing on the assistance and advice from the iTi, their Local Joint Apprenticeship Training Center (JATC) “worked intensely with instructors to develop their online skills, and they practiced on each other.”

Myres credits iTi for supporting industry beyond providing curriculum. “Thanks to the Institute we were able to purchase iPads for all of our apprentices,” he says, referring to a reimbursement program for JATCs who want to get the devices into the hands of apprentices in the later years of their program, thus ensuring that everyone is working on the same platform.

Even though Harris looks forward to the eventual return of courses, like welding, that demand an in-the-shop setting, iTi’s online presence will continue to grow. “Not all of our online offerings will be retained when the pandemic ends, but many components will remain and strengthen our service abilities,” he says. “We’re very proud of how everybody pulled together to make this happen.”

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The International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART) and the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors’ National Association (SMACNA) have a labor-management partnership that is more than 75 years old. The goal of these Partners in Progress is to maintain an effective cooperative effort that demonstrates their expertise in the heating ventilating and air conditioning (HVAC), architectural metal, and industrial sheet metal markets. For additional information, visit *pinp.org*.