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SMACNA and SMART Use Gamification in Training to Attract the New Sheet Metal Generation

Attention spans are getting shorter, in-person and hands-on training has become more challenging due to the pandemic, and the pace at which technology is evolving is rapidly accelerating. The Sheet Metal Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART) and Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors' National Association (SMACNA) have been working on a new style of training that is tackling these challenges head on and taking the industry's training efforts to a whole new level.

At the International Training Institute's (iTi) 150 training centers (jointly-funded by SMART and SMACNA), it is not unusual to find apprentices and technicians donning Oculus virtual reality (VR) headsets and working interactively on an HVAC system or learning welding fundamentals.

Last year iTi partnered with Interplay Learning, the leading provider of online training for skilled trades, using VR and 3D simulations to provide faster hands-on training to more than 14,000 SMART apprentices.

“iTi is using Interplay Learning’s technology to attract a new generation of professionals, change the way the workforce thinks about hands-on training, and make learning more powerful,” says Mike Harris, program administrator at the International Training Institute.

In fact, most iTi training centers have now gotten onboard and are using VR in some way.

“Technicians can learn everything remotely as if they are in front of an instructor,” says Darrell Garrison, TAB/service specialist at iTi. “It’s so kinetic, you have to bend down to get in front of a HVAC unit that isn’t actually there, but you are building up the muscle memory. You can work on a unit right in your living room. It’s gamified, too, which makes it fun. It actually becomes addictive. Before you know it, you have spent 200 hours working on a system because you want to rack up the points and beat your classmates.”

The VR training works by determining a tech’s skills and providing a comprehensive, at-a-glance view into skill level, training progress, and field readiness. Competency-based assessments and field-like troubleshooting simulations identify strengths and weaknesses, which lead to assignment of expert-led, on-demand courses in HVAC to close skills gaps.

It also acts as a recruiting tool because it provides assessment tests to better place a potential apprentice in a program. With iTi courses filling up within days of being advertised, this new style of training is definitely popular, and it is appealing to the new tech savvy generation, too. Millennials and Gen Z have been raised on gamification, so their minds have adapted to basic game concepts like achievements, levels, and scoring systems.

But beyond that, it works. Statistics show that gamification participants score 14% higher on skill-based assessments; 89% [of who] say that if a task is gamified, they feel eager to complete it and are in a competitive mood; and only 3% of participants remain unproductive during gamified training.

This deep dive into training gamification is an entry for the new generation of sheet metal workers into sheet metal training innovations, such as augmented reality—mixing the virtual world with the existing world. It’s proving to be an excellent adjunct to designing, planning, and viewing a project or system before getting your hands dirty because it lets the real world stay as it is and lays a simulation over it.

“When we are onsite, we can populate a virtual component of a system, interact with it, and digitally manipulate parts of it,” Harris says. “It’s extremely beneficial for trouble shooting and saves a lot of time on calls and being put on hold or having to wait for a mentor to drive to the site. It also saves customers money. In the future, field work and augmented reality will work hand in hand.”

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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*.