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Classes give small firms, workers a chance to grow

BY ROGER SHOWLEY

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Justin Unger oversees six metal-fabrication workers for Quality Iron Products in El Cajon, using a simple spreadsheet to track hours worked and costs incurred.

So it was a revelation when he discovered a whole new world of sophisticated software that Turner Construction Co. uses to manage hundreds of millions of dollars in building projects.

“I could see as we get into some bigger projects and as the company grows that I’m going to have a need for some of this software,” said Unger, 29.

Unger was one of 38 construction workers and executives who graduated last week from the Turner School of Construction Management, a free, seven-week course offered by the company to help small businesses bid for building contracts, not only for Turner but any other general contractor and public agency doling out federal stimulus grants and regular budgeted dollars.

“I’m proud that you all have stuck it out,” said Ron Rudolph, Turner vice president, following a spaghetti dinner at Lindbergh Field’s airport board offices.

But the celebration wasn’t all about fun and food.

Some students were conferring with each other on possible joint ventures they might form to bid on public contracts.

Two were Gregg Towick, principal of Diamond Pacific Construction in La Mesa, and Floyd Jackson, a former construction laborer who has recently started New Growth Tree Service out of his home in Spring Valley. Towick said he checked out a demolition job in El Cajon and at the last Turner class, asked Jackson if he would be interested in bidding on the tree-removal portion.

“I’m trying to get serious and develop myself and get some work,” said Jackson, who learned about the Turner classes through the Black Contractors Association.



PEGGY PEATTIE /P>

Justin Unger graduated from the Turner School of Construction Management. Unger, an employee of Quality Iron Products, learned skills he would need for big construction projects.

The Turner program began in 1969 in Cleveland, where city officials urged the firm to reach out and involve more small and minority-owned businesses in big city jobs. Since then, Turner has expanded the program to 70 cities in which it does business and graduated employees from more than 32,000 companies.

“It just makes good business,” Rudolph said, because subcontractors become more prepared to bid on major projects and Turner gets credit for reaching out to small business, a common requirement in public works contracts.

One of the nation’s largest general contractors, Turner recently won the bid to manage the \$865 million Green Build expansion of Terminal 2 and other improvements at Lindbergh Field that are expected to generate 1,000 construction jobs.

Vera Howell, director of community affairs for Turner locally, said many other training programs are offered by colleges and associations, but most charge a fee. She said the Turner classes typically fill up one or two months in advance; 12 students who could not participate this time are signed up for next spring’s session.

Begun in San Diego in 2003, the Turner classes are held twice annually. The 40 students who enroll each session represent the full range of construction trades — electricians, drywallers, maintenance, janitors and small general contractors. Applications are open to anyone in the industry, but no more than two from any one company may participate in any session and they must attend at least 11 of the 14 classes to graduate. Howell said two of the 40 students this session dropped out to oversee new contracts their companies had just received, but they plan to re-enroll next year.

The three-hour, twice-a-week lecture-style classes, held at an airport facilities management building, start at 6 p.m. with a free dinner, sometimes sponsored by students’ companies.

Turner employees who conduct the classes cover a wide range of topics, including contracting, safety, scheduling, job cost accounting, bonding and estimating. After graduation, Turner offers three free follow-up courses online plus one at a discount to obtain OSHA-30 certification, a safety requirement on many job sites.

Many students come from businesses owned by minorities, women and disabled veterans, which public agencies typically want general contractors to use for added diversity in the work force.

One participant in the Turner class this session doesn’t do business in the United States. Sandrine Rattier is a personnel manager for Novi Industries, which does construction work in Algeria, the home country of the company owner. But when job opportunities come up in San Diego, Rattier said the Turner classes will help her deal with safety issues that differ from those in North Africa.

“I had no idea about the details,” she said.

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