



Strong foundations

FOR an industry that took a long time to get its own association in Australia, the piling community has certainly been making up for lost time.

At first glance you would think that with all piling rigs busy around Australia, the industry would be on cloud nine and not have too many issues to worry about. That would do a serious injustice to the Piling and Foundation Specialists Federation (Piling Federation), which has marked up several achievements in the little over five years it has been operating.

One of its first big achievements was developing standard contract terms and conditions that it regards as fair and reasonable. In doing this they had to look no further than Australian Standard Conditions of Contract AS 4901-1998 *Subcontract Conditions* and AS 4903-2000 *General Conditions of Subcontract for Design and Construct* for large contracts, and AS4949-2001 *Work Order* for smaller contracts.

The Piling Federation has gone beyond this to have industry-specific appendices professionally drafted to reflect conditions appropriate to the piling and foundation industries.

There's no doubt the piling and foundation industry is relatively compact, and that there are significant capital and technical barriers to entry, so there is a high level of professionalism in those who survive in the industry.

These factors may help the federation in its endeavours with the standard contract, but it is up to the discretion of individual members to adopt the standard format where appropriate, and there has been a high level of acceptance.

While the standard contract is not universally accepted, it has made encouraging progress in trying to bring about what the Australian Standards regard as fair trading terms. Short of having an independent arbiter of fair contract terms, this is probably as much progress as a subcontractor can hope to make in the business environment, though it may be an issue which other industry associations representing subcontractors could consider taking up.

In occupational health and safety issues, Australian Standards are the benchmark that should be met or exceeded when a company is defending itself after an accident. It would be interesting to be able to test contracts against the Australian Standard for fairness.

The Piling Federation has also taken a strong stance on fund retentions, stating this is an inappropriate way to deal with claims for works

rectification, as the piling contractor's pride in its reputation is sufficient incentive for it to return to site, should that be needed. Many international piling federations have adopted a zero retention stance, so the issue is certainly not localised to Australia.

One of the most recent areas of activity for the Piling Federation has been the provision of Working Platform Certificates for areas in which piling rigs and associated equipment operate. The high centre of gravity of piling rigs, their high static weight, and the forces exerted on rigs while operating, mean the condition of ground where rigs walk and stand is an important safety issue.

Because the principal contractor is in the best position to ensure working platforms are built and maintained to the standard necessary for safe operation of piling equipment, it is in the best position to accept this responsibility. The means by which this is formalised is a *Working Platform Certificate* provided to the piling subcontractor by the principal contractor before the piling rig commences work.

Again, the Piling Federation is not reinventing the wheel. The United Kingdom Federation of Piling Specialists adopted Working Platform Certificates four years ago and has provided considerable support for the local federation.

Chairman of the UK Federation of Piling Specialists Terry Bolsher states, "One third of accidents in the piling industry result from defects in the working platform."

The local federation believes this observation is equally valid in Australia.

For the Piling Federation, it is not a case of passing the ball and running. The piling contractor has an obligation to supply the principal contractor with the working platform design requirements for equipment that will be working on site.

The Piling Federation website (www.pilingfederation.org.au) contains a wealth of resource material developed in Europe, covering a good practice guide to the design, installation, maintenance and repair of ground-supported working platforms; papers and guides covering working platform design; and even an easy-to-follow spreadsheet for calculating rig loading.

The ready availability of this information should benefit the industry as a whole. Cranes would have many similar requirements for working platforms, and there is even a case to be made for the condition of haul roads where subcontractors provide haulage equipment.

The documentation does not create OH&S


obligations that did not exist previously, but it is a means of focusing attention on the issue and ensuring it is given the recognition it deserves. It also emphasises that working platforms must be maintained to original standard over the course of their useful life. Poor drainage and site works through the working platform (for example, pipe installation) can affect the integrity of the working platform as it was originally built, and the principal contractor is in the best position to be aware of this and deal with the problem.

Another item on the Piling Federation's safety agenda is development of an accident-incident reporting system, so information can be collated and analysed for recurring issues, or issues that demand attention from the industry to avoid a recurrence.

Again this is not a case of reinventing the wheel, as the European Federation of Foundation Contractors developed an accident reporting tool that has been operative since 1995, and is used in 13 countries. The database covers 3500 accidents and incidents and provides a broad, reliable database from which to identify causes and develop training and practices to reduce the incidence and severity of these. The Australian industry will thus be able to benchmark itself against overseas countries.

In Australia attention has been paid to the form of reporting, with extensive use made of an electronic check box rather than tedious written reporting. A previous reporting system fell into disuse because of the rigours of written reporting, and duplication of reporting required under state OH&S regulations.

The Piling Federation reporting is independent of OH&S authorities, and can preserve the anonymity of the reporting party if requested. In doing so, it has the potential to trap the near misses that can otherwise go unreported.

In the actions it has taken, the Piling Federation has provided a benchmark for industry associations in the speed with which it has identified and tackled industry issues and, where possible, adopted and adapted resources when providing solutions to those problems. 

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