



Higher education

Mast-climbing work platforms are becoming increasingly popular. And that means training is growing in importance. Neil Gerrard reports.

Training might seem to be one of those areas that gets put on the back-burner as companies tighten their belts throughout the construction industry.

But that is unlikely to be the case in the mast-climbing work platform (MCWP) sector, which has grown at a rate of around 20% year-on-year since 1995, and is expected to continue at a rate of around 15%, even amid the downturn.

Such blistering growth puts training at the forefront. But fittingly, for such a specialised area, the training model for MCWPs is not quite what you would expect.

MCWPs are unique among powered access equipment, in that there is no Powered Access Licence (PAL) Card for users. Because MCWPs are fixed to the side of a building and can only go up and down, users are given a short induction by a qualified demonstrator, where they are shown how to move the platform and how to stop it. And that's basically it.

"In terms of powered access equipment, there are categories for users of all the other equipment because the user has options when they are using it. The user of a MCWP can go up or go down. It really is a simple piece of kit to use in terms of its operation," says Adrian Bolton, construction manager at Alimak Hek.

But the training for those who are required to demonstrate, inspect, and install the machinery is much more involved. So how does it work?

There are five different types of PAL Card available in the sector:

1) Demonstrator – the demonstrator can



operate the machine, demonstrate the safety devices on it, and is responsible for weekly checks on the machine;

2) Mobile operators – a rarer category for operators on mobile MCWPs, which measure up to about 20m;

3) Installer;

4) Advanced installer – assesses the installation and signs it off; and

5) Instructor.

The first thing to say of training courses for MCWPs is that they are distinct from courses for other forms of powered access in that they are modular. There are 28 modules in total, of

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which a demonstrator will do around eight, whereas an advanced installer will do all 28.

A modular training system was introduced in 2006, to make it more similar to the NVQ training that scaffolders receive, as Cameron Reid, UK operations director at SGB Project Services explains.

"Building an MCWP is very similar to building scaffolding in the sense that you are erecting a modular system up the face of a building, you are fixing it

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to the building, and then you are handing the machine over to the contractor/client, who will then carry out their work activity from it," he says.

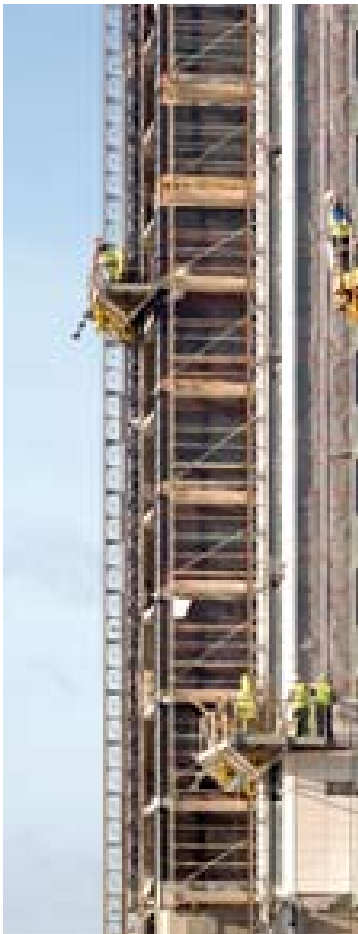
Despite this, before 2006, the training course bore little relation to the kind of course trainees would come across in the scaffolding sector.

It was previously a test-based course that was purely designed to certify a competent installer. But those in the industry who were tasked with coming up with a new course recognised that it didn't allow trainee installers the chance to develop their skills over a period of time.

"The course was redesigned and revamped in order to try and become more of a modular course that aligned itself as closely as it could with NVQ-type modular training. So what we did was develop 28 modules' worth of a training course where you can test and examine, with an instructor, one module, or 10 modules dependant on the training needs and competencies," Reid explains.

The new model not only offers more familiarity to those already acquainted with MCWPs, but also allows greater flexibility for trainees, and increases the importance of site-based experience and on-the-job training.

So how long would it take to complete enough modules to become a demonstrator, or an advanced installer?



For demonstrators – the biggest category that is trained – Bolton expects the course to take between one and two days.

"The intention is to train at least one demonstrator for every site where there are mast-climbing work platforms in operation. A demonstrator course will take between one and two days, but it depends on their understanding of the machinery.

"If you have someone with some health and safety experience and maybe some instructional technique experience, who is used to standing and talking to people, they will probably manage it in a day," he says.

Health and safety

And teaching health and safety awareness to operators is something that is crucial to the role of a demonstrator, despite MCWPs' deceptively simple appearance, according to IPAF international training manager Rupert Douglas-Jones.

"What you don't want is people going onto the machine just as passengers because they will see people pressing up and down buttons and thinking: 'It's just an elevator, I can do that too'. What they don't take into account is if someone has gone and opened a window and you take a mast climber up past it, you are going to tear that window off or damage the mast climber, or both," he warns.

And at the other end of the scale, installers and advanced installers will take several years to learn their trade.

"An advanced installer is someone who has typically been in the industry for five years and has been training and developing during those five years. You could become an installer within

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three," Reid adds. The regime is, therefore, quite tough. But, as Douglas-Jones points out, the learning process goes even further than just the training courses.

"If you make a mistake in the installation or dismantling of a mast climber, there would be problems. But they are extremely safe machines, in that all the different mast-climbing members of ours get together and they discuss openly any possible problems, accidents, or near-misses that they have had," he says.

This sharing of information is almost unheard of, Douglas-Jones asserts. "Those in the MCWP fraternity disclose any problems they have so that they can learn from each other," he adds.

Of course, that might be natural up to a point, in a sector where there are only two major firms that offer MCWP training in the UK: SGB and Alimak Hek. The only other firm to have offered similar training was Sovereign Access, which was acquired by SGB earlier in 2008.

Both firms have IPAF training centre accreditation so that they can provide all of the courses, but they will also send instructors out on site, particularly when it comes to training demonstrators, who are often the contractors themselves.

And with the use of MCWPs growing at such a rate, it looks likely that the ranks of demonstrators in particular are set to climb even further over the coming years.

